

Tea and Toilers:
Region, Regime and Resistance in Duars Plantations, 1872-1967

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By

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that this thesis entitled "**Tea and Toilers: Region, Regime and Resistance in Duars Plantations, 1872-1967**" submitted by Anirban Bhattacharya to the Centre for Historical Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of the Doctor of Philosophy has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this university or of any other university and is my original work.

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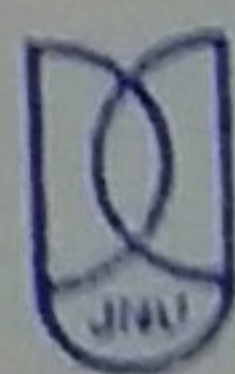
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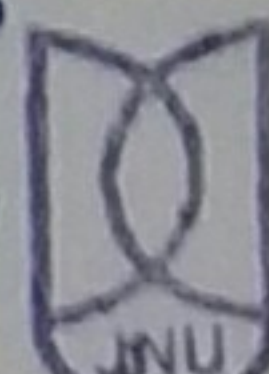
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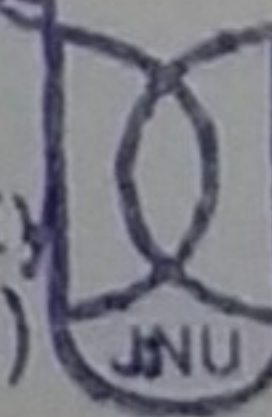
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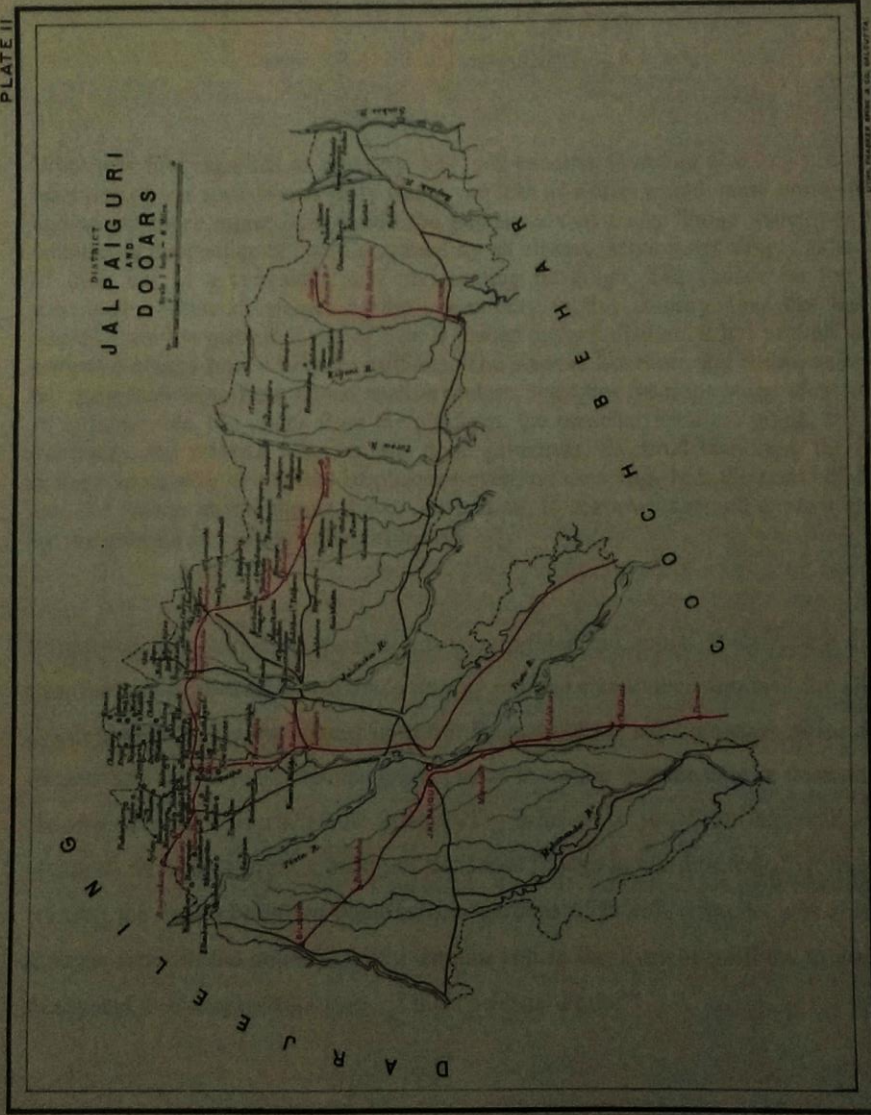
Finally, apart from all those who stood by me, what made this endeavour more meaningful and exhilarating, was what I along with so many of us stand by. That is the peoples' struggle for a better, more just, more equitable society. It is this vision for revolutionary social transformation that we all draw our inspiration from so as to raise questions against any imposition or against the dominant status quo – whether in historiography or in the streets, or even within us.

Abbreviations:

AIG:	Additional Inspector General
AITUC:	All India Trade Union Congress
As.:	Anas
Asst.:	Assistant
BARRWE:	Bengal Assam Rail Road Workers' Union
BSP:	Bhabani Sen Paathagar
CHB:	Census Hand Book
Co.:	Company
Col.:	Cornel
CPI(ML):	Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)
CPI:	Communist Party of India
CSI:	Civil Service of India
DBITA:	Duars Branch Indian Tea Association
DCH:	District census Handbook
Dept:	Department
DIB:	District Intelligent Branch
DIG:	Deputy Inspector General
DIO:	District Intelligence Officer
Dist.:	District
DND:	Darjeeling and Duars
DONo:	Despatch Order number
DPA:	Duars Planters' Association
Dy.:	Deputy
EPW:	Economic and Political Weekly
Gen.:	General
Govt.:	Government

IB:	Intelligence Branch
IESHR:	Indian Economic and Social History Review
IG:	Inspector General
Inspr.:	Inspector
INTUC:	Indian National Trade Union Congress
ITA:	Indian Tea Estate
LC:	Lieutenant Commissioner
Lieut. Col.:	Lieutenant Colonel
Lt.:	Lieutenant
LW:	Labour Welfare
NE:	North East
NMML:	Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
No.:	Number
Offg.:	Officiating
P.:	Paisa
Pub.:	Publisher
Rs.:	Rupees
RSPi:	Revolutionary Socialist Party of India
Secy.:	Secretary
SPI:	Socialist Party of India
Supdt.:	Superintendent
TE:	Tea Estate
Vol.:	Volume
WBSA:	West Bengal State Archives
WCR:	Weekly Confidential Report

PLATE II



Map of Jalpaiguri & Dooars Tea District, Taylor's Maps of Tea Districts, Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1910

Introduction

I

What was first regarded as a luxury, has now become, if not an absolute necessity, at least one of our accustomed daily wants, the loss of which would cause more suffering and excite more regret than would the deprivation of many things which once were counted as necessities of life. Consumed by all classes, serving not simply as an article of diet, but as a refreshing and invigorating beverage, Tea cannot be too highly estimated... That all classes of the community in this country have derived much benefit from the persistent use of Tea, is placed beyond dispute. It has proved, and still proves, a highly prized boon to millions. The artist at his easel, the author at his desk, the statesman fresh from an exhaustive oration, the actor from the stage after fulfilling an arduous role, the orator from the platform, the preacher from the pulpit, the toiling mechanic, the wearied labourer, the poor governess, the tired laundress, the humble cottage housewife, the votary of pleasure even, on escaping from the scene of revelry, nay, the Queen on her throne, have, one and all, to acknowledge and express gratitude for the grateful and invigorating infusion.¹

It has been 138 years since those words were printed in London. It was about the same time that the cultivation of tea made its way into the submontane tracts of the Duars, or the doorways to the Himalayas in North Bengal. Much has happened in the ensuing decades and in the years preceding them so as to ensure that the empire does not suffer the loss or even a dearth of the invigorating infusion of tea. From annexation of the region to settlement, from clearing of the dense foliage to recruitment of workers, from “taming the coolie beast” to planting the “gardens of Eden” – momentous shifts were brought about in the colonies of the empire and in the lives of millions to maintain a steady and ever-increasing supply of this “celestial liquor”.

As I would embark upon the meandering rail-ride from Siliguri every morning during my field visits, and traverse through mile after mile of the picturesque tea-acreage, walled on one side by the distant blue mountains, and interrupted only by the mighty Tista, the Jaldhaka and the numerous smaller streams or *jhoras* and few patches of forests, - it was difficult not to be aware of the passage of history that brought about such a transformation of an entire region and the people. So, while for most of my co-passengers what would be a monotony of neatly laid out

¹ Samuel Philips Day, *Tea: Its Mystery and History*, London: Simpkin, Marshall & Co., 1898, pp 70-71

gardens, for me it would be no less than a travel through time till I reach Banarhat from where I would take a bus to the Haldibari tea estate. What for so many, might quite justifiably appear so omnipresent, matter of fact, so much a part of their daily lives – to me would appear as a product of a past, in fact a recent past.

One fine morning, my rail-ride was suddenly halted. The exigencies of a packed field trip wherein even a day's loss mattered greatly certainly irked me. Upon enquiry it appeared to be caused by a pack of elephants crossing the tracks during which one of them was also grievously injured by a running train. In a similar ironical manner, the “triumphant” tale of capital saw many such interruptions, halts or even resistance. It was never a unilineal tale, or an uninterrupted chugging of the engine of capital. At times it was the malarious forests itself, at other times it was the incessant floods and ever-changing river beds that challenged it. The very first tea-estate in Duars in Gazoledoba was plagued by floods necessitating the move towards higher grounds in Fulbari and then to Bagrakot estates. But the “disruptions” that raised the most acute alarm amongst planters and the state administration, was when the discipline of the plantation regime was unsettled by the workers. It is this history of the resistance of the working people of the Duars gardens that would be the focus of my study.

Some do say that, at the end of the day, most of our works tend to be autobiographical. Growing up in north Bengal in the vicinity of the tea gardens in my childhood, being aware of the plight of the garden workers during garden lock-outs through the late nineties, and the resultant hunger deaths drew me closer to the theme of labouring lives in the plantations. In colonial narratives, the “triumphant tale” of capital and entrepreneurship left space for only tertiary mention of the labouring lives. Symptomatic for instance is Claud Bald's account of the Indian tea wherein at the most 25 pages deal with “The Cooly” as the last chapter in a nearly 400 page book.² It is undeniable that a certain sense of emancipatory politics around the working classes makes the academic pursuit of labour history more passionate and adds more stakes to it. To a certain extent, that is also partly what drives one till the end. But, to be honest, the journey so far has been as much about learning as about unlearning certain pre-conceived notions with which one began. It then becomes a constant tussle between what one wishes to look for or expects and

² Claud Bald, *Indian Tea: Its Culture & Manufacture*, Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1922

what one actually finds while sieving the archives. At the end, the exercise provides more nuances to the answers one set out to seek.

How and when did the plantations come about in the Duars? What were the forces at work behind the coming of tea in this region? How did it climb the hills? When did it descend onto the Duars? How did the region itself get constituted in the larger narrative of colonial expansion? What existed before the gardens? What or who were the casualties that were omitted in this grand narrative? How was the region - its topography as well as demography - transformed to make way for tea? How did the coming of tea further add to this transformation? How did these processes in turn affect the working of the gardens within in the longer run? Where did the workers come from? How was this colossal shift of population brought about? These questions in turn breed another set of queries. What was the particular labour regime that came about in the gardens? How did capital interact and negotiate with the region's pre-capitalist social formation and what did that in turn entail for the particular form of labour regime that took shape? What were the relations of labour? Was it really "free"? What were the forms of workers' resistance that came before the "organized" or trade union phase? Did their community identity loom very large? If so, can their struggle still be called a "working class" struggle? How much was the onset of the trade union phase a break from the earlier mobilisation patterns? How did planters, the garden hierarchy and the state respond to labour indiscipline? How and why did the developments (at times peasant initiatives) outside the gardens shape workers agitations within the gardens?

The latter set of questions in fact ultimately compels us to reflect upon as to how do we then characterize the peculiarity of the plantation labour in particular as also the Indian working class in general. Early nationalist/Marxist historiography adopted one rather extreme position in economic assumptions and determinism. They emphasized in constructing a linear trajectory in the consciousness of the working class from pre-capitalist to a steady development of proletarian consciousness as reflected in the early trade union histories.³ Whereas the latter trend was to reify culture or community identities.⁴ And this is precisely the dilemma that is discernible in much of the historiography on Indian labour.

³ S. Sen, *Working Class of India: History of Emergence and Movement, 1830-1990*, Calcutta: KP Bagchi & Co., 1997

⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal 1890-1940*, Delhi: OUP, 1996 [Henceforth Chakrabarty]

II

One of the prime engagements in this study is with the question of community/identity consciousness and class consciousness and the relation between the two. Are the two mutually exclusive of each other? If not, how do the two interact, intersect or co-exist, responding to the constant processes of historical mediation? The “ever-present possibility of fragmentation” along lines of religion, language, ethnicity, and so on in the Indian working class, as Dipesh Chakrabarty points out is a reality.⁵ Neither would it be fruitful to disagree with the numerous instances of the class loyalties of workers “being overridden by” loyalties arising from their “precapitalist” community identity. But what drives Dipesh Chakrabarty towards pessimism so as to conclude that “the course of history remains, ultimately, undecidable”, is his neglect of the fact that the Indian working class remains in a constant state of flux. He freezes the working class identity in situating where it is essentially hierarchical, inegalitarian and deferential by virtue of its pre-bourgeois characteristic and primordial ties.

What seems to escape him, as Chitra Joshi strives to argue⁶ is the significant aspect of historical mediation – for instance through struggles, solidarities and confrontations between labour and capital. In his denunciation of the viability of “the assurances given us by emancipatory narratives”, his argument recalls a strand of history writing that, in its apprehensions about economic determinism, has been driven to the opposite pole of cultural determinism. The latter approach rather cynically prefers to valorize the ‘inherently fracturous’ nature of the working class, entailing a shift of focus from organized political actions driven by aspirations for change to individual acts of negotiation. There are no ‘pre-given-ness’ in the categories that the workers identified themselves with; these identities and categories do not remain ‘unaffected’, but are ‘actively created’ at different junctures by the workers themselves, mediated by socio-economic circumstances. The dynamism ingrained in the process cannot be ossified into frozen, static identities. While we will address this debate in the course of the chapters in the context of the Duars labour, here, let us first glance through a brief historiography pertaining more specifically to plantation labour that shall be relevant to our study.

⁵ *ibid* pp.219-230

⁶ Chitra Joshi, *Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and Its Forgotten Histories*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003

Historians working on plantation labour, have debated the real/imagined differentiation that exists in our characterization of *'free/unfree'* labour. In the rich tradition of historical works on the various specificities/similarities of plantation regimes that emerged after the abolition of slavery in colonies across the world at a particular juncture of imperialism, evolving a position on this question of *'free/unfree'* labour has remained a highly contested problem.

In this respect Robert J. Steinfeld's work is of considerable significance. He shows quite effectively that contrary to our general perception of free contract ushering the age of 'free labour', 18th and 19th century England was actually characterized by the proliferation of statutes aimed at punishing criminally the breach of labour contracts till as late as 1875. He stresses the fact that such penal legislations were not merely meant for meting out punishment to a violator but more importantly to "compel performance" as criminal sanctions were of great "economic use" to the employer.⁷

Steinfeld demolishes the traditional dichotomies of *'free/coerced'*, *'pecuniary/non-pecuniary'*, *'economic (thereby natural)/legal (imposed) 'voluntary contract/penal regime'* and so on. He forcefully argues that "the line separating free from unfree labour is not natural, but conventional."⁸ As long as the labour is forced to choose between disagreeable alternatives (thereby forcing him/her to choose the lesser evil), there is not much of a difference between what we call modern 'free wage labour' and slavery. Thereby he underlines the futility of drawing an artificial line to divide 'free' from 'unfree'. He shows, rather, "a continuum of coercive pressures."⁹

Prabhu Mohapatra most eloquently discusses the emplotment of these contract-induced unfree labour relations. In sharp opposition to the Henry Maine's famous dictum of movement of progressive societies from 'Status to Contract', he shows an opposite trend by "demonstrating how 'British' status relations inherent in British contractarian ideology melded into and

⁷ Robert J. Steinfeld, *Coercion, Contract and Free Labour in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p 10

⁸ *ibid* p 14

⁹ *ibid* p 16

reproduced ‘Indian’ status relations.” He illustrates this para-judicial contract set-up in the context of the ‘*Khattaband*’ Company weavers, the indigo producers in Bengal under the stringent Regulation X of 1830 and several Breach of Contract laws that deeply shaped labour relations in 19th century.¹⁰

In terms of understanding the phenomenon of large scale migrations of indentured labourers (both inter-continental and intra-continental) to work the ever-burgeoning plantation sector, a revisionist interpretation emerged that came to challenge the notion of ‘disguised slavery’. While questioning the notion of force, bondage and penal servitude entailed in the process; this scholarship fore-grounded (and also happened to over-emphasize) the idea of ‘voluntariness’ and ‘free/rational choice’ on the part of the so called ‘free’ emigrants. David Northrup provides us with a neat sketch of the evolution from slavery to indentured labour and the economic imperatives of the plantocracies that marked the limits of the agenda of the abolitionists. He demonstrates how the idea of free wage labour in place of slavery was anathema to the requirements of discipline, control and labour cost for the planting class and the colonial states – and hence for labour regimes based on indentures. Alongside he also emphasizes the demands of western capital, settlers and new technology that in this phase of imperialism propelled tremendous expansion over the course of the 19th century.

But having done so, Northrup, much in line with the revisionist scholarship (that sought to downplay the coercive or forced nature of indentures), seems to be in a considerable anxiety to stress the “voluntary” aspect of the migrations. For instance, he characterizes Indian indentured migration “as liberation, not entrapment.” He says, “within the spectrum of options open to Indians motivated by ambition or desperation to leave their rural homes, indentured migration overseas promised higher wages and greater chances for savings...the Indian trade was constructed and run to maximize consent and understanding.”¹¹ There is a similar anxiety in works of like that of Marina Carter,¹² who attempts to distance herself from Hugh Tinker’s idea

¹⁰ Prabhu Mohapatra, "From Contract to Status Or How Law Shaped Labour Relations in Colonial India" *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the The Law and Society Association, TBA, Berlin, Germany, Jul 25, 2007*

¹¹ David Northrup, *Indentured labour in the age of imperialism, 1834-1922*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 70

¹² Marina Carter, *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers: Indians in Mauritius, 1834-1874*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995

of a ‘new form of slavery’.¹³ These historians ultimately tend to move towards a “rational choice” concept whereby migrants demonstrate their entrepreneurship or adaptability by leaving their homes to work elsewhere. It is this notion of “consent”, “options”, and exercise of “informed/free choice” that has been severely challenged in other works.

Lalita Chakravarty, in her seminal work, calls into question the validity of such notions of “choice-margin” available to migrant workers. She also helps further our understanding of the *un-freeness* of the migrant worker – whether under the ‘contract system’ or in the supposedly ‘free’ labour sites outside indentures. She abandons the categories pertaining to ‘analytical labour economics’ that run in terms of marginal calculations involving free choice on the part of the migrant. Rather she identifies in subsistence agriculture the main explanation behind labour migration. In this vein, she questions a basic tenet of exchange economics that assumes that a labourer moving from agriculture to wage labour is thereby making a rational choice between different possibilities. Making a significant and relevant distinction between a peasant and an agrarian proletariat (or landless agricultural labour), she contends that while the aforesaid choice margin may be relevant for a peasant, it does not apply to the latter who constituted the main force of migrant workers in India. Free labour migration, she observes, is supposed to be determined (in volume and direction) by an income differential between the sending and the receiving sectors. But these choice margins “really detract attention from the fact that many early migrant labourers were (and many of the migrants still are) members of the agrarian proletariat for whom the choices were (and are still) either to die working with bare hands or die starving.” Most migrant workers from labour catchment areas moved out, risking death, disease, being cheated and the attenuation, if not destruction, of all primal social ties like family and kinship, allured by the immediate gain of one blanket, one change of clothes per year, and two rationed meals a day. Obviously, the village community did not provide steady livelihood even on these meagre terms. “When a prospective “coolie” migrant is pushed so hard in his place of origin, is it meaningful to talk of a choice margin open to him?”¹⁴

¹³ Hugh Tinker, *A New system of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830-1920*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1974

¹⁴ Lalita Chakravarty, ‘Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in a Dual Economy – British India, 1880-1920’, *IESHR*, XV, No.3, 1978, p. 266

Further, she calls into question the assumption that the labour market is shaped by the simple exchange economy of supply and demand that determines the value of labour-services. In most plantation regions (or even in urban factory units) local labour proved expensive because of higher demands for wages. In such context monetized exchange economy penetrated agrarian society to procure “distant labour” by resorting to non-market institutions like “sourcing of labour” and “labour-lordism”, thereby perpetuating *un-freeness*. She breaks the traditional distinction made between “contract labour” and the “free labour” that replaces it. She demonstrates how in both cases, the costs of *search for, transport of* and *disciplining* the labour is met by non-market means: i.e., arrangements made by the colonial state, subsidized information and transport networks, and finally the migrant labourer himself. For “contract labourers”, penal sanctions and breach of contract rules, extracts extra labour in exchange for his transport cost. While for “free labourers”, this extraction occurs mainly through a crushing debt burden as he has to meet his own “disciplining cost” in the form of commissions/cuts/bribes to the institutionalized intermediaries or labour lords (sardars/jobbers etc). It is the extra-economic role and function of these non-market intermediaries that set the limits to being ‘free’.¹⁵

Michael Anderson developed further the limits of a *formally free* labour market in India. He provides a historical overview of the evolution of the Indian master and servant laws which had their basis in the metropolitan laws. But they also developed certain distinctively colonial characteristics. In this regard he discusses the development, working and impact of the Penal Code and the more notorious Workman’s Breach of Contract Act. But his most crucial contribution lies in his contention that for employers in India, the creation of a formally free labor market had hardly any impact as their system of control relied not on penal contracts but on the authority of jobbers and on holding wages in arrears. Penal compulsion had never been a practical solution not only for the concomitant humanitarian objections, but also because it was too expensive. “If Indian industry held any hope of competing against foreign imports without absurdly high tariffs, it would need to force the costs of discipline, labor mobility, and social reproduction back upon the work force. This task was achieved through a formally free labor market, which housed multiple forms of informal coercions.”¹⁶ In this context he locates

¹⁵ Chakrabarty pp. 281-283

¹⁶ Michael Anderson, ‘India, 1858-1930: *The illusion of Free Labour*’ in Douglas Hay & Paul Craven ed., *Masters, Servants and Magistrates in Britain & the Empire, 1562-1955*, London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004, p. 450

the crucial role of the labour intermediary, their most important function being control and disciplining of the labour force. For all practical purposes, it was the *sardar* or jobber, rather than the manager or owner, who were the real employer of labour. They not only possessed the power to hire or fire at will but often controlled access to credit, housing, shops, and medical care as well. Where labour relations were determined primarily by relations of hierarchy and deference, pre-capitalist/feudal mechanisms, or paternalistic ma-bap idioms; the terminology of the law found little social use. The colonial state never intended to challenge the existing social relations by attacking slavery and bondage. Slavery and servitude were banned in law but tolerated in practice. Under such a context of *un-freedom*, it is not surprising that penal sanctions for breach of contract continued to be used widely in some sectors over the whole period even after its repeal.¹⁷

Ranajit Das Gupta elaborates the *real* economic benefits from the *un-freedom* of the plantation workforce that accrued to colonial capital. He explains how instead of market mechanisms, it was largely outright force and various politico-legal mechanisms that met the gap between demand and supply of labour. In such a context, despite the formal and juridical restoration of personal liberty, it was covert compulsion and fraudulent extra-economic means (including the *girmit* or bonus system) that characterized the relations of labour. Through such relations both in Assam or in Bengal, whether indentured or “free”, the wage levels of garden workers were kept abysmally low: so much so that even the entire family’s wage-earnings could meet only a fraction of their subsistence requirements. This forced them to depend on the non-capitalist subsistence economy: either through subsistence peasant and/or tenant farming on plots provided by the garden management, or through settlement of ex-garden workers on adjacent government land. For the planting class, this on one hand, served the non-economic function of disciplining as well as reducing the workers to a semi-servile status tied to land. More importantly, by shifting a considerable part of the cost of reproduction of labour on to the subsistence sector to be borne by the labourers themselves, it helped the planters and the colonial state to maintain wage-levels below the cost of reproduction of labour power and to perpetuate *un-freedom*.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid p. 453

¹⁸ Ranajit Das Gupta, ‘From Peasants and Tribesmen to Plantation Workers: Colonial Capitalism, Reproduction of Labour Power and Proletarianisation in North East India, 1850s to 1947’, *EPW*, 21, No.4, 1986 pp. 5-7

Ranajit Das Gupta gives us an overview of the salient features of the labour market in India to demonstrate how the *un-freedom* of the workers was ingrained in the very structure of the labour market as it evolved under colonialism. His picture of a labour market structure is one that was not rigidly compartmentalized into multiple markets, but neither was it with sufficient interpenetration so as to have a pan Indian character. He explains it as a complex *multiplicity of market structures within the colonial economy*. He significantly moves away from an interpretation that tries to explain away the *un-freeness* as ‘frictions/imperfections’ of a mechanism that is otherwise operating under market forces. He also negates the characterization of a ‘dual’ market based on apparent differences in legal domain – one “unfree” (*viz.*, indentured labour in Assam) and the other a “free” market (outside penal contracts). It was essentially an *unfree* market structure characterized by fragmentation and various forms as well as varying degrees of open or concealed compulsion. While it is easy to conclude with the un-freeness of the indentured labour, he observes a tendency to characterize non-indentured labour (for instance in Duars gardens, the coal mines or the jute mills) to be under “free” market relations. Over the course of his study he amply proves that in all these industries - despite their own specificities and though not under any penal agreement - were characterized by a labour force who were subjected to various kinds of un-freedom, dependency relations, servitude and bondage.¹⁹

It would be enlightening to look into some texts concerning the various plantation societies that emerged particularly in South and South East in an identical historical context and roughly around the same time period. Their trajectories in terms of origins, subsequent growth, the patterns of labour recruitment and the labour regimes that were created for the largely immigrant indentured labour largely overlap despite their regional specificities.

In this light Jan Breman’s work on the social organizations and realities of labour control in the plantations of the East Coast of Sumatra is of crucial significance.²⁰ Breman describes and

¹⁹ Ranajit Das Gupta, ‘Structure of the Labour Market in Colonial India’, *EPW*, 44/46, Spl No., 1981 pp. 1782-1785

²⁰ Jan Breman, *Taming the Coolie Beast: Plantation Society and Colonial Order in Southeast Asia*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989

analyses how economic and non-economic coercion were *structurally involved* in the very working/living conditions of the workers and in the structure of the plantation regime. These were in the form of an unending labyrinth of payments, fines, deductions and other ‘informal mechanisms’ that the workers were subjected to or in the form of the use of acute physical, mental and racist violence. Violence in the plantations was not merely incidental. Intimidation, corporal punishment, imprisonment and torture formed an integral part of the general pattern of uncontrolled exercise of power which characterized relations between planters and labourers. Force was not the only means through which the contract workers were held down. Contracts were initiated on the basis of indebtedness, and the impossibility for a worker to free himself [or herself] of that debt was the most important reason why the contract endured. However his assumption that the abandonment of the bonded labour regime and the adoption of free labour would drastically transform the plantation economy may not be tenable. A mere changeover from a ‘penal regime’ to that of so called ‘free labour’ regime would not bring about any fundamental shift in the real position of the workers as economic compulsions and informal mechanisms would continue to push workers towards making difficult choices resulting in their virtually ‘unfree’ status. Breman also highlights in great detail the forms of individual and collective resistance orchestrated by the workers. Far from being a timid, defenseless mass, they were a defiant people who had nothing more to lose.

P. Ramasamy attempts to study both labour and trade unions together by placing plantation labour in a broad time frame extending from the colonial period to the present.²¹ He examines the formation of the plantation system, the nature of the labour-capital relationship, labour-capital conflicts in the pre-war and post-war periods, and the political circumstances under which a pliant/moderate trade unionism came into being in the post-colonial era. He attempts to explain as to why plantation labour was the most exploited section in Malaysia.

Ramasamy attempts to argue that the state’s role vis-à-vis capital is one of ‘limited autonomy’ which enabled it to pursue labour policies that were not constrained by the immediate dictums of either capital or the unions. But in his vehement articulation for the ‘relative autonomy’ of the state, probably he bypasses the variable of the ‘organized working class’-the presence/fear or absence of which can to a large extent determine the extent to which the state would openly

²¹ P. Ramasamy, *Plantation Labour, Unions, Capital, and the State in Peninsular Malaysia*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994

align itself with capital. Similarly, it should be pointed out that the changes that capital underwent (for instance the reduction in the extra-economic coercion of labour in the post war years that Ramasamy shows) were not spontaneous ones. The “concrete historical situation” that Ramasamy refers to for the determination of nature of capital at a particular juncture, in the case of post-war Malaysia (in the 1960s for instance) was most definitely the *rise of a militant well organized radical Left trade union movement*.

Embarking into the domain of colonial (tea) plantation economies of north-eastern India, it would be imperative to start with one of the seminal works on Assam by Amalendu Guha.²² He starts with the account of the Raj’s conquest of Assam with the express purpose in the long-run to turn Assam into an agricultural estate of the tea-drinking population of the metropolis and to transform local traditional institutions to suit the colonial pattern of exploitation. Following the anti-slavery legislation of 1833-34 in the metropolitan centre, the Raj, too, pronounced the abolition of slavery in 1843: but only to replace it with a different kind of ‘debt-slavery’ epitomized in the Workman’s Breach of Contract Act of 1859 and Indenture System that effectively curbed the possibility of a free labour market and precipitated a semi-feudal mode of exploitation. The chapter on recruitment is a particularly harrowing tale of oppression—abduction, confinement, intimidation, violence, mounting mortality while transport, extremely meager wages and forceful ‘involuntary’ re-engagement.

Along with Rana P. Behal, Prabhu Mohapatra dealt in considerable detail with the multiple facets of the emergence, operation and eventual decline of the indenture system in Assam.²³ In this analysis, they place the impetus for the final abolition of the indenture system not on ‘benevolent’ colonial policy, but on the inherent contradictions of the system itself that made it untenable.

But as long as they were in force, it may be assumed that indenture laws were relatively less important for labor discipline in Assam (compared to West Indies) as has been argued by Prabhu Mohapatra. His analysis is based on the low rates of prosecution/offences under the

²² Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947*, Calcutta: Tulika Books, 2006

²³ Rana P. Behal and Prabhu Mohapatra, “Tea and Money versus Human Life’ : Rise and Fall of the indenture system in Assam Tea Plantations 1840-1908’, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 19, 1992

penal contract in Assam as compared to a high incidence of the same in the West Indian plantations. However, this is not to suggest that the labour regime in the gardens of Assam were by any means more relaxed; it was in every bit as strict. Mohapatra contends that while in West Indies enforcement was largely through state administration of penal laws; Assam relied primarily on private enforcement by the garden authorities: the private power of arrest and severe corporal punishment. The low prosecution rates were often trumpeted as a sign of healthy labour relations in the gardens, and therefore, the “privatization of enforcement blurred the limits of legality.”²⁴ So, even when penal legislation was abolished, the massive apparatus of surveillance and detention which was the *real* factor behind enforcing labour discipline still remained.

Jayeeta Sharma attempts to understand the process and implications of the making of the garden economy in Assam within the larger historical development of the region, its ecology and its people. Her study of Assam in terms of an “Edenic transformation” of a ‘jungle’ into a ‘garden of the empire’ is set apart by an approach to understand how colonialism with its own economic drives encounters and negotiates with the people, and *vice versa*, on the basis of their varying subject positions. This is also exemplified in the complex and ever changing colonial stereotypes, perceptions and racialized theories that emerged vis-à-vis various fluid categories of the subject population and in the manner the latter responded to the same. The ascription of ‘indolence’/‘lazy natives’ to the local peasantry as the meagre garden wages failed to attract them as workers and the simultaneous shift from a promotion of “skilled and civilized” labour for tea to the invention of “primitive virtues” of the tribal population demonstrates the complex interplay between capital’s needs, race theories and recruitment drives.²⁵ Jayeeta Sharma’s efforts to unravel the impact of tea and the concomitant improvement discourse of colonialism in the reformulations of the regional identities and making of the ‘Assamese’ widens the perspective of understanding the inter-relations between political economy, a region and its culture.

²⁴ Prabhu Mohapatra, ‘Assam and the West Indies, 1860-1920: *Immobilizing Plantation Labour*’ in Douglas Hay & Paul Craven ed., *Masters, Servants and Magistrates in Britain & the Empire, 1562-1955*, London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004, p. 476

²⁵ Jayeeta Sharma, *Empire’s Garden: Assam and the Making of India*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2012, p. 60

A significant addition to the corpus of writing plantation history is Rana P. Behal's work on Assam. While unravelling the transformation of the migrant agrarian communities into 'coolies', he critiques the revisionist 'voluntary' or 'rational choice' arguments in the light of the rampant reference to coercion and abusive recruitment even in colonial documents. He also delves into the virtual immobilization of the labourers within the plantation economy, i.e., their inability to withdraw their labour power in bargaining for better terms. Here again he criticizes the revisionist scholarship's argument of indentures in fact being a rational economic choice of the labourers who also benefitted from it. He compares them with contemporary apologists of the system that included planters themselves. He elaborates the labour relations as they evolved within the gardens under the contract system wherein the planters managed enforce renewal of contracts producing "generational servitude". The system of advances, land grants, debt and wages in kind were all deployed to immobilize workers within a structure of dependency which, he argues, sustained even after the formal abolition of the indenture system. In terms of resistance to this, he exemplifies how the late arrival of trade union formations or the cultural diversity of the workers did not always come in the way of having collective assertions in the gardens of Assam.²⁶

Finally moving into Duars, Sharit Bhowmik's analysis of the process of class formation in the plantation system commendably brings about a reconciliation between "orthodox" Marxism and Sociology. It provides significant insights into the specificities of the plantation as a distinct '*Social System*'. Bhowmik asserts that the peculiarities of the structure of the plantation regime, combined with the particularities of 'unfree-ness' that it entails, gives rise to some specific characteristics to its labour force: low technology, heavy dependence on manual labour, coercion, low wages, immigrant labour and general isolation of the plantation.²⁷

The important question that Bhowmik addresses is: *Does the 'homogeneity' that the economic activity of being wage-labourers thrusts upon the adivasi workers as a class in a plantation system necessarily reflect upon their social life as well?* Keeping in mind the 'multistructural nature of society' he opines that the 'isolation' that is ingrained in the plantation regime tends

²⁶ Rana P. Behal, *One Hundred Years of Servitude: Political Economy of Tea Plantations in Colonial Assam*, Delhi: Tulika Books, 2014

²⁷ Sharit Bhowmik, *Class Formation in Plantation System*, Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1981

to help the workers preserve their links with their adivasi social organization drawing upon a completely different kind of production system.

To quite some extent, Manas Das Gupta's work complements that of Sharit Bhowmik and helps us sharpen many of the arguments therein.²⁸ He starts with the early development of the tea industry in India and also gives an account of the emergence of the Indian entrepreneurial class drawn predominantly from Jalpaiguri's legal profession. Moving on to his analysis of 'indentured labour' that was in the interests of the planters, he refers to the various racialized theories about the work-attitudes of the tropical people in the plantations that emerged to justify and rationalize such bulk transportation of people *en masse*. Then again, the structured inability of the worker to sell his/her labour outside the plantation (or even to other plantations) shows his location outside the 'classic proletarian' framework. The strict denial of the right to organize for around a century left the workers in Duars disjointed, divided and poorly paid for the longest time. Simultaneously, Das Gupta also explains the various 'push factors' that led to the particular pattern of migration into Duars predominantly from adivasi belt of Chotanagpur. In contrast to Bhowmik's more optimistic appraisal of the role of the post-colonial Government in terms of the plight of the tea garden workers, Das Gupta maintains that the government's attitude to the gardens in general and labour in particular may be summarized as that of 'benign neglect', unwilling to intervene in the mis-management and open flouting of legal obligations by the planters.

Asim Chaudhury and Sibsankar Mukherji provide insights into the impact of the plantation economy with huge inflow of capital from the metropolis on the midst of the 'backward' subsistence economy of the region. Sibsankar Mukherjee, for instance, opines that in a truly capitalist method of production, the generation of surplus depends on the production process. But, in a plantation economy, capitalist surplus depends on market processes. Hence, investment in the plantation economy comes primarily from the petty bourgeois or merchant class. "The appreciation of investment by this class", he says, "is very different from that of industrial capitalist class, and the semi-capitalist nature of plantation investment together with

²⁸ Manas Das Gupta, *Labour in Tea Gardens*, Delhi: Gyan Sagar Publications, 1999

quick turn-over perfectly satisfies their model investment.”²⁹ In his formulation of “enclaves” in a peasant society, Asim Chaudhury says that the continuity of agricultural backwardness of the region marked by pre-capitalist social formations, only served to show that the “extension of colonial rule or investment by merchant capital in plantations in a backward peasant economy tend to perpetuate its underdevelopment.” First, the backwardness of the hinterland, and hence the low wage level in the subsistence sector, served the economic interest of the planters as it helped them to keep wages abysmally low in the gardens. Second, the paltry income of the workers also failed to generate enough demand to stimulate production in local agriculture and small-scale manufacturing in the hinterland. The high salaried managerial staff (primarily European) had most of their luxury items supplied from home, and even their massive savings were entirely siphoned off to their country. So, neither their high consumption expenditure nor the high savings meant anything to the hinterland. Even the surplus generated by the Indian planters went into land, trading, speculation, real estate in Calcutta, or some charities. “Hence, in the matter of capital transfer to the non-agricultural sector of the plantation economy the foreign and Indian planters behaved similarly, albeit for different reasons.”³⁰

Piya Chatterjee provides a very different perspective for looking at the multiple facets of the plantation economy and its work-force because of her specific and very powerful authorial position of being a postcolonial, Third World, feminist anthropologist.³¹ She stresses the inherent *continuities* in the moral economies of rule within the plantations from the colonial to the post-colonial, - nuanced ‘continuities’ that, for instance, Bhowmik glosses over or overlooks. With labour procurement and discipline constituting its material basis, colonial cultures of management and political isolation chart a particular economy of rule, marked by a ‘unique cultural history’ and ‘hybrid cultural politics’ of colonial imperatives and indigenous feudal norms. Chatterjee explicates the phenomenon of ‘unfree-ness’ written into the plantation work-regime from a gender perspective, by showing how the planter/*mai-baap* power rests upon a social structure that is ‘explicitly patriarchal.’

²⁹ Sibsankar Mukherjee, ‘Duars Plantation Economy – Evolution and Pattern’, *Paper Presented at the Seminar on Sociological Perspectives on Plantation Labour in North-East India, 1984, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, North Bengal University*, p. 8

³⁰ Asim Chaudhuri, ‘Enclaves in a peasant society: The political economy of Duars Tea Plantations in the Jalpaiguri District of West Bengal’, *Special Lecture II, Centre for Himalayan Studies, University of North Bengal*, pp 1-16

³¹ Piya Chatterjee, *A Time for Tea: Women, Labour and Post-Colonial Politics on an Indian Plantation*, New Delhi: Zubaan, 2003, pp.1-22

In the context of the Duars working class, Ranajit Das Gupta comes closest in hinting towards the fluidity of multiple identities of the workers by calling the process of class formation in the gardens to be “ambiguous”. He recognizes the role of the community identity in forging solidarities amidst the workers. At the same time he points at the crucial self-awareness of the workers themselves as being exploited. As a cautionary note he states that “in a society marked by considerable mix between pre-capitalist and capitalist relations, the process of class formation and class struggle remained unclarified and fluid.” But alongside, there also remains a tendency in him to chart a steady progression towards “class consciousness” with a qualitative leap being achieved in the Duars over the two years 1946-47. He justifies this through his claim regarding a sudden, marked and definitive transformation of “capital-labour relationship” in the Duars gardens - a claim that remains largely unsubstantiated. And it is the presence of such a larger schema that also leads to a certain language of lamentation in his narrative of what ought to be (working class identity) and what wasn't (the persistence of community identity). So, he talks of the “incapacity” of the proletariat to “transcend” their community or pre-capitalist identities and widen their “class sphere of action.”³²

So, in his cautionary note, while he identifies the “partial penetration of capital” as one of the fundamental reasons behind the ambiguities and fluidities in the nature of the working class; but still, he locates a persistent “hiatus” between the ethnic identity and the class identity of the workers. In the post-war context, the class identity of the workers along with their peasant-outlook and the resultant experience of united struggles did lead to significant leaps in the history of Duars working class in 1946-47. But, if one borrows from Chitra Joshi, then, the same solidarity could also slip away into fractures at another moment only to be forged again later at another historical juncture. There is no permanent “hiatus”, between the ethnic/caste/community identity and working class identity, rather the Indian working class remains in constant flux. It is a process wherein the class identity is continually in contestation – as also sometimes in collaboration - with communitarian, caste, regional and religious identities. When any one of these identities gain prominence at any given point in time, it does not mean that it does so at the cost of the other identities. In more ways than one, my research is also an attempt to understand better Ranajit Das Gupta's cautionary note regarding the

³² Ranajit Das Gupta, ‘Ambiguities of class formation : plantation capitalism, workers and collective action in the Duars, 1890s-1947’, *Working paper series, 96, Calcutta : Indian Institute of Management, 1987.*

ambiguities inherent in the Duars working class in particular and the Indian working class in general.

III

The first chapter deals with the coming of tea. Once the indigenous tea plant was discovered signaling the conquest *of tea*, it thereafter would trigger off territorial conquests and settlements *for tea*. And finally, in a few decades, the plantation regime came to dominate and shape the entire region according to its own needs marking the conquest *by tea*. These three processes, interconnected as they are, would form the dominant theme of the first chapter.

The significance of and internecine debates surrounding the discovery of tea in Assam along with its momentous implications for the imperial economy will be traced as an overture to the final journey of tea to the Duars. Hereafter we would deal more specifically with the conquest, marking out of the geographical entity of the Duars and finally the formation of the districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri – all propelled by the needs of the imperial economy in tea. The sprouting of the gardens in the Darjeeling hills will first be understood with its own specificities in terms of the terrain, its demands, and the laboring people. Thereafter, we will trace the descent of tea downhill to the Terai and subsequently in the Jalpaiguri Duars in the last quarter of the 19th century. We would reflect upon the significant transformations entailed in this shift and their implications in terms of the formation of a certain ‘ethnicized landscapes’: from hillmen to plainsmen, from paharia (Nepalese) to madhesia (adivasis).

The attempt in this chapter would also be to study closely the transformation of the entire region – its landscape and its people. Generally, studies of plantations tend to start at a point when the gardens have already come into being. But then we ought not to forget that there was a past, in fact a recent past, before the gardens when there were none of this “idyllic” landscape. We would focus, instead, on the process of an earlier transformation which happened, to make way for tea. The disruption and marginalization of the slash and burn mode of cultivation and living

of the Meches and Lepchas is one such aspect. While certain significant changes were brought about upon the region in the process of establishing the plantation economy; the latter, in turn, in a dialectic and largely interconnected process, also played a role in transforming the region and its people. The susceptibility of the region to food crisis can, for instance, be traced as significant transformations that would be brought about by the coming of tea.

For the history of the discovery of tea, and the debates surrounding it, the sources are primarily official gazettes, *Correspondence regarding The Discovery of the Tea Plant of Assam* by B.E. De Beanport (1941), *Indian Tea: Its Culture & Manufacture: a text book on The Cultivation & Manufacture of Tea* by Claud Bald (1903), *The History of the Indian Tea Industry* by Sir Percival Griffith, and some more recent secondary references. For the conquests & demarcation, the administrative history and for the advent of tea into the region we primarily rely upon the Imperial Gazetteers, the District Gazetteers of Bengal, Eastern Bengal & Assam district Gazetteers, Gazetteer of Bengal & North East India, Census Reports, Hunter's Statistical Account of Bengal, Whitley's Royal Commission on Labour, Edgar's Paper's regarding tea industry in Bengal and so on. All of the abovementioned sources have been consulted in NMML, NAI and British Parliamentary Papers. The Forest Department., Agriculture Department., Scarcity & Famine files, Miscellaneous, Political, General & Railway Dept. files give us extensive insights from the archives into the larger transformation of the Duars as a region and its people both for tea and by tea.

The second chapter begins with an interrogation of the planters' claims of the Duars workers being "free" through the Tin Box incident. In Rangamati tea estate in Duars some time in early 1893 a garden-worker named Gobind was locked up in a Tin House for several days, presumably for around three or four days under the order of the British manager Mr. Murray. It is in the light of this incident, that the High Court bench asked for periodical inspections to safeguard the rights of the workers vis-à-vis such "excesses". But in the context of Duars what we see is that far from the context of unchallenged authority of the planters on ground, the abstract idea of "free labour" seems to have been used merely as a convenience to avert any social cost and obligations, and, thereby, allow the Planter Raj to continue. There seems to have been a coming together of the interests of both the government and the management in Duars

in this matter. The same attitude is further more clearly discernible if one were to look at the labour relations from the recruitment end of the picture.

The recruitment for the Assam gardens was under Emigration Acts and was, therefore, closely observed. The nature of discrepancies, coercion, malpractices that were a part and parcel of the process of recruitment (as described in great details in available records) and the farce of government supervision that was mandatory under the Act (which official narratives themselves refer to) only serve to indicate the state of affair of labour that was being recruited without such Acts – as in Duars – where emigration was supposedly “free”. The notoriety of the practices of the garden sardars – particularly the ones without licence engaged with “free emigration” as articulated in government discourses – are crucial for our understanding. The planter class had long been demanding recruitment without the hassles of “unnecessary” and “expensive” supervision. In this context, the shifting of emphasis even on the part of the state towards a similar arrangement by the 1880s is significant.

If one were to delve into working/living conditions of the workers in the gardens, the same narrative of government apathy in the name of “free labour” would tend to emerge. It would also be an opportunity to understand and illustrate the conditions of labour as it existed in the gardens of Duars which otherwise is least documented in contrast to Assam, etc., being outside the purview of regular inspections. The municipal, sanitation and medical branch of the colonial administration however provide us with some useful insights to develop a fair idea of the conditions in the gardens of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri. A normatively “free” workforce ensured that the planters were under absolutely no compulsion under penalty to undertake any welfare measures or capital outlays and could treat the workers as “cattle” flocked into unhealthy lines. While at the same time, again a notionally “free” labour in fact kept the state *free from its responsibility* of regular enquiries or enforcement or protection of the workers. All interferences or suggestions to that end was immediately dubbed as an impediment to “free” labour and hence rejected summarily.

The same unfreedom was written into the relations of labour as also the production process in the gardens. It was bolstered and perpetuated by the elaborate hierarchy of command that existed and notably in the extra-economic worker-sardar relations that was carefully preserved.

A study of the working hours, wage-determination, the discrepancies and illegalities therein, including the concept of “family wage”, are worth analyzing. The façade of “free labour” is further busted by the continual efforts on the part of the planters, with the tacit support of the state, to ensure a captive labour force whose mobility and free choice of employers are sought to be restricted. In the name of countering “enticement” of labour by offers of higher wages, the Duars Labour Rules “were designed” by the planters’ association precisely to this end. Last but not the least, one of the other most potent means of depressing wages and in turn maintaining a captive labour force was to shift a portion of the cost of reproduction of labour onto its subsistence economy. And this was achieved in the gardens through parceling out pieces of land for cultivation to the workers which in turn had far reaching implications in defining the plantation economy.

The Correspondences around the *Inspection of Tea Gardens in the Duars* in the General Department Emigration Branch along with the *Extracts from the Judgment recorded by their lordships Justices Princep and Trevelyan in the case of Mr. Murray* are two crucial sources to map the debates around the purported freedom and the reported unfreedom in the gardens of Duars. That apart, the District Census Handbooks, the Whitley Commission Report on Labour (1931), Annuals Reports of the Duars Planters Association, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal in the General Department, Emigration Branch and Inland Emigration particularly pertaining to *Recruitment of Labourers for the Tea Districts of Assam, etc in the Districts of Chota Nagpore* narrate the debates centering around recruitment. While for working conditions we would rely primarily on the Municipal Department Sanitation Branch, and the Medical Department proceedings, Rege Committee Report on Labour, and the Annual Reports of the Duars Planters Association. Apart from the above, the Deshpande Committee Report on Cost and Standard of Living of Plantation Workers in Assam and Bengal (1947), a report on the living conditions of plantation workers in Jalpaiguri district (Duars) helps in developing an understanding of the character of the plantation regime.

The third chapter deals with the Tana Bhagat Movement in Jalpaiguri Duars. As an extension of the Tana Bhagat Movement in the districts of Ranchi, Palamau and Hazaribagh, the “Uraon Unrest” had spread ‘alarmingly’ across the tea gardens of Duars in 1916. Considering there were 90,000 Oraons in the district of Jalpaiguri of whom near about 60,000 were tea garden

workers, this phenomenon led to considerable panic among the garden as well as state authorities as they thought that it could destabilize the entire workforce of the industry. We would try to fathom what were the underlying propellers behind the Tana Bhagat movement that manifested in the particular shape it took, its articulation and mobilization. An understanding of the socio-economic conditions prevailing in the Chota Nagpur region, the location of the Oraons therein historically, the internal hierarchies within the community that were further intensified due to colonial interventions, and the resultant socio-political aspirations, are imperative in order to understand the agitation. This would be essential for our understanding of the transfer and scope of the same into the Duars gardens of Jalpaiguri by the end of 1915. Alongside, we would also closely observe its ramifications in terms of the planters' response and that of the state. Over all we will try to understand the complex underpinnings of the various narratives/interpretations that crop up while grappling with a movement that is Adivasi in origin while at the same reading its articulations when transposed in the Duars wherein, unlike in Chota Nagpur, the Oraons also happened to be workers in a plantation regime. This might give us an opportunity to reflect upon the “class vs community” debate that has puzzled labour historians for years.

For this chapter, we would heavily rely upon the Correspondences, Weekly Information Reports and Continuous Notesheets of the CID, Intelligence Branch under the File Name “Uraon Unrest” accessed in the IB Archives, Kolkata. The other significant source is the *Copy of Judgment in the case Emperor vs Guiya Oraon, Soma Oraon Birsa Oraon & Ratia Oraon, Sec 124A IPC, Sec 25(1) Defence of India Consolidation Rules* which was constituted to mark the “ring-leaders” of the Oraon agitation in the gardens. That apart, the Duars Planters Association Annual Report for the year 1916, the English as well as various vernacular newspapers, the District Census Handbooks, Settlement Reports and Gazetteers provide us crucial information to reconstruct this history and look for certain answers.

In the fourth chapter we would see the entire region of the Duars – with all its historical specificities, the trajectory of its development with the coming of tea, its settlement, land tenure and most importantly its people – coming into play in the melting pot of rapid unionization within the gardens and the raging Tebhaga movement without, during the post-war years of food shortage. To start with, we would briefly discuss what exactly we mean by “food

shortage”, what exactly transpired in the “war years”, or how exactly did the “post-war crisis” affect the region and the gardens in particular. The resultant acute malnutrition in the gardens and the responses of the planters and the state administration in the midst of this ration crisis will be closely studied for a better understanding of the historical context in which unionization began in the gardens. Our focus would be on what is called the ‘organized’ phase of the plantation workers’ struggle in the gardens of Duars. By ‘organized phase’, I refer to the phase of workers’ movements that was led and expressed through the trade union leadership – a phase that unfolded in the Duars only from 1946.

Here we would discuss the quick spurt of labour militancy that spread across the Duars gardens in the initial (roughly six) months of trade union activity in 1946, primarily protesting discrepancies in rations in the midst of an overall ‘food-scarcity’, low wages and ill-treatment at the hands of garden authorities. A simultaneous attempt would be made to perceive in all its complexities the community-assertions and the consequent inter-communal tensions/suspicious provoked by the multiple (conflicting) identities of the workers [Gurkha/Paharia/hill men vs Madhesia/Bengalee/plainsmen/adivasi] that played themselves out intermittently in the labour-lines since the incipient labour organisations and struggles began. We would also study how the Bengali Garden Babus, placed as they were in an exploitative position in the garden hierarchy, tried to use the community identity to obfuscate their role during the ration crisis for which they were to become a prime target of the workers’ wrath. We would also study the roles of the Management and the state officials as they attempted to use the communitarian ‘fissures’ to their own advantage.

It is this labour militancy that would subsequently (or rather immediately) reach remarkable heights during the Tebhaga period in the Duars, marking an important qualitative change in the labour movement which was now in active participation with the sharecroppers’ movement outside. We would study in some detail the intersections between the class and community identities that play such an important part in understanding and identifying the particular nature of the working class as they evolved in the gardens and their political expressions.

This chapter is sieved from the Political Confidential files in the W.B. State Archives and the Intelligence Branch Archives. The *Review of Labour Unrest in the Duars in 1946* has been of special significance. Pamphlets, booklets and political propaganda material of various formations, particularly the CPI which are kept in the Bhupesh Gupta Bhawan, as well as newspapers like the *Swadhinata* and *The Statesman* provide significant insights into the period. Various government reports like the following also were valuable sources - Report on Malnutrition among Tea Garden Labourers in the Duars, The Notes of the Industrial Health Advisory Committee Meeting at Jalpaiguri, 22nd September 1944, The Report on an enquiry into conditions of labour in plantations in India (or the Rege Committee Report, 1946), The Report on an Enquiry into the Cost and Standard of Living of Plantation Workers in Assam and Bengal (or the Deshpande Committee Report, 1948), and the Report on an Enquiry into the Living Condition of Plantation Workers in Jalpaiguri district, Duars (or the Halder Committee Report, 1951). This apart, the Proceedings of the 22nd session of the AITUC and the Duars Planters Association Annual Reports for the years 1943 to 1948 were also of crucial significance.

Chapter I

From its Discovery to the Duars: Conquest of Tea, for Tea & by Tea

Mr. C.J. O'Donnell, ICS, who partially revised the Jalpaiguri District Gazetteer in 1888, commented on the coming of tea into the Duars in the following words:

This important industry has increased so much of recent years as to change almost completely the physical characteristics of the submontane country over a great area thirty miles long extending from the debouchment of the Tista from the Darjeeling hills to a similar point on the Diana river on the frontier of Bhutan. *The greater part of the primeval forest has disappeared and mile after mile has been replaced by great expanses of tea gardens...*³³ [emphasis mine]

Hunter's *Statistical Account of Bengal*, published in 1874³⁴, does not mention a word about tea in the Duars. The same year, however, the first garden was opened at Gazilduba in the Duars by one Richard Haughton. What followed was the galloping expansion described in the quote. But the travel of tea into these tracts of Duars has a much longer history: a history that was propelled by the imperatives of merchant capital and was driven by the needs of imperial trade. A trade, which, by the early 19th century, had already assumed "considerable national importance" in the metropolis.³⁵ So, the setting

³³ J. F. Gruning, *Eastern Bengal and Assam District Gazetteers, Jalpaiguri*, Allahabad: Pioneer Press, 1911, p. 104

³⁴ W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal Vol X – Districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri and the state of Koch Behar*, New Delhi: D.K. Publishing House, 1974

³⁵ Percival Griffiths, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967, p. 37 [Henceforth Griffiths, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry*]

up of gardens - at a particular time, at a particular space and in a particular form, i.e., plantations in the colonies - was largely incumbent upon the demands of capital and the needs of a metropolitan economy. It is only in this context that the history of annexations, the carving out of spaces, the definition of rigid boundaries imposed on ever-perplexing claims over the fluid frontiers, and finally the planting of the hills with tea, that Terai and the Duars can be understood.³⁶

This was also in the same historical period when the formal abolition of slavery in the west, was neatly replaced with the rise of plantation empires in the colonial peripheries of India, Ceylon, Malaysia, Sumatra and so on. Entire plantation societies or plantocracies mushroomed in these areas, all more or less in the same period; spanning the latter half of the 19th century and becoming an inseparable part of colonial economies by the turn of the century. Formal slavery gave way to 'contractual slavery', propped up by penal measures/criminal sanctions whereby indentured workers could be herded into the enclosure of the plantations in large numbers and held there by force virtually as bonded labour.³⁷

Once Assam emerged as a success story of the Planter Raj, the phenomenal investment of capital that followed, and the consequent hunger for more and more land under tea acreage, explains the travel of tea to North Bengal. It was for the express purpose of bringing vast expanses of land within the fold of plantations, that the two districts of Darjeeling and thereafter Jalpaiguri were created, marking a late chapter in colonial expansion, conquest and settlement by the middle of the 18th century.

Once the indigenous tea plant was discovered signaling the conquest *of tea*, it thereafter would trigger off territorial conquests and settlements *for tea*. And finally, in a few decades, the plantation regime came to shape (and also was shaped by) the entire region, marking conquest *by tea*. These three processes, interconnected as they are, would form the dominant theme of the first chapter.

A Prelude

³⁶ The word 'terai' is derived from Persian meaning a damp and humid place. The term may broadly be applied to the running strip of land 15 to 20 miles wide occupying the length of the foothills of the Himalayas from west to east. In a restricted sense and especially as understood in the tea industry, it refers to the area at the immediate foot of the Darjeeling hills and the border foothill areas between Bhutan and India. The Duars – meaning, doors to the mountain, is actually an area included in the terai.

³⁷ Robert J. Stenifeld, *Coercion, Contract and Free Labour in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 10

Here we will discuss in brief the discovery of tea in Assam and the coming into being of the plantation economy. The significance of and internecine debates surrounding this discovery along with its momentous implications for the imperial economy will be traced as an overture to the final journey of tea to the Duars.

The custom of tea-drinking is supposed to go back as early as the third millennium BC in China which is considered its homeland. Portuguese and Dutch traders were the first importers of tea into the European mainland with regular shipments from by 1610 onwards. The English East India Company started capitalizing upon its popularity only by the mid-18th century when it began to import it into England from its Chinese homeland. "The Chinese name for tea is 'Tcha' which is, of course, the origin of the word 'cha' which is found, in some form or the other, in most Indian vernaculars. A dialect form of the Chinese 'Tcha' which might be written as 'Tey' gives us the form which the word assumes in most western languages."³⁸ When the first tea seeds from China began to arrive in India, Governor General Warren Hastings sent a selection of them to George Bogle, then British emissary in Bhutan.³⁹ No practical result seems to have followed from this, but this marked the beginnings of a long search for the possibility of growing tea in India.⁴⁰ As early as 1778, Sir Joseph Banks was asked to prepare a series of notes for the East India Company on the cultivation of new crops, and he strongly advocated the cultivation of tea in India. He began by demarcating the geographical region within which satisfactory tea could be produced.

Black teas...may certainly be cultivated with success in the Northern Parts of the Province of Bahar Rungpoor and Coosbeyhar for instance where the Latitude and Cooling influence of the neighbouring mountains of Boutan give every reason to expect a climate eminently similar to the Parts of China in which good Black Teas are at Present manufactured.⁴¹

This was the first connection that had been established at least on paper between the Duars region and tea. This happened years before Assam valley plantations were set up . Though the Duars would have to wait for almost a century before the gardens finally arrived there, the course had already been

³⁸ J.C. Kydd, *The Tea Industry*, London: OUP, 1921 p. 8

³⁹ Griffiths, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry*, p. 33

⁴⁰ For further details read J. Forbes Royle, 'Report on the Progress of the Culture of the China Tea Plant in the Himalayas, from 1835 to 1847', Reviewed work(s), *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 12, 1850; J. C. Marshman, 'Notes on the Production of Tea in Assam, and in India Generally', Reviewed work(s), *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 19, 1862

⁴¹ Cited in Griffiths, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry*, p. 34

determined in the words of Banks. He even considered the possibility of hiring Chinese tea-makers and tea-growers in Honan and to induce them to come with their shrubs and their tools to Calcutta to instruct the possible growers in India.⁴²

In spite of this enthusiastic report, nothing materialized for a long time and it was to take several years before the indigenous Assam plant could be identified as tea. Several missions were sent to China, meanwhile, for the “express purpose” of seeking comprehensive knowledge about cultivation and manufacture of tea. Seeds and plants were sent back to Calcutta for further experimentation in the Botanical Garden of the Company.⁴³

British explorations into Upper Assam in the first quarter of the 19th century marked their first encounters with tea. Official reports started trickling in, about the cultivation of tea by the Singphos at the northeastern end of the Assam valley. Such facts found mention, for instance, in the letters of Colonel Latter (in 1815) and Mr. Gardener (in 1816).⁴⁴ In 1819, however, David Scott, then agent to the Governor General to Assam, who had begun to take an active interest in of growing tea, was still considering working with the plants imported from China. He wrote to Dr. N. Wallich, botanist to the East India Company, asking for Chinese tea plants and seeds from Calcutta, “expressly for the purpose of trying them in the Hills to the Eastward of the berhampooter.”⁴⁵

Meanwhile, in 1823 Robert Bruce, “an adventurer and trader”, learnt of the existence of tea in Assam amongst the Singphos and arranged for a consignment of specimens to be sent over to his brother C.A. Bruce, then in charge of a flotilla of gun-boats engaged in the ongoing Burmese War.⁴⁶ He claimed to be the first European who ever penetrated the forests and visited the tea tracts in British Suddiya, and brought away specimens of earth, fruit and flower. At the end of the war, these were then forwarded via Scott to Wallich, but the latter was not convinced that it was genuine tea. No further development took place till 1831, when Lieutenant Charlton, then serving in Assam, sent what he

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 34

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 35

⁴⁴ CR Harler, *The Culture & Marketing of Tea*, London: OUP, 1933 p. 229 [Henceforth Harler, *The Culture & Marketing of Tea*]

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p 36

⁴⁶ Harler, *The Culture & Marketing of Tea*, p. 229

described as tea plants to the Agricultural and Horticultural Society in Calcutta. But this consignment, too, was not recognized as genuine tea in the laboratories, the benchmark being the Chinese variety.

When Bentinck became Governor General in 1828, he received a memorandum from a certain Mr. Walker on the desirability of tea cultivation on Nepal Hills and elsewhere in India. The words are significant as they chart out in the clearest terms the irreversibility and indispensability of the imperial trade in tea. Once trade with China became shrouded in uncertainty, it was only a matter of time before the cultivation of the crop would shift to the colonial peripheries. This, from now onwards, would inject a renewed vigour in the search for tea in India.

The commercial relations of this country with China have lately assumed a character of uncertainty, by no means corresponding to the importance of the trade, or consistent with the dignity, of the British empire.

For many years the consumption of tea has been increasing in this country; it has become a luxury to all, and almost a portion of food to the common people, who in some districts drink it three or four times a day. Its use is so intermingled with our habits and customs, that it would not easily be dispensed with.

It is, therefore, of considerable national importance, that some better guarantee should be provided for the continued supply of this article, than at present furnished by the mere toleration of the Chinese government, which, although the Chinese have at present a monopoly, it will be easy for us to destroy.⁴⁷

This was a clear warning and an ultimatum : the commanding voice of imperial demand, the supply for which had to be ensured swiftly from the colonies. "If in future we are not rendered independent of the Chinese by producing tea from our own territories and colonies, it will", stated Walker, "be our own fault". He therefore proposed that "the East India Company should resolutely undertake the cultivation upon the Nepal hills and other districts, where the camellia and other plants of a character similar to the tea plant are indigenous."⁴⁸ Similar forebodings had become commonplace by then and had certainly led to serious concerns about the fate of tea. There were apprehensions about France "steadily creeping" towards China, the "great tea garden of the world" from the South West. Russia had great sway over its northern borders. China was itself facing internal turmoil while English merchants were somehow clinging on to its eastern sea-board. "No one can foresee into what

⁴⁷ Cited in Griffiths, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry*, p. 37

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p 38

complications, the situation, may at any moment hurry us, but any one can foretell that they, most inevitably, must eventuate in a crisis, that will shake the Celestial Empire to its foundations, and possibly devastate every acre of those vast tea lands in which England is so deeply interested...and in such circumstances, it certainly must be very gratifying to Her Majesty's Ministers to know, that while India is secure and well governed, England's demand for tea, be it ever so great, can be readily supplied." So, when in 1833, the East India Company lost its monopoly of tea trade in China, the empire made a desperate bid to build "a rival source of supply under its own control."⁴⁹

The debilitating effects of addictive opium on Chinese society and the aversion of China to allow trade in foreign goods led to one of the classic examples of belligerent "Free Trade" forcing its way onto what they called the "despotic East".⁵⁰ Even the "supposed liberals and radicals" of the west justified this enforced smuggling of drugs to counter what they called the "arrogant and insupportable pretension of China" to come in the way of "free trade".

The opium-for-tea trade or the triangular trade of the British with China was rejected by the Chinese emperor, finally leading to the Opium Wars of 1838 onwards.⁵¹ While the urge to test the possibility of growing tea in the subcontinent can be traced from almost more than a decade earlier, the events leading up to the Opium Wars (1838) added a desperate fillip to the search for tea in India. Bentinck paid heed to the forebodings and while addressing his Council on 18th January 1834, remarked: "It is not necessary that I should trouble the Council with many remarks to support the abstract question of the great advantage that India would derive from the successful introduction of the tea plant."⁵² The Tea Committee was promptly appointed on the 1 February 1834 including seven servants of the Company, three Calcutta merchants, Wallich himself, and two Indians. At first the Committee began with exploring the possibility of growing the China plant. So, they attempted to collect more information about the soil and climatic conditions in the sub-Himalayan areas through a circular from local officials in order to compare it with those of China. In a striking response, Captain F. Jenkins, who

⁴⁹ Harler, *The Culture & Marketing of Tea*, p. 230

⁵⁰ Frank Sanello and W. Travis Hanes III, *The Opium Wars: The Addiction of One Empire and the Corruption of Another*, Illinois: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2002

⁵¹ Roy Moxham, *Tea: Addiction, Exploitation and Empire*, London: Constable, 2003, p. 82 [Henceforth Moxham, *Tea: Addiction, Exploitation and Empire*]

⁵² W. Nassau Lees, *Tea Cultivation, Cotton and Other Agricultural Experiments in India: A Review*, London: [W.H. Allan and Co.](#), [Thacker, Spink, and Co.](#), 1863 p. 9 [Henceforth W. Nassau Lees, *Tea cultivation, cotton and other agricultural experiments in India: A review*]

in 1834 became agent to the Governor General for the North Eastern Frontier with his headquarters at Jorhat, said:

I am so fully impressed with the belief of the fitness of the mountainous region which divides Cachar from Assam for the growth of tea, that I beg to attempt to call the attention of the Committee to that region in the most favourable manner I can, with a view to its examination by a competent individual.

Camellias are found in every part of this hill country; and within our jurisdiction in the Singpho district of Beesa, a coarse variety of the tea plant is, as I am informed, undoubtedly indigenous. A plant was given to me at Sudiya, which I have reason to suppose was a genuine tree.⁵³

When Jenkins showed the circular to his assistant Charlton, he at once confirmed it referring to his own discovery about three years back which had been rejected. He also sent Jenkins some seeds and leaves of the tea tree in Assam from Sadiya. Wallich and the Tea Committee were finally convinced. The Bruce brothers found no mention in this discovery. Robert Bruce, who had reported about it as early as 1823, however was to be duly credited later. The event which marked the real birth of the Indian tea Industry was the discovery by Major Robert Bruce in 1823 of indigenous tea plants in Assam.⁵⁴

The “re-discovery” of tea in Assam stirred interested circles in Calcutta. Wallich considered that “in view of the presence of tea in India, the importation of the China stock was a waste of time” and hence was duly to be abandoned.⁵⁵ The Committee was now determined to follow up the Assam discovery with vigour, and a scientific panel was stationed at Sadiya in January 1836. The panel was still split in its opinion. Wallich advocated the Western Himalayas as more suitable than Assam to grow tea and the Assam plant to be more suitable than the China tea. Griffith, a noted botanist on the other hand, considered the region of Assam and the plant from China to be the best combination. As far as the choice of plant was concerned, Griffith believed a plant that has been cultivated for generations must be yielding better than a wild variety. But, in the long run, it would appear that “Wallich was illogical, but he was right; Griffith was logical, but the result of his recommendations was disastrous.”⁵⁶ Those

⁵³ Cited in Griffiths, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry*, p. 40

⁵⁴ D.V. Rege, *Report on an enquiry into conditions of labour in plantations in India*, Labour Investigation Committee, Government of India, 1946, p. 1 [Henceforth Rege, *Report on an enquiry into conditions of labour in plantations*]

⁵⁵ Harler, *The Culture & Marketing of Tea*, p. 231

⁵⁶ Harold H Mann, *The early history of the tea industry in north-east India*, Calcutta: D.L. Monro, the Calcutta general printing co., 1918 p 12

interested in tea in Assam still tilted towards the China breed. So even as late as 1848 was sent to the interiors of China's tea districts "to engage some first-rate tea manufacturers for the Indian plantations, to procure a supply of the implements used for the manufacture of tea, and to get together a large collection of tea-plants."⁵⁷ But finally, as the China plants took more time to mature than the Assam variety, it was the latter sample that made its way from Assam to Calcutta in November 1836, and was well received.⁵⁸ At the end of 1837 a larger sample was sent, and it was considered to be of 'marketable quality'.⁵⁹ In 1838, twelve chests of tea were sent to the East India Company in London. Some of the tea was kept for the directors, some was sent as samples to tea-brokers, and some was dispatched to provincial mayors, apparently to stimulate an interest.⁶⁰ In a burst of patriotic fervour or for a bid for publicity, one Captain Pidding is said to have bought the entire consignment at an exorbitantly high auction rate.⁶¹

With this first break, there was no stopping for what was to remain by far the most valued colonial export of the Raj. So much so that by 1874 Lt. Col. Edward Money brims over with confidence as he proclaims "it is very certain the day will never come that Tea cultivation will cease in India."⁶² And from then on, borrowing the words of Galeano, tea was destined for the metropolis which would "profit more from consuming them than" the colony would "from producing them."⁶³ Early in 1839 the Bengal Tea Association was formed in Calcutta and in a few weeks' time the Assam Tea Company was floated in London. In another two years time there would be experimental plantations on the hills of Darjeeling, and in another thirty years' time, tea was to make its entry in the Duars.

Now began a mad scramble among prospective planters for more and more tea leases. And hence, the need for even more land to be acquired by a desperate colonial government for the same purpose. Already by 1868, there were 38 joint stock companies engaged in tea production in India with a

⁵⁷ Robert Fortune, *A journey to the tea countries of China including Sung-Lo and the Bohea hills; with a short notice of the East India company's tea plantations in the Himalaya mountains*, London: J. Murray, 1852 p. 316

⁵⁸ Harler, *The Culture & Marketing of Tea*, p. 232

⁵⁹ Griffiths, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry*, p. 51

⁶⁰ Moxham, *Tea: Addiction, Exploitation and Empire*, p. 100

⁶¹ Daniel Forrest, *Tea: for the British: The Social and Economic History of a Famous Trade*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1973, p. 112

⁶² Edward Money, *The cultivation and manufacture of tea, an essay for which the prize of the Grant gold medal and Rs. 300 was awarded by the Agricultural and Horticultural Society of India in the year 1872*, Calcutta: Wyman, 1874, p. xiii [Henceforth Edward Money, *The cultivation and manufacture of tea*]

⁶³ Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: five centuries of the pillage of a continent*, New Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2008, p. 1

nominal capital amounting to 4.5 million sterling.⁶⁴ These years were soon to bring the industry to the brink of disaster even as it was just in its infancy. As Money would put it, “it was madness to expect aught but ruin, under the conditions which the cultivation was entered on in the Tea-fever days.” So, as far as management was concerned, “people who had failed in everything else were thought quite competent to make plantations...any one – literally any one – was taken”: retired or cash-hired army or navy officers, medical men, engineers, veterinary surgeons, steamer-captains, chemists, shop-keepers, stable-keepers, used up policemen, clerks, and what not. Whereas 700 acres were considered enough land to run an estate, the mad rush for green gold translated into the purchase of five, ten, fifteen, even twenty thousand acres with a paltry and often no local supply of labour. There seems to have been “a hazy idea that if 500 acres paid well, 1000 would pay double...there was no bound – in fancy – to the size a garden might be made.” Then again, “in those fever days, with the auction system, lands almost always sold far above their value. The most absurd prices..were sometimes paid for wild jungle lands.” Absurdly large areas were brought under tea which eventually led to huge losses and panic.⁶⁵ The speculative expansion that gave the initial thrust pushing the frontiers of tea from the hills towards the Terai, and eventually into the Duars. By 1874, the year tea strikes roots in the Duars, India supplied about 20,000,000 lbs of tea to the English market – a figure that had steadily expanded since then. But still it was just a fraction of the total consumption of 130,000,000 lbs of tea in England, much of which was still being shipped from China.⁶⁶ So, as tea stepped into this area between the Tista and the Sankosh rivers, a lot of ground had to be covered through subjecting the region to the most momentous changes.

This vigorous drive to bring vast tracts under the plantation regime in the mid 19th century was perceived by the colonists as a civilizational project wherein tea itself played the role of colonization. Tea was no longer a mere beverage, a crop; it became a metaphor for both colonization and civilization. Colonial imperatives and the market ascribed much wider meaning to it. Crude economics needed an ideological justification that would push the colonists in their grand project of subjugating an entire region and its people and moulding both according to the needs of a distant metropolis. Tea was also perceived by many as the beacon of modern civilization and enlightened rule, bringing order and productivity onto vast swathes of savage, jungle, wild, unproductive, “waste” lands. It was described as a process riddled with “insurmountable difficulties” to penetrate into regions that “has

⁶⁴ Charles Henry Fielder (Secretary Indian Tea Planters Association), On the rise, progress and future prospects of tea cultivation in British India, *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, March 1st, 1869, p. 37

⁶⁵ Edward Money, The cultivation and manufacture of tea, p. 2

⁶⁶ Harler, *The Culture & Marketing of Tea*, 4th edition p. 177

been jealously guarded against all innovation". So powerful was this discourse of '*making productive what was a waste*', of '*opening up something that hitherto was locked*', that no matter who inhabited these lands and in what manner prior to the arrival of tea, acquisition was effected in term of 'wastelands'.⁶⁷ This is symptomatic of the concept of *terra nullius*, most infamously applied by the British settlers in Australia whereby they conferred upon themselves the legal right to settle "uninhabited", "barbaric" or "waste" lands by nullifying all claims of the indigenous population upon them.

I accept it as a sound maxim, that no country can be colonized by another country, in which that people cannot till the soil. Now the European cannot labour in the plains of India, and therefore I look on the idea of colonization, generally, as *utopia* (emphasis in original). Yet, if anything can be done in this direction, the cultivation of tea is most certain to accomplish it...We can see again miles of malarious and deadly jungle disappear, and our fine healthy young hill colonies connected by broad highways with the termini of the great arterial lines of railroads, and thus with the ports of Calcutta, Bombay, Karachi & Madras. Finally, we can see at no distant date, India supplying the major portion of a present trade of twelve million sterling.⁶⁸

Scaling the Hills: planting Darjeeling

The history of planting tea in the hills of Darjeeling is, to start with, a history of British "adventurism".⁶⁹ The commercial venture into plantations, as we would see, closely followed the 'history of conquest'. I will also deal with the question of labour recruitment and migration that had been triggered off in this hill region in tune with the needs of the plantation economy. At the end of it, I will look at the close association that was to be established between the 'Nepali/Gurkhali plantation workers' and the 'hill region'-an 'ethicized landscape' that would persist in Darjeeling hills.

Once established, Darjeeling rapidly increased. Allotments of land were purchased by Europeans by building dwelling-houses; barracks and a bazaar were formed, with accommodation for invalid European soldiers; a few official residents civil and military, formed the nucleus of a community...the progress of Darjeeling during the two years I spent in Sikkim, resembled that of an Australian colony, not only in amount of building, but in the accession of

⁶⁷ To find the presence of such rhetoric in expansion read Charles Henry Fielder, 'On the Rise, Progress, and Future Prospects of Tea Cultivation in British India', *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, Vol. 32, No. 1, March, 1869 pp. 29-37

⁶⁸ W. Nassau Lees, *Tea cultivation, cotton and other agricultural experiments in India: A review*, p. 3-4

⁶⁹ Manas Das Gupta, *Labour in Tea Gardens*, Kolkata: Gyan Sagar Publications, 1999, p. 4 [Henceforth Das Gupta, *Labour in Tea Gardens*]

native families from the surrounding countries. There were not a hundred inhabitants under British protection when the ground was transferred; there are now four thousand.

Extracts from "Himalayan Journal", 1843

by Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker⁷⁰

The history of Darjeeling presents a late chapter in the extension of British rule.⁷¹ Gurkha Wars of 1814-16 gave the British control over this area. The district, till the beginning of the 18th century, was a part of the dominions of the Raja of Sikkim. In 1706 however, what is now the Kalimpong subdivision of the district was occupied from the Raja of Sikkim by the Bhutanese. The Gurkhas, on the other hand, had seized power in Nepal and they invaded Sikkim in 1780.⁷² The "aggressive Gurkhas" in a span of 30 years overran Sikkim "as far eastward as the Tista, i.e., the belt of country lying along the lower hills between that river and the Mechi, which is now covered by the valuable tea-gardens of the Darjeeling planters."⁷³ At this juncture, the Company went to war against the Gurkha "aggressions throughout the whole length of their northern frontier." They were impelled as the Gurkhas were an expansive power far too close to Indian territory. The Anglo-Gurkha war broke out in 1814 "at the end of which in 1817 by the Treaty of Titaliya, the tract which the Nepalese had wrested from the Raja of Sikkim, was ceded to the Company. Preserving the right to arbitrate in case of any further dispute with its neighbours, the Company restored the entire tract between the Mechi and Tista to Sikkim."⁷⁴ With these guarantees, the Company started to establish its influence over the region.

With a strategic "balancing act" that had already been mastered by the Company, it moved between the kingdoms of Nepal and Sikkim, by allying with the weaker kingdom of Sikkim. The British thus made their head-way into this region. In one such episode of arbitration by the Company in 1829, two officers, Captain Lloyd & Mr. Grant, penetrated far north into the hills and they were attracted to "the old Goorka station called Dorjeling".⁷⁵ It was then largely deserted, occupied only by a large village and it was the residence of one of the principal Kazis of the region. Mr. Grant immediately reported to the Governor General Bentinck about "the numerous advantages promised by a Sanitarium at Darjeeling and also recommended its

⁷⁰ See Appendix III – 'Extracts from Himalayan Journal, 1843 by J.D. Hooker' in A. Mitra, *District Census Handbook, Darjeeling, Census 1951, West Bengal*, Alipore: West Bengal Government Press, 1954, p. cxxx-cxxxii

⁷¹ E.A. Gait, C.G.H Allen, H.F. Howard, *Imperial Gazetteer of India, Provisional Series: Bengal*, Vol. II, New Delhi: Usha Publications, 1984, p. 196

⁷² A. Mitra, *District Census Handbook, Darjeeling, Census 1951*, p. i

⁷³ L.S.S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1907, p. 19 [Henceforth O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*]

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p.19

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p. 20

occupation for military purposes as the key of a pass to Nepal.”⁷⁶ He dwelt upon the “climate, proximity to Calcutta, and accessibility on its central position between Tibet, Bhotan, Nepal and British India.”⁷⁷ Bentinck appointed the Deputy Surveyor General Captain Herbert to examine the area “and in due course, the Court of Directors approved the project.”⁷⁸ An opportunity to open negotiations with the Raja of Sikkim was soon provided by yet another arbitration of dispute by the Company in course of which Captain Lloyd obtained the following:

...I, the Sikkimputtee Rajah, out of friendship for the said Governor General, hereby present Darjeeling to the east India Company, that is, all the land south of the Great Runjeet river, east of the Balasur, Kahail and Little Runjeet rivers and west of Rungno and Mahanuddi rivers.⁷⁹

An allowance of Rs. 6000 per annum was fixed as compensation payable to Sikkim. When General Lloyd and Dr. Chapman were sent in 1836 to explore and investigate the area to realize its potential, there were only a few huts erected by the Raja of Sikkim. But by 1840 rapid progress was made in terms of communication, a staying bungalow at Mahaldiram, hotels at Kurseong and Darjeeling, around 30 private houses in Darjeeling and Lebong.⁸⁰ Dr. Campbell was appointed as the Superintendent in 1839 taking charge of civil, criminal and fiscal administration of the district along with political relations with Sikkim. He is credited to have encouraged the settlement of the district by immigrant cultivators and in a decade the population rose from 100 to 1000 by 1849. W.B. Jackson, an Inspecting Officer, writing in 1852, credits Campbell - along with several other feats - with the introduction of “experimental cultivation of tea and coffee”.⁸¹

The making of Darjeeling as colonial territory and of Darjeeling tea thus interlocked in the interests of colonial capital. The establishment of the tea industry in Darjeeling is credited to the “enterprise of Dr. Campbell, who was appointed Superintendent of Darjeeling at a time when attention was being attracted to the possibility of starting and developing the cultivation and manufacture of tea in the territories under the East India and Company.”⁸² Colebrook had repeatedly mooted the possibility of growing tea while Colonel Kyd had already started

⁷⁶ A. Mitra, *District Census Handbook, Darjeeling, Census 1951*, p. ii

⁷⁷ ‘Extracts from Himalayan Journal, 1843 by J.D. Hooker’ in A. Mitra, *District Census Handbook, Darjeeling, Census 1951*, p. cxxx

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p. ii

⁷⁹ O’Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*, p. 21

⁸⁰ A. Mitra, *District Census Handbook, Darjeeling, Census 1951*, p. ii

⁸¹ O’Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*, p. 23

⁸² *ibid.*, p. 72

experimenting with tea at the Sibpur Botanical Garden. Wild tea had been discovered in Assam valley as early as 1821 which then also triggered the appointment of an expert committee by Bentinck to advise on the introduction of tea. Official experimental plantations in Assam proved successful and in 1839 private enterprise took to the field with the formation of the Assam Tea Company.⁸³ It is most certainly not a coincidence that the same year Campbell was transferred to Darjeeling. He was to start his experiments with tea. The first trial with tea in Darjeeling was made in 1841 and its success encouraged others to follow suit. And now, the annexation, by any means, of the rest of the district of Darjeeling (as we know it today) was only a matter of time, the target being the Kingdom of Sikkim to start with. Justifications were typical: the “insolence and avarice” of the Sikkim authority; the ruler’s aim being “to monopolise the trade of the country, and to enrich himself at its expense”; their rejection of free trade with British territories; the “conduct of the Dewan throughout [being] Indo-Chinese; assuming insolent, aggressive, never perpetrating open violence, but by petty insults effectually preventing all good understanding.”⁸⁴

Finally on the pretext of Dr. Hooker & Dr. Campbell, being “treacherously seized” by the Sikkim authority,⁸⁵ a military expedition was launched that ended with the annexation of the Sikkim *terai* and with a considerable extension of the British domains in the mountainous area of about 640 sq miles that was consequently devoted to tea. As the Company’s troops entered the Sikkimese capital Tumlong in 1861, a treaty was made that “was of particular importance to Darjeeling because it finally put an end to frontier troubles with Sikkim”.

Consequently, in 1866, a hilly tract of 486 square miles, consisting of Kalimpong, was transferred from the Western Duars District and was incorporated into the newly formed Darjeeling district. This was the last addition to the district which now reached its present dimension.⁸⁶ The conquest of the hills, through military and diplomatic struggles, through strategic battles and corporate contests that paved the way for the plantation settlements on the

⁸³ *ibid.*, p. 72

⁸⁴ ‘Extracts from Himalayan Journal, 1843 by J.D. Hooker’ in A. Mitra, *District Census Handbook, Darjeeling, Census 1951*, p. cxxx

⁸⁵ They were captured “while travelling” by Raja Dewan (Prime Minister) of Sikkim for trespass, whereas the British claimed that they had the permission of Govt of India & the Raja of Sikkim.

⁸⁶ A. Mitra, *District Census Handbook, Darjeeling, Census 1951*, p. iii

hills of Darjeeling—“the conquest and administration of a region that would bring ‘gold and glory’ into the treasure chests of empire.”⁸⁷

The making of the plantations in Darjeeling, as we observed above, went along with the history of the making of the district itself. If Darjeeling was purchased (not yet annexed) in 1835, we find Dr. Campbell, the “maker of modern Darjeeling”, experimenting with China tea seeds from Kumaon at a height of 7000 ft. at Darjeeling as early as 1841.⁸⁸ Mr. Jackson’s report on Darjeeling (1852) also attests to the success of tea at Dr. Campbell’s Darjeeling garden.

I have seen several plantations in various stages of advancement, both of the Assam and China plant, and I have found the plants healthy and vigorous, showing that the soil is well adapted for the cultivation. In the Garden of the Superintendent, Dr. Campbell, in Darjeeling, in the more extensive plantations of Dr. Whitcombe, the Civil Surgeon, and Major Crommelin, of the Engineers, in a lower valley called Lebong, the same satisfactory result has been obtained: the leaves, the blossom and the seeds are full and healthy; the reddish clay of the hill at Lebong seems to suit the plant better than the black loam of Darjeeling.⁸⁹

While Dr. Hooker opined that “there is too much moisture and too little sun in Darjeeling to admit the cultivation on a large scale becoming remunerative,” Jackson refutes such pessimism and takes the examples of the lower sites of Pankhabari and Kurseong, where one Mr. Martin’s tea plantations thrived well. He further contests any pessimism by adding that “between the Morang and Darjeeling, every variety of elevation and aspect is to be found, and there seems to be little or no doubt that tea cultivation in that tract would answer.”⁹⁰

Finally, proving Hooker’s doubts to be unfounded, tea moved out of the experimental plots to be cultivated on an extensive and commercial scale by 1856, marking the beginning of an unprecedented investment of colonial capital into this part of north Bengal. According to the account of a contemporary observer, Revd. T. Boaz, writing in January 1857, tea plants had been sown and raised by the end of that year [i.e., 1856] at Takvar to the north by Captain Masson, at Kurseong by Mr. Smith, at the Canning and Hope Town plantations by the Companies attached to those locations, by Mr. Martin on the Kurseong flats, and by Captain Samler, the Agent of the Darjeeling Tea Concern, between Kurseong and Pankhabari.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Piya Chatterjee, *A Time for Tea: Women, Labour and Post-Colonial Politics on an Indian Plantation*, New Delhi: Zubaan, 2003, p. 60 [Chatterjee, *A Time for Tea*]

⁸⁸ Das Gupta, *Labour in Tea Gardens*, p. 4

⁸⁹ O’Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*, p. 72

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 73

⁹¹ Cited in O’Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*, p. 73

In the same year the Alubari Tea Garden was opened by the Kurseong and Darjeeling Tea Company, and one at Lebong by the Darjeeling Land mortgage Bank. This was followed by the Dhutaria garden, started by Dr. Brougham. Between 1860-64, four more gardens came up at Ging, Ambutia, Takdah and Phunbsering under the Darjeeling Tea Company, and the gardens at Takvar and Badamtam under the Lebong Tea Company.⁹² Out of the “two distinct tracts” that the Royal Commission talks about, “namely, the ridges and deep valleys of the Lower Himalayas and the Terai on level country at their base” it was the hill tracts that came to be covered with tea to start with.⁹³ The other pioneer gardens in the hills before the planters “attention was turned to the Terai” were the Makaibari, Pandam and Steinthal tea estates. While the Terai began to be planted in 1862, there was considerable focus on this region developed by 1866.

Favourable natural conditions coupled with an equally favourable pro-planter policy of the government ensured the speedy spread and development of the plantation economy in the hills. Land was abundant at this time in the entire Darjeeling hill areas and the requirements of the newly emergent tea lobby were given utmost priority in the assignment of land. As to what existed before, who peopled this land before, and the omitted history of what was to be their fate with the coming of tea is a theme I would discuss in some details subsequently. For now, most of the gardens acquired land, either as tenures “held in grant under Old Rules”, with discretionary power in the hands of the planter to convert cultivable land into tea gardens; or, as tenure “held in Fee Simple under New Rules” directed by the Waste Land Rule of 1859 that was subjected to subsequent amendments (Free Simple Rule, 1862) to suit the convenience of the planters. All acquired land in the hill territory was converted to free-hold tenure.⁹⁴ That is to say, under such arrangements, the planters were granted lands that were fully revenue free. Within the span of a decade after the establishment of tea on a commercial basis, there were 39 gardens with 10,000 acres under cultivation with an outturn of over 433,000 lbs. In another eight years, the number of gardens almost trebled. The area under cultivation expanded by a whopping 82% and the outturn multiplied ten times. This phenomenal scale of expansion of the garden economy had ramifications and consequences written into the very process of its spread. These would lead to irreversible changes in the newly constituted district and the region altogether,

⁹² *ibid.*, p. 74

⁹³ John Henry Whitley, *Royal Commission on Labour in India, House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, Cd 3883*, London: HMSO, 1931, p.356 [Henceforth Whitley, *Royal Commission on Labour in India*]

⁹⁴ Das Gupta, *Labour in Tea Gardens*, pp. 6-7

something that will be discussed later. By 1905 all suitable and available land within the district had been already exhausted while the number of gardens shrank owing to amalgamations.⁹⁵

From the 1850s onwards, within a span of 25 years, the newly acquired hill district witnessed phenomenal demographic changes. According to Hunter, the population in this quarter of a century astonishingly doubled itself.⁹⁶ While the census figures record a population of 94,712 in 1872, it had a 64% increase in a decade to reach 1,55,179 by 1881. And then again, another 44% increase would make the figure 2,23,314 in 1891. This unprecedented development is primarily attributed to the coming of the tea in Darjeeling. According to Dash in 1872 there were 74 estates in the district with 14,000 acres planted: these figures increased in 1881 to 153 and 30,000: and in 1891 to 177 and 45,000.⁹⁷ The figures denote the prodigious scale of operations whose characteristic is the employment of an enormous quantity of manual labour. And with that we come to the vital question of labour supply and recruitment that was imperative to feed the extraordinary expansion that this labour-intensive industry was undergoing. In comparison with this rapidly increasing demand, the local supply of labour was found quite unequal. The result was unexampled immigration. The census of 1891 found that no less than 88,000 persons resident in the district were born in Nepal.⁹⁸ Migration was primarily from the adjacent state of Nepal which, for the earlier decades of the plantation, happened to be the sole catchment area for plantation labour.

J.W. Edgars, in his *Papers* on the tea industry in Bengal in 1873, refers to Major B.W. Morton, the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling, who said that the labour question was not as yet become a problem in this district. Morton further adds with confidence that as long as the people of Eastern Nepal have free access to the district, there ought to be no scarcity of labourers for the gardens in the hills. Based on this report, J.W. Edgars concludes:

In the Darjeeling Hills, and to some extent in the Terai, the labour employed is chiefly obtained from Nepal, which possibly owing to the impetus given to an increase in population by the security enjoyed under Sir Jung Bahadur's administration, has for some

⁹⁵ O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*, p. 7

⁹⁶ W.W. Hunter, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India* Vol. III, London: Trubner & Co., 1881, p. 42 [Henceforth W.W. Hunter, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India* Vol. III]

⁹⁷ O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*, p. 36

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 56

years back been throwing off swarms of its inhabitants into the neighbouring districts and that *Nepal ought to be able to supply enough for the hills*.⁹⁹

Coolies employed in the hill-estates remained almost entirely Nepalese, while in the Terai they came from both Nepal and Chota Nagpur. In official parlance, Nepalis being “more useful as labourers” in the tea estates, and being “more efficient and thrifty as cultivators than the [local] aboriginal Lepchas”, were preferred by the planters and the recruiters in the hills.¹⁰⁰ So, the colonial land settlement policies in this hill district began to create important reservoirs of workers for plantation settlement, road building and army recruitment; the immigrant settlement policy that targeted Nepali men for the British Indian army, according to Piya Chatterjee, simultaneously had the important effect of supplying labour to tea plantations.¹⁰¹ they began to flock in large numbers by 1860.¹⁰²

The first regular census of the district in 1872 records a total population of 94,712 persons.¹⁰³ The ethnic division of the population in the census report shows around 32,338 *Nepalis and 1,648 Oraons immigrants* attracted by the tea-gardens. The Nepalis formed 34% of the population in these early years of the district. They were described as “pushing and thriving race” and the Deputy Commissioner is reported to be of the opinion that they would in time occupy the whole district. Nepalis, according to Hunter, made “capital agriculturists” and were thereby preferred as labourers by the managers of the tea gardens. Most of the Nepali immigrants over the years settled down permanently in the district. The Deputy Commissioner observed that, unless the indigenous tribes (the Lepchas and the Bhutias) settle down leaving their slash and burn and shifting habits, the probabilities are that in a few years the Nepalis will spread everywhere, they already being 34.1% of the population.¹⁰⁴

European capital in tea had supposedly “opened a new era of prosperity” in this hill district.¹⁰⁵ In 1875, there were 121 gardens with an annual production of more than £4 million. The Nepalis, says Hunter, “are reported to be flocking in large numbers welcomed warmly by the tea-garden owners as their

⁹⁹ J.W. Edgars, *Papers regarding the Tea Industry in Bengal*, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1873 [Henceforth Edgars, *Papers regarding the Tea Industry in Bengal*]

¹⁰⁰ Arthur Jules Dash, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*, Alipore: Bengal Government Press, 1947, p. 56 [Henceforth Dash, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*]

¹⁰¹ Chatterjee, *A Time for Tea*, p. 65

¹⁰² Dash, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*, p. 65

¹⁰³ W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal* Vol. X –*Districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri and the state of Kuch Behar*, New Delhi: D.K. Publishing House, 1974, p. 41

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p.53

¹⁰⁵ W.W. Hunter, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India* Vol. III, p. 42

most valuable labour.”¹⁰⁶ The Royal Commission on Labour also points out interestingly that the climate of the hills were “too severe for the inhabitants of the plains” and hence labourers in this hilly terrain have always primarily been immigrants from or descendents of Nepal.¹⁰⁷

The astounding rate of demographic increase in this district in consequence of the massive influx of foreign-born immigrants, however, shows a declining trend that is particularly discernible from the Census Report of 1911. It clearly shows, 1891 onwards, “a progressive decline in the rate of increase and a shrinkage of the volume of immigration.”¹⁰⁸ This, it says, is because of the fact that “all the land suitable for tea cultivation, within the area reserved for it, has been taken up. On the tea gardens, therefore, no considerable increase of population can be expected.” However, it says that the immigrants still account for 20% of the total population in 1911. The reduction in their numbers merely means that “the flow of fresh immigrants is growing less and not that it is closing. The earlier foreign born immigrants are being increasingly replaced by their children born in Darjeeling.”¹⁰⁹

Even as fresh immigration to the hills eventually declined, it would be of utmost importance at this point to map this staggering migration from Nepal into these hill plantations through the second half of 19th century within a historical context. What accounted for such an astounding number of Nepalis to flee Eastern Nepal and constitute the ‘*paharia*’ workforce in the tea-gardens of Darjeeling?

The data obtained from the Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling by Arthur Jules Dash is of great help as it provides extensive figures up to 1941¹¹⁰:

Census

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, p. 43

¹⁰⁷ Whitley, *Royal Commission on Labour*, p. 356

¹⁰⁸ L.S.S.O’ Malley, *Census of India 1911*, Vol. V: *Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Sikkim, Part I Report*, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1913, p. 101

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, p. 101

¹¹⁰ Dash, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*, p. 62

Years	Population	Increase	Per cent
1872	94,712	--	--
1881	1,55,179	60,467	64
1891	2,23,314	68,135	44
1901	2,49,117	25,803	12
1911	2,65,550	16,433	7
1921	2,82,748	17,198	6
1931	3,19,635	36,887	13
1941	3,76,369	56,734	18

The demographic pattern in the Darjeeling district as it stands today is the shadow of the consequences of some fundamental economic and political revolutions that swept through both Nepal and Darjeeling in the early and mid 19th century. The growth of the plantation labour force is intricately connected with the demographic change in Darjeeling hill areas. And in the same vein, the present labour force formation in the hill areas of Darjeeling is the result of far reaching changes that affected Nepal and Darjeeling in the last two centuries. Mr. Edgars, the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling, is reported to have talked about “a very large influx of Paharia Immigrants from Nepal especially on the hill side” which was posing a threat to the survival capabilities of Bhutias and the Lepchas - the local inhabitants of the hills. However, along with this concern, what is most prominent here is the anxiety that any protective measure for the latter should not prove to be a discouragement for the “colonization [of the local inhabitants] by the Nepalis” considering they were so valued for the plantation labour force. There were certain basic economic and social conditions prevailing in Nepal that served as the prime incentives for such a large scale migration from Nepal to the hills of Darjeeling – i.e., the “push factors”.¹¹¹

Nepal’s economy suffered from acute stagnation which made it incapable of absorbing its own population. The British in India on the other hand encouraged resultant migration in their own interests

¹¹¹ Das Gupta, *Labour in Tea Gardens*, p. 28

which included the growing need for cheap labour in the plantations and other public works. Excessive taxation in variegated forms in Nepal led to the perpetuation of bonded slavery which in itself served as a 'push' factor. Political conditions in Nepal also fostered mass-emigration. Since the late 18th century, with the expansive aggression of the Shah Rulers in Nepal, increasingly the original 'Kipat' land tenure system was being irreversibly replaced by the new 'Raikar' system. This meant that the original holders of the land, were now steadily dispossessed by new moneyed upper caste intruders in Eastern Nepal. The failure to produce 'documentary evidence' for the possession of customary rights to the 'Kipat' lands was used progressively in this massive dispossession drive. This inevitably led to the steady pauperization of the indigenous inhabitants who were also cheated of their claims by the Sanskritised literate Brahmin elites. At this juncture, the Darjeeling hill areas held once a more lucrative prospects to offer than was available in Nepal.¹¹² 'Organized recruitment', as the Royal Commission says, was prohibited in Nepal, but 'voluntary migration' continued even with restrictions.¹¹³

In the 'Papers regarding The Tea Industry in Bengal (1873)', Edgars comments that unlike Assam, Sylhet and Cachar where there were 'special laws' binding the workers to the gardens through penal measures in their contracts, in the district of Darjeeling labour was free. One of the special laws being referred to is the notorious Workmen's Breach of Contract Act (Act XIII of 1859). This entailed a small advance in cash given to the worker while being recruited in exchange of his/her thumb impression.¹¹⁴ The penal contract system came into force with Act VI of the Bengal Council (1865) that introduced minimum monthly wages at Rs5 for men and Rs.4 for women, a three year contract and a nine-hour work day. While prior to 1865 a deserter was punished under section 492 IPC that provided for one month's imprisonment, after the Act VI of 1865, penal sanctions were greatly enhanced in favour of the planters. Its penal provisions entailed the right of the planters to arrest a deserting worker (or an 'absconder' in planter's parlance) even without a warrant, while the workers were subject to imprisonment for non-compliance. It meant that even if the worker found the living and working conditions in the gardens impossible, he/she would not be free to quit as doing so would be considered a breach of the contract for which one could be prosecuted. Soon the planters were to demand the lifting of all government regulations, the extension of the term of penal contract to a period of five years along with the expansion of the ambit of the penal law also over those workers who had completed their term of contract. The colonial state was obliged to abide by more or less all of this in

¹¹² *ibid.*, pp. 26-28

¹¹³ Whitley, *Royal Commission on Labour*, p. 357

¹¹⁴ Sharit Bhowmik, 'Plantation Labour in North east India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 20, No. 13 (Mar. 30, 1985), p. 540

the shape of the 1882 Labour District Emigration Act I. Powered with these unrestrained penal measures, the planters could expand production at great rapidity while at the same time cutting down heavily on the costs of production. This not only served to create a labour force whose wages were determined outside the labour market, but also thwarted the very possibility of the development of a labour market.¹¹⁵

Edgars argues that owing to the absence of any such penal provision in the Duars, “there never were serious abuses.” Building on this he also appeals: “It may be best to render immigration as free, cheap, and easy as possible-and special laws of the sorts in Assam must be dispensed with.”¹¹⁶ This was to be the case even for the workers in Duars, the penal regime of Assam valley being thoroughly discredited.¹¹⁷ But what this so called ‘freedom’ really entailed will be discussed separately.

Tea travels downhill: advent into Duars

As has been seen above, the planters, faced with an exhaustion of land in the hills, increasingly made forays into the Terai region of the Darjeeling district and subsequently into the Duars of Jalpaiguri. And with that, tea descended in astonishing vigour “from Darjeeling to the Duars which is a submontane country, twenty-two miles in width, between the Tista and Sankosh rivers and between Bhutan on the north and Cooch Bihar on the south.”¹¹⁸ The Duars was soon to constitute one of the most compact tea areas in North-East India. This luxuriously forested, beautifully scenic but malaria-infested tracts would have remained sparsely populated if not for the large influx of coolies from the Chotanagpur and Santal Parganas into the tea gardens.¹¹⁹ Once both land and labour were made available, plantations steadily carpeted the extensive tracts of the Duars in the newly consolidated district of Jalpaiguri. But before embarking upon this Duars chapter, it is again imperative for us to delve into the history of the British conquest of the Duars. An understanding of the region’s history, ecology, mapping and subsequently the making of the district of Jalpaiguri would prove beneficial. More so, considering that the story of British expansion in these tracts was woven into the express purpose of the expansion

¹¹⁵ Rana P. Behal and Prabhu Mohapatra, ‘“Tea and Money versus Human Life’: The Rise and Fall of the Indenture System in the Assam Tea Plantations 1840-1908’ in *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 19, 1992

¹¹⁶ Edgars, *Papers regarding the Tea Industry in Bengal*, p. 112

¹¹⁷ Rana P. Behal, *One Hundred Years of Servitude: Political Economy of Tea Plantations in Colonial Assam*, Delhi: Tulika Books, 2014, pp 90-92

¹¹⁸ Whitley, *Royal Commission on Labour*, p. 357

¹¹⁹ W.S. Meyer, J.S. Cotton, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India* Vol. XIV, London: Oxford, 1908, p.34 [Henceforth Meyer, Cotton, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India* Vol. XIV]

of the Planter Raj from the hills to the plains. As charted out in the first section (on the hills), here too, we would look into the context of labour recruitment patterns that came to heavily depend on the adivasis-the Oraons, the Mundas, and the Santals.

On the second day we arrived at Jeelpigoree, a large straggling village near the banks of the Teesta, a good way south of the forest: here we were detained for several days, waiting for elephants with which to proceed northwards.

-Joseph Dalton Hooker's travel in Jalpaiguri district (3-14 March,1849),

Extract from Himalayan journals.¹²⁰

Hooker describes 'Bai-kant-pore', the old capital of the "Jeelpigoree Rajah" as being surrounded "on three sides by a dense forest, and on all by many miles of malarious Terai," "It appears sufficiently secure from ordinary enemies during a great part of the year." Describing the scintillating beauty of the landscape in his travels through the region, Hooker laments "...it is difficult to suppose so lovely a country should be so malarious as it is before and after the rains, excessive heat probably diffusing widely the miasma from small stagnant surfaces."¹²¹ The "straggling village" was soon to become a district headquarter. The inaccessible region would soon be penetrated by the galloping pace of colonial mercantile capital that was hungry for more and more estates of tea.

The name '*Jalpaiguri*', is said to be derived from *Jalpai* or olive tree, and *Guri* or place, i.e., the place of the olive trees "of which there used at one time to be many in the town."¹²² There is also a supposition that the name might be associated with '*Jalpes*', the presiding deity (Siva) of the entire region who had been in the minds of men there from time immemorial. Legend has it that the Jalpeshwar Mandir near Mainaguri was established by Jalpeshwar, the third king of Assam.¹²³ The region has many such names which go by a particular tree or allude to a particular event in its history. For example, Mainaguri and Dhupguri; or Sanyasikata-the place where the Sanyasis of the Baikunthpur Raj fell in battle with the British; or Mogulkata-probably named after a place where the Mughals fought the Bhutanese in the 17th century. Jalpaiguri, as Hooker's travelogue suggests, was a natural point of trans-shipment in an

¹²⁰ Appendix X – 'Joseph Dalton Hooker's travel in Jalpaiguri District' in A. Mitra, *District Census Handbook, Jalpaiguri, Census 1951, West Bengal*, Alipore: West Bengal Government Press, 1954, pp. ccxi-ccxliv

¹²¹ *ibid.*, p. ccxi-ccxliv

¹²² Gruning, *Eastern Bengal and Assam District Gazetteers, Jalpaiguri*, p.1

¹²³ A.M. Kusari & B.K. Bhattacharya, *West Bengal District Gazetteers, Jalpaiguri*, Alipore: West Bengal Government Press, 1981, p. 28

area that was densely covered by forests. It was also an important military cantonment. The Jalpaiguri subdivision (formed in 1854) that was earlier a part of Rangpur district, became the nucleus of the new district formed in 1869. The local name of an important place like Jalpaiguri, thus gave first its name to the subdivision and then to the district.

The process of annexation of territories in North Bengal unfolded soon after the acquisition of the Dewani right of Bengal province, conferred on the East India Company by the Mughal emperor Shah Alam in 1765. The Company immediately entered into relations with the rulers of both Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri. Ever since the beginning of the 18th century, and more acutely by 1765, Bhutanese forces dominated the affairs of Cooch Behar. The Company was to take advantage of this feud and the “intolerable state of affairs” faced by the ruler of Cooch Behar. It once more put to the test the same tactic (as we observed in the story of the conquest of Darjeeling) of aligning with the weaker kingdom against the ‘tyrannical’ to wrest territorial control. Predictably, by virtue of the treaty of 1773, the Company sought to use four companies of the 6th Battalion under Captain Jones “to free the Zemindaree of Cooch Behar from the Ravages & Invasion of the Boutanners” and establish the suzerainty of the Government of Bengal. In exchange “for the defence of the Country”, Cooch Behar was made into a feudatory state.¹²⁴

The Bhutanese, however, soon claimed a large tract of Baikunthpur including the Jalpesh Temple and Falakata (portions of the present Jalpaiguri district) for their territory. In this continuing dispute of claims and counter claims over land, the British also seem to have evoked the supposed ‘ethnic differences’ of hillmen/plainsmen and Bhutia/Hindu to justify new recruitment of settlement strategies. Charles Purling wrote in 1790: “I was at Rangpur both before and since the Cooch Behar district was brought under the Company’s protection, and I never, till now, heard of any claim of the bhutias upon Jalpesh and Falacotta. Jalpesh is a pagoda of Hindu worship with which bhutias can have nothing to do.”¹²⁵

This region, however, has had a history of resistance against the various efforts by the British to establish their control to bring it under Permanent Settlement. In the context of the multiple claims made upon it from the Nepalese and the Bhutanese kingdoms, Baikunthpur also formed one of the

¹²⁴ A. Mitra, *District Census Handbook, Jalpaiguri, Census 1951*, pp i-ii

¹²⁵ *ibid.*, p. ii

hotbeds of the Sanyasi Rebellion. Towards the end of the 18th century, the *Sannyasi Bidroho* challenged the British forces and sought to jeopardize the Company's revenue collecting authority for over three decades. The Baikunthpur forest in this period formed a shelter for the sanyasis "in armed bands amounting to several hundreds" and remained "impassable except by narrow paths known only to the dacoits." Meanwhile, Darpa Deo, the ruler of Baikunthpur, refused to accept the heavy revenue assessed on him and, finally, the Company mounted an expedition against the recalcitrant Rajah in 1773. When the Company's forces reached "Jellpyegaurie, the Fortress and Capital of the Bycuntpore Country," Darpa Deo had fled and joined ranks with the sanyasi rebels. The British mounted a violent crackdown and by holding all the entrances to the forest, the sanyasi rebels were at length starved out. In a year's time 549 rebels were said to have been brought to trial.¹²⁶

Finally, the Company needed complete control over the Bengal Duars which the Bhutanese were still unwilling to forfeit. This led to the Bhutan War of 1864-65¹²⁷ to reclaim an area that apparently remained for a century in a "state of anarchy".¹²⁸ "Fruitless negotiations" and yet again, the "ill-treatment of a British envoy" and the "indignity" hurled upon Ashley Eden (heading a Special mission to settle differences) finally provided the grounds for the use of force – a similar narrative as we saw in the case of Darjeeling, and only the actors had changed. The decision was taken "to carry out the permanent annexation of the Bengal Duars, amounting to an advance northward for a distance of from twenty to thirty miles along a line of about a hundred and eighty miles in length, so as to command all the passes into the plains".¹²⁹ The Company's forces, after small skirmishes, soon ensured that the whole of the Duars was completely occupied by the middle of January 1865. The newly acquired territory was, for the time being, divided into the districts of Eastern and Western Duars. Subsequently in 1867, the Dalingkot Subdivision of the Western Duars was attached to Darjeeling and the remainder in 1869 was united with the Titalya subdivision of Rangpur building into the new district of Jalpaiguri. The Duars was still a non-regulation tract and the census operations were confined to the permanently settled portion of the district.

The grandeur of the scenery is enhanced by the steep hills of Bhutan which form a splendid background, and right up to the border of which tea gardens and extensive forests leading out.

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, p. iii

¹²⁷ S.P. Mallik, 'The Duars war: 1864-65: A Leaf from Forgotten History', in Appendix III of B. Ray, *District Census Handbook, Jalpaiguri, Census 1961, West Bengal*, Alipore: West Bengal Government Press, 1965, pp.99-102

¹²⁸ W.W. Hunter, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India* Vol. V, London: Trubner & Co., 1881, p. 20

¹²⁹ A. Mitra, *District Census Handbook, Jalpaiguri, Census 1951*, p. iv

Between the jaldhaka and the Torsa and again between the Torsa and the Dima river intervene large tracts of primeval looking forests, tea gardens and villages.¹³⁰

In the Duars too, tea closely followed upon the heels of conquest while the latter seems to have been directly motivated by the thirst of the plantation capital for more land – its need to descend and expand plain-wards from the hills of Darjeeling. And the expansion, as we would observe, was phenomenal. The first garden to make a head-start in the Darjeeling Terai was in 1862 at Champta. The planter was a Mr. James White, who had previously planted the Singel estate near Kurseong.¹³¹ By the end of 1866, planting in the Terai had picked up some momentum as several other gardens were opened in close succession. Between 1866 and 1874 the number of tea gardens in the Darjeeling district almost trebled while the area under cultivation increased by 82%. The outturn itself multiplied nearly ten times. “It was natural that planters should turn their attention next to the wastelands of the Western Duars, which border on the Terai”. In 1874 a garden was opened out in the Gazilduba by Mr. Richard Haughton, the pioneer of the tea industry in the Jalpaiguri district.¹³²

The owner of the Gazilduba garden, Dr. Brougham, was again someone who had started his planting career in the hills of Darjeeling as early as 1859. Fulbari was next in the Duars to be planted by Mr. Pillans (who gave his name to the market called Pillans Hat) followed by Bagrakot opened by Mr. North. In 1876, two years after Gazilduba, there were 13 gardens with an area of 818 acres and a yield of 29,520 lbs of tea. By 1881, the number of gardens was 55 and acreage 6,230 i.e., “the number of gardens had more than quadrupled and the area under cultivation had increased more than seven times in five years.”¹³³

The growth of the tea industry in Duars in its first three decades is illustrated underneath¹³⁴:

Year	No. of gardens	acreage under tea	outturn of tea in lbs
1876	13	818	29,520

¹³⁰ B. Ray, *District Census Handbook, Jalpaiguri, Census 1961*, p.13

¹³¹ Gruning, *Eastern Bengal and Assam District Gazetteers, Jalpaiguri*, p.103

¹³² *ibid.*

¹³³ *ibid.*

¹³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 104

1881	55	6,230	1,027,116
1892	182	38,583	18,278,628
1901	235	76,403	31,087,537
1907	180	81,338	45,196,894

While the acreage under tea had nearly doubled between 1892 and 1901, expansion slowed down eventually as “[A]part from the existing grants there is not much more land which is suitable and available for tea”. The apparent decrease in the number of gardens post 1901 was due to the fact that the figures represent the number of grants or temporarily settled estates. The increase in outturn since 1901 was owing to “young tea coming into bearing and to the gradual extension of cultivation on existing grants.”¹³⁵

Since 1880, the tract between the Tista and the Diana rivers was rapidly transformed into carpet gardening of tea. But there was then a check as the country to the east of the Diana was believed to be devoid of water. This however was insufficient to halt the advance of plantation capital that was riding on a tide of “reckless expansion”. By the early 20th century tea gardens had engulfed this entire tract, facing ‘no difficulty in obtaining an adequate supply of water. In some gardens water was obtained through pipes from springs in Bhutan (this being most preferred by the garden-workers). In others like, Chunabati, New Duars Garden, Banarhat, Gandrapara, Dalgaon and Palasbari, water from the wells brought land under tea.¹³⁶ Another obstacle had been the devastating floods in the Duars rivers that caused havoc to the gardens. Other than the threat posed to the resident labour force, it also led to waterlogging, boulder or gravel deposition and neutralizing of soil acidity in tea acreage. “Another latent source of danger to many tea estates is the possibility of sudden and sweeping changes in the river course.”¹³⁷

The tea-gardens in the western Duars gave a good yield but do not match up to the quality of tea as those of the Darjeeling district. It was the sheer bulk of production for export that remained the goal

¹³⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 104-5

¹³⁶ *ibid.*

¹³⁷ For more on effects of flood and rivers on gardens in extracts from ‘Fluvial Devastation of the Duars Tea Plantations’, See Sm. Champa Mitra’s article in A. Mitra, *District Census Handbook, Jalpaiguri, Census 1951*, p.19

for the ever-expanding acreage in the Duars. The eighties and the early nineties were characterized by high prices and general prosperity. This fed the mad rush and “reckless expansion” of cultivation in India, Ceylon and Java. As supplies surpassed demand, prices plummeted by 1897 and the industry went into a severe depression. The situation was made more acute by the fixing of the standard of exchange and the exorbitantly high duty imposed on tea in Great Britain. By the early years of the 20th century, however, Indian tea had opened up new markets in Europe as well as successfully replaced Chinese tea in the markets of Russia, America and Australia which was to further boost the industry.¹³⁸

“Jalpaiguri, and to a smaller extent Darjeeling, have registered the most impressive increases in population since 1872, which surpasses even the most spectacular increases in Howrah, 24 Parganas or Calcutta.”¹³⁹ One of the prime propellers behind this stupefying increase was the rapidity with which the sparsely populated region east of Tista, i.e., the western Duars, came under the cultivation of tea. Between 1872-1921, the population of the district increased by 244.2%. The advent of tea led to a complete transformation of the composition of tribes and their distribution in the district. While in the 1891 Census there was mention of only five tribes e.g., Oraon, Mech, munda, santal and Garo, in the 1961 Census more than 20 Scheduled Tribes were recorded.¹⁴⁰

The rate of increase (in terms of area under individual police stations) mounted higher and higher as one went further east until in Kalchini, Alipur Duars and Kumargram the increment amounted to the fantastic figure of 1,042.3 per cent. In the western Duars, where we observe the most stupendous rate of increment, the first commercial tea enterprise made its mark in 1874. Subsequently, the others followed so rapidly that by 1901 there were 235 gardens with 76,403 acres under tea. This necessitated the recruitment of immigrant workers at an astounding rate that makes it “easy to appreciate the great change that has come over the population of the district...and the polyglot character of the immigrant population.”¹⁴¹ Alongside plantations, the years between 1891 and 1901 also saw a rapid settlement of lands in the Duars for ordinary cultivation. The rates of rent being “very low”, cultivators were attracted not only from the police stations west of the Tista, but also from Rangpur and Cooch Behar.

¹³⁸ Gruning, *Eastern Bengal and Assam District Gazetteers, Jalpaiguri*, p. 105

¹³⁹ A. Mitra, *District Census Handbook, Jalpaiguri, Census 1951*, p. li

¹⁴⁰ S.K. Bhattacharya, ‘The Tribes of Jalpaiguri’ in B. Ray, *District Census Handbook, Jalpaiguri, Census 1961*, p.104

¹⁴¹ A. Mitra, *District Census Handbook, Jalpaiguri, Census 1951*, p. li

Hunter, in the early years of the district, predicted that “the introduction of the tea-plant will open out a new source of prosperity.”¹⁴² During the settlement operations of 1870, the population of Duars appeared to be 418,048. Excluding the Duars area, the ethnic breakup of the rest of the district in the census of 1872 yields 144 Nepalis, 553 ‘aboriginies’, and 148,043 ‘semi-Hinduized aboriginies’. Among the ‘aboriginal tribes’ the immigrant ‘Uraons’ are recorded to be 453.¹⁴³ The population increased from 417,855 in 1872 to 580,570 in 1881 to 680,736 in 1891 to 787,380 in 1901. By 1901 more than one-fifth of the population was composed of immigrants from elsewhere.¹⁴⁴ In the north-west of the district the conditions of the tea industry are supposed to have given rise to large settlements of labourers. In the early years a steady movement of population is traced from the west of the district towards the extensive tracts to the east, and an “enormous immigration” of tea-garden coolies from Chota Nagpur and the Santal Parganas finds mention. Ranchi alone supplied 80,000, chiefly Oraon and Munda migrants, and the Santal Parganas accounted for 11,000 adivasi immigrants into this area—and this inflow had constantly been on the rise. However, in the tea gardens on the higher slopes at the foot of the hills, the Nepalese were reported to have replaced the men from Chota Nagpur, and many of them also settled there permanently.¹⁴⁵ These men however would not work on gardens lower down on the plains. Many of the Nepalis, thus, in the Jalpaiguri district were employed on tea gardens near the hills which stood at a small elevation, such as Sam Sing, Matiali, Lankapara and Hansimara; they were said to have refused to work on gardens right on the plains.

The Oraons, of whom there were 62,844 in the census of 1901, originally belonged to the Ranchi district from which most of them came up to the tea estates. Within 7 years of the launching of the first gardens, Ranajit Das Gupta says, a “trickle of Chota nagpur labour” started arriving in the Duars. The 1881 census recorded 210 Oraons, indicating that the bulk of them migrated during the last 20 years. Like the Oraons, the Mundas too were introduced into the district by the tea industry and they too did not come into the district in any numbers until “comparatively recently”. Only 1,855 of them were found in the Western Duars in 1891 whereas by 1901, the number had risen up to 11,672. Gruning points out, they were in “great demand” among the tea-planters. Santals also made their way into the district as tea-garden coolies and in 1901 they numbered 10,857.¹⁴⁶ The great “diversity of languages” in the district therefore owed to the large migrant labour force.¹⁴⁷ Jalpaiguri, is said to have had an

¹⁴² Hunter, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India* Vol. V, p.20

¹⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 22

¹⁴⁴ Meyer, Cotton, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India* Vol. XIV, p. 34

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*, pp 34-35

¹⁴⁶ Gruning, *Eastern Bengal and Assam District Gazetteers: Jalpaiguri*, p.38

¹⁴⁷ B.C. Allen, E.A. Gait, C.G.H. Allen & H.F. Howard, *Gazetteer of Bengal and North East India 1906*, Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1979, p. 227

important advantage over the tea districts of Assam, as labour found its way freely and no special law was required to enforce labour contracts as it did in Assam.¹⁴⁸ The exact process of recruitment, abuses and changes therein would be discussed in details in subsequently in the next chapter.

The Census 1941-Bengal (Tables) gives the following table for the population figures of Jalpaiguri¹⁴⁹:

Census Years	Population	Variation	Net Variation (1891-1941)
1891	680,051		
1901	786,786	+106,735	
1911	903,155	+116,369	
1921	936,778	+33,623	
1931	983,929	+47,151	
1941	10,39,513	+105,584	+409,462

Ranajit Das Gupta, while commenting upon the vast immigrant labour force that made its way into the district in the last three decades of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century, also adds that the most remarkable increase of population was confined entirely to the Duars : a phenomenal six fold increase between 1872 and 1921. In course of time, he says, a majority of these tribal immigrants to the Duars settled permanently in the district and many switched over to peasant agriculture.

While Nepali immigrants from the Darjeeling district continued to constitute a fair proportion of the labour force in the gardens located particularly in the hilly areas of the Duars (around 15% of the total Duars work force), the overwhelming majority was recruited from the distant Chota Nagpur and the Santhal Parganas.¹⁵⁰ Migration to the gardens (unlike in the case of factories) was characterized by an eagerness on the part of the recruiters “to secure women as well as men, and take children also. The factories ask for individuals; the plantations want

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 229

¹⁴⁹ Dash, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*, p.60

¹⁵⁰ Rege, *Report on an enquiry into conditions of labour in plantations*, p.77

families.”¹⁵¹ (This, as we will see later, was one way of holding a captive labour force at a cheaper cost.) This, of course, suggests a literal uprooting of the adivasi workforce from their place of origin, but that is not to suggest that there were no backward linkages. This would be demonstrated in the course of the following chapter through the transmission of the Tana movement from Chota Nagpur to Jalpaiguri. The expansion of the plantation acreage in the Duars finally reached its limits by the first decade of the 20th century. As the Census Report of 1911 suggests, any more expansion of tea cultivation could not be very great.

As we noted in the case of the Nepali immigrants to the Darjeeling hills, here too we find astounding similarities in the context that gave rise to the mass emigration of the adivasis into the Duars plantations of Jalpaiguri. We are confronted with the question as to why or how—in spite of the arduous conditions of work in the unhealthy tracts of Duars—did the ‘uncontrolled’ recruitment policy of Duars attract this enormous influx of labour power. We find the answers in the same narrative of steady dispossession and pauperization of immigrant labourers in their homeland—almost replicating the context of the ‘Nepali immigration’ as studied in the first section. This process has been described by Sharit Bhowmik who locates the pattern of labour recruitment and immigration within the historical developments of the adivasi-belt. One needs to look at the socio-economic conditions that cropped up in Chotanagpur resulting in the ‘push factors’ that triggered and speeded up the process of migration away from the homeland. Adivasi society in Chotanagpur was in a “state of turmoil” in the 19th century. The process of ‘Hinduisation’ of the tribal chieftains that took place in the 17th century progressively brought in its wake ‘dikus’.¹⁵² It was this influx of dikus or literate caste-Hindu aliens into the tribal homeland that was to lead to a vicious spiral of displacement. The process was reinvigorated with the coming of the British bringing in its train more alien intruders and land settlement policies that fed into the process of steady alienation of the adivasis from their traditional/customary rights on the land/forest. With this *sarkar-sahukar-zamindar* nexus in operation, they were progressively reduced to the status of landless agricultural labourers and destitution.¹⁵³ Numerous adivasi uprisings flared up over the course of the 19th century—starting from the Kol insurrection (1831), the Santal rebellion (1855) and the Munda Ulgulan (1899)—that register the unrest that this steady dispossession evoked among the adivasis. And at this juncture, pushed by acute necessity, tea garden work with all its hardships seemed to be

¹⁵¹ Whitley, *Royal Commission on Labour*, p. 349

¹⁵² Sharit Bhowmik, *Class Formation in the Plantation System*, New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1981, p. 43

¹⁵³ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Delhi: OUP, 1983, p. 8

the only option for many of these landless adivasis to earn a livelihood.¹⁵⁴ For many others under the clutches of the money lenders, the arkattis or the promises of the sardars, it was hardly a matter of choice.

The questions of landlordism and the consequent alienation of land, high rent exaction and general indebtedness seems to have contributed in conversion of the whole of Chota Nagpur into a labour catchment area. But the relationship between the rate of emigration with that of the above mentioned variables complicates and serves to enrich our understanding of the factors that could have further contributed to this phenomenal migration to the tea-districts. Prabhu Mohapatra looks into the ecological and agronomical conditions (and changes therein) of Chota Nagpur from 1880 onwards. He suggests that the rate of emigration is to a considerable extent determined by the extreme variability of harvests, according to local conditions and the specificity of the class of land. He concludes that lands at the highest reaches of the slopes which are the most infertile and are transformed into rice lands through terracing, these are the ones that suffer the most from extreme fluctuations in harvest. These transformed uplands (that he demarcates as *dom III* lands) are the ones that account for highest rate of emigration from Chota Nagpur.¹⁵⁵

Ethnicized landscapes? Mapping the 'shift' from paharia to madhesia

In this section I will try to map the marked shift in the logic of recruitment that took place in the tea plantation economy in North Bengal as the preference in terms of the 'ideal' plantation worker underwent a fundamental shift from the focus on the 'Nepalis' to an emphasis on the 'adivasis'. The logic of this shift is closely associated with the demands of the ever-expanding plantation economy, the geographical or topographical changes written into this process, the construction of the colonial stereotyping regarding the essential characteristics of the 'ideal' plantation labour/wage worker, the ever-changing needs of capital in the colonial context, and the overarching imperatives of a modern (colonial) state. What we would try to search for is a probable meeting point of all these seemingly diverse facets.

¹⁵⁴ Bhowmik, *Class Formation in the Plantation System*, p. 48

¹⁵⁵ Prabhu Mohapatra, 'Coolies and Colliers: A study of the agrarian context of labour migration from Chotanagpur 1880-1920', in *Studies in History*, 6, 2 n.s., 1985

Within the tropes of colonial ethnology of cultivation, the Nepalis, being characterized as ‘settled agricultural castes,’ were “naturally” suited for “fixed employment” and thereby could be the ‘ideal wage-workers’. This is confirmed by Hunter who maintains that the Nepalis make “capital agriculturists” and are preferred as labourers by the managers and recruiters of the tea gardens. The Nepalis are therefore warmly welcomed by the planters as their “most valuable labour”. The ‘tribal groups’, on the contrary, were situated at the opposite end because of their ‘nomadic/primitive/tribal’ cultivation.¹⁵⁶ On account of their essentialized ‘wandering’, ‘lazy’ and ‘instable’ nature, they were conceived as antithetical to the idea of settled wage-work.

I would attempt to make certain basic observations regarding the ‘logic’ of recruitment that was to give shape to the specific ethnic categorization that survives till now in this geo-economic region of the hills and the Duars. As land in the hills was exhausted by the early 1870s, in their bid to engulf more and more acreage under the gardens, planters opened the Duars chapter of tea plantations in the history of colonial capital in this area. This new chapter threw up new demands of capital and an entirely different context that was to ask for essential changes in the recruitment pattern that hitherto suited the needs of capital on the ‘hills’. With unabated expansion of the plantation economy into the terai an acute shortage of labour supply gripped the planters. This had been anticipated by J. W. Edgars as early as 1873 while he was writing the Report about the tea industry in Bengal.

Nepal ought to be able to supply enough for the hills. But there was some uneasiness in the Terai owing to the increased extension, and there was pretty general talk of getting up Dhangars.¹⁵⁷ Since then the difficulty has somewhat increased.¹⁵⁸

This was necessitated to a large extent by the refusal of the Nepali workers to descend along with the gardens. Geographically and topographically the Duars was significantly different from the heights of the hill plantations. Not only was the terai a densely forested tract of inaccessible tropical growth crisscrossed by innumerable streams, but it was also notoriously unhealthy with its heat, rain and malaria. Unlike the climate of the hills that is very healthy and where the death rate is low, the *terai* is “notoriously malarious”, and mortality is always very heavy. In the Siliguri thana of Darjeeling district, the recorded death-rate during the decade ending 1901 averaged 59.8% per 1000, and the birth rate only 19.4%.¹⁵⁹ The Duars which was

¹⁵⁶ Chatterjee, *A Time for Tea*, p. 65

¹⁵⁷ Dhangar became a generic term used by the colonial state officials to refer to the tribals of the Chota Nagpur region.

¹⁵⁸ Edgars, *Papers regarding the Tea Industry in Bengal*, p. 122

¹⁵⁹ W.S. Meyer, J.S. Cotton, *Imperial Gazetteer of India* Vol. IX, London: Oxford, 1908, p. 169

sparsely populated when first acquired carry a smaller population than the rest of Jalpaiguri district which to a great extent is due to the unhealthy conditions of the *terai*. Malaria is rampant here and in eight years of the decade ending 1901, Jalpaiguri figured among the six districts with the highest mortality rates from fever in Bengal.¹⁶⁰ The *terai*, which is just about 300 feet above sea level, the Royal Commission says, was “overgrown with dense malarious jungle” before being cleared for the plantations.¹⁶¹ The immigrants from Nepal were unwilling to come down to the plains to clear the dense and unhealthy tracts of the Duars for the planters or to work there. Gruning confirms that while on the slopes of the hills, the labour force is mainly composed of Nepalis, these men will not work on gardens lower down on the plains in Jalpaiguri.¹⁶²

Therefore, it is at this juncture that the positive ascriptions for the cultivating ‘settled’ castes of the Nepalis “switched to a negative codification of essential laziness”. They were now seen as “excessively settled” for wage-work. Alongside, there was a positive reappraisal of the ‘primitive-ideal jungli bodies’-the *adivasis*. Their ‘primitivism’ was now perceived as an integral connection to the landscape which created their ‘superior capacities’ to labour on it.¹⁶³ They would be a must for the needs of clearing the tropical woods of the *terai* to make way for the plantations and providing the supply of labours in these unhealthy tracts. Therefore, there was no one single stereotype that the colonial discourse put forth. To a large extent, they were shaped, constituted, and re-constituted by the changing needs of capital.

A. J. Dash states that the Siliguri subdivision of the Darjeeling district has an area and population of 22% and 24% respectively of the total district population. Being on the plains, this, he says, is comparatively low which, again, might be because of the “unhealthiness of the *terai*”. This was cited in the past as the reason for a low population development, rendering necessary the importation of *adivasis* from the Chota Nagpur and the Santal Parganas to develop and work the tea gardens.¹⁶⁴ A few of the gardens in the *terai* region of Darjeeling might also recruit Nepali workers. But these gardens, as the Royal Commission points out, are strictly restricted to the ‘foothills’; -and overall, the composition of labour forces in the *terai* and the Jalpaiguri Duars are predominantly of *Adivasi* origin.¹⁶⁵ A.J. Dash, attesting to this, says that

¹⁶⁰ W.S. Meyer, J.S. Cotton, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India* Vol. XIV, London: Oxford, 1908, p. 34

¹⁶¹ Whitley, *Royal Commission on Labour*, p. 356

¹⁶² Gruning, *Eastern Bengal and Assam District Gazetteers, Jalpaiguri*, p.41

¹⁶³ Chatterjee, *A Time for Tea*, p. 71

¹⁶⁴ Dash, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*, p. 53

¹⁶⁵ Whitley, *Royal Commission on Labour*, p. 357

the Santals had been especially successful in clearing jungle and bringing waste and forest lands under cultivation, and they were used for opening up of land in the *terai* for tea. The Oraons and the Mundas, too, migrated into Darjeeling from the Chota Nagpur plateau, and like the Santals were recruited for the purpose of opening up of land for tea cultivation.¹⁶⁶ This would eventually open the doors to the massive influx of adivasi work-force into the Duars tea plantations in the subsequent decades—a phenomenon that would be closely observed in the next section.

To get a wider insight into this ‘shift’ we might attempt to locate it within the broader imperatives of the state that might have contributed (or at least complemented the needs of the capital) to some extent to the particular recruitment pattern that came into being at the last quarter of the 19th century. I would borrow from the ideas of James Scott and try to test their viability in this context. Scott sees the modern centralizing state to be in perpetual enmity with ‘people who move around’. He locates ‘sedentarization’, i.e., the efforts directed at permanently ‘settling’ the ‘mobile people’ as a ‘perennial state project’.¹⁶⁷ And this ‘project’, he suggests, originates from the “state’s attempt to make a society legible, to arrange the population in ways that simplified the classic state functions of taxation, conscription, and prevention of rebellion.”¹⁶⁸ The desire to achieve ‘legibility’ according to Scott forms a cardinal objective of the centralizing modern state. Agriculture, seen in this perspective, is nothing more than a radical reorganization of Nature to suit the needs of man (or even the state). And whatever the other purposes, ‘plantations’ are in a way calculated ploys of the state to make the work-force more legible—and thereby manipulable from above and from the centre. Considering that ‘nomadic tillage’ could not be mapped into the settled imperatives of agrarian revenue collection, it remained invisible - an invisibility that was not only uncomfortable for the colonial modernizing state but also considered to be dangerous in this state of illegibility. Thus the need for settling the “intransigent nomads” in the plantations as “civilized labouring being[s]”—an ‘evangelical mission’ to ‘civilize’ the ‘savage’—and in the process making it possible to count them as they are now visible and legible.¹⁶⁹ The recruitment of the Santals, the Oraons and the Mundas in the Duars plantations at the end of the 19th century and the functioning of evangelical missions like the Santal Mission Colony to facilitate such recruitment, apart from meeting the needs for tea, can also be interpreted as an attempt to make legible/visible what is illegible/invisible and thereby is dangerous in its rebellious propensities. Such propensities had already been most threateningly demonstrated by the adivasis throughout the course

¹⁶⁶ Dash, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*, pp. 68-69

¹⁶⁷ James Scott, *Seeing like a state: how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*, London: Yale University Press, 1998, p.1

¹⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p.2

¹⁶⁹ Chatterjee, *A Time for Tea*, p.68

of the second half of the 19th century in the recruitment areas of Chota Nagpur. Therefore, there seems to have been a convergence in the imperatives of colonial capital and governance.

Nepali vs. Adivasi/Hill-men vs. Plains-men/Paharia vs Madhesia:

A fall-out in terms of an emerging ethnic antagonism can be anticipated from the ‘shifts’ in colonial recruitment strategies. What appears to be most stark in this ethnic compartmentalization is the emerging hill/plain divide that had been written into the very ‘logic’ of the recruitment policies of the planters of the Raj. The Nepalis, via the process of recruitment followed in the early years on the Darjeeling hills are rooted to the ‘hills’ and this ever since has resulted in ‘hills’ becoming an ‘ethicized landscape’ within the arena of plantation economy. So much so that even in the terai areas, for instance, in the Duars of Jalpaiguri, they would be exclusively concentrated in the elevated tracts of the hills. They refused to work on the plains and this has largely prevailed over the years. The adivasis, on the other hand, were recruited from the very beginning with the jungle landscape of the terai being mapped on to their so called ‘jungli’ body through the ‘logic’ of the shifting colonial recruitment strategies. They, as we noticed, were recruited for the express purpose of clearing impenetrable submontane rainforests of the Duars and subsequently work on the unhealthy malarious tracts of the terai and similarly refused to climb the hills-the heights being too severe for them. If we look at the hill/terai division within the geographical context of Darjeeling, we will see the sharp distinction in quantitative terms being played out on the basis of this essentially ethnicized landscape of the plantation economy. The adivasis reside almost exclusively in the Siliguri subdivision in the terai while the Nepalis reside predominantly on the hill plantations.

A table of the 1941 census showing population of the subdivisions of the Darjeeling district according to ‘race’, ‘tribe’ and ‘caste’ gives such figures:

	Sadar (hill)	Kurseong (hill)	Kalimpong (hill)	Siliguri (terai/plain)	District Total
Scheduled Castes*-----	1,182	962	1,095	<u>47,511</u>	50,750
Nepalis-----	<u>1,32,767</u>	53,936	62,333	5,572	2,54,608

*it includes among others Santals(4,045);Oraons(12,433);Mundas(4,993)¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ Dash, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*, p. 62

Therefore for the district of Darjeeling, the percentages of population of Scheduled castes is 13.5% and for Nepalis it is 67.6%. *But the most significant set of percentages will be obtained by separating the Siliguri or plains part of the district from the other three or hill subdivisions.* These separate percentages are given below.¹⁷¹

	Three hill Subdivisions	Siliguri or <i>Terai</i> Subdivision
Scheduled Castes -----	1.1%	<u>52.7%</u>
Nepalis-----	<u>86.8%</u>	6.2%

The preponderance of the Nepalis in the hill subdivisions over the other hillmen is very noticeable and in this area the two combined are nearly 94% of the whole population. In the Siliguri subdivision on the other hand, while the percentages of Nepalis is 6.2 % as against 87% in the hills, the percentage of Scheduled Castes and Plain Hindus is 85.5%. The distribution of ethnic groups in the tea areas show, that Nepalis predominate heavily being 78% of the district tea area population and 96% of the tea population in the hill subdivisions. In the terai they are only 7% of the tea area population while Scheduled Castes and Plains Hindus make up 91%.¹⁷²

Population of the subdivisions of the Darjeeling district according to race, tribe and caste in areas under Tea.¹⁷³

District

	Sadar (hill)	Kurseong (hill)	Kalimpong (hill)	Siliguri (<i>terai</i>)	Total
Scheduled Castes	171	506	799	<u>13,910</u>	15,386

¹⁷¹ *ibid.*, p.63
¹⁷² *ibid.*, p. 64
¹⁷³ *ibid.*, p 83

Nepalis	<u>75,049</u>	33,469	4,327	1,893	1,14,738
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Of 4,045 Santals in the district practically all (3,956) resided in the Siliguri subdivision.¹⁷⁴ A study of the 'racial composition' of the population of the district, according to Dash, is interesting, because the number of 'races' and tribes found is of significance for those who wish to understand its history and forecast its future.¹⁷⁵

An important antagonism that emerges is in terms of the Paharia/Madesia divide which was observed by L.S.S. O'Malley. He points out that the majority of the people in Darjeeling hills are of 'Mongolian origins' belonging largely to various Nepalese castes and the 'madhesis' are held in great contempt by the stalwart Nepalese. Adivasi communities such as the Oraons, Mundas, Santhals, Gonds, were also called the Madesias, i.e., people from the 'middle country', or Chotnagpur. Madesia were contrasted to Nepali immigrants, the paharia, people from the hills, and it is indicative of a major ethnicized division. Nepalis would distinguish themselves from adivasis as the latter often denoted outcaste status. The term 'adivasi' is used by the migrants from Chota Nagpur in order to distinguish themselves from other groups, specially Bengali, Punjabi, and Nepali elites.¹⁷⁶

The Nepalis, conscious of their 'caste Hindu' status always denigrate the 'otherness' of the adivasis. This ethnicization or ethnic differentiation seems to have existed from the outset amongst the Nepalis largely basing itself on caste lines. As Gruning noticed in the case of Jalpaiguri, the emigrant Nepalis residing in this district, only take water from the hands of the indigenous Mech tribe. This is presumably because they consider the Mech as ethnically akin to themselves compared to the 'madhesis'.¹⁷⁷ This is duly reciprocated by the adivasis, as Sharit Bhowmik shows, through their refusal to 'dine with' the workers of Nepali origin. The compartmentalization plays out in the linguistic sphere too. For the adivasi workers in the gardens, Gruning observes, the lingua franca would be a corrupt version of hindi while among the Nepalis it would be khas. The self-awareness of a 'difference' is clearly discernible even in gardens where in the Labour Lines the Adivasis and Nepalis reside together; - multiple dichotomies result in a potentially volatile relationship between the two. The advantages of

¹⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p. 68

¹⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p. 56

¹⁷⁶ Chatterjee, *A Time for Tea*, p. 246

¹⁷⁷ Gruning, *Eastern Bengal and Assam District Gazetteers: Jalpaiguri*, p.41

such dichotomies to the planters (as we would study in more details in later chapters,) was that they could play upon such 'differences' to 'manage' workers' unrest.

Transforming a region for tea:

The insatiable demand for tea as a commodity in the world market led the colonial state to transform the entire region of Duars: its people, its so called "wastelands" and its forests. This involved the total disruption of older modes of living and livelihood among indigenous people – Meches and Lepchas, for instance – with land acquisition, deforestation, demarcation and enclosure of reserved forests, along with the new stress upon settled cultivation in place of traditional 'slash and burn' methods. I will begin, therefore, with a very brief pre history of the region before it began to be prepared for tea, and I will look at older settlement and landholding patterns and cultivation. These sparsely populated areas were generally designated by the colonial state as "cultivable wastes" before the tea plantations or "gardens" were set up.

When Duars was under the rule of Bhutan, the highest officer connected with revenue was a Soobah. He had no personal interest in the soil, and was neither landlord nor tenant. He collected revenue and remitted a portion to the Government treasury. The sums were collected from Katams or tehseeldars who sub-divided the whole of the Duars among themselves for this purpose. Under the Katams were jotedars, or persons who paid revenue directly to the Katam. These jotes were measured by ploughs and the land had been obtained by hereditary succession from original occupiers of the tracts. For five years they held the land rent-free, and at the end of that period the one who cleared the land became the jotedar of all such land *as he had brought under cultivation*, agreeing to pay the revenue as fixed.¹⁷⁸

Right after the annexation of this extremely fluid frontier region of Duars from Bhutan by January 1865, the first settlement operations seem to have been conducted with the principle of "leasing large tracts of fallow and jungle land to persons who had no legal claim to any such settlements." This method of settlement of Duars, however, seems to have come under the severest criticism in the

¹⁷⁸ Matters connected with the Administration of Land revenue, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, General Department, - Miscellaneous. Calcutta, August 1873, WBSA

ensuing years. An extract from C.R. Metcalfe, the Officiating Commissioner of the Cooch Behar Division, comments highlight this:

The effect of that settlement was directly to deprive the Government of all proprietary right and title in this pergunnah. A more short-sighted policy on the part of the revenue officers I cannot conceive. Here was a case of a large tract of rich, culturable and waste soil ceded by a foreign power after war deliberately without the sanction of Government, handed over *en masse* to any person who came forward to claim it. The whole settlement “reads like the history” of a troubled mind overburdened with the possession of a large waste tract, and desirous to get rid of it at any cost. a settlement was concluded” without reservation; without detailed inquiry cultivated and uncultivated land at one fell swoop were leased out. The rights of jotedars were recognized as proprietary rights. Miles and miles of valuable waste included in these jotadaries, were leased away. The Doars for which the Government had fought were deliberately given away to men without the shadow of a title under the authority of a war proclamation, which offered to recognize all existing rights.¹⁷⁹

The term “jotedar” to describe land-holders was introduced not by the rulers of Bhutan, but by the colonial officials themselves while describing the revenue arrangement under Bhutan: “In no sunned that has yet been produced by any cultivator having been received from the Booteahs, is there any such tenure recognized, and the first persons who introduced the term jotedar as applied to a cultivator in the Duars were the revenue and settlement officers.”¹⁸⁰ In fact it was in this period that the Duars region was formally brought under the jotedari system of tenure that was to stay (with some subsequent changes) as the recognized land-holding system for the years to come.

The dissatisfaction, however, formed the basis for a new settlement in 1872 where a detailed inquiry was to be made into the rights of each and every jotedar. This was justified in official discourses on the ground of liberating cultivators who had tenures of the most “precarious character” and who had apparently been “suffering” under the yoke of an “arbitrary and despotic” rule of Bhutan. Under the rule of Bhutan, it was said that the Duardar of Buxa was ordered to “collect the revenues of the Duars and do all such acts as may be required of you, and if you disobey, you will be tied up in a bag and thrown into a river.”¹⁸¹ All of these were now apparently to be rectified by modern ‘enlightened

¹⁷⁹ *ibid*

¹⁸⁰ *ibid*

¹⁸¹ *ibid*

despots'. What they did not change, however, was the jotedari system of land-holding that now took firm roots in the Duars.

The self congratulatory proclamations hid the real source of disappointment with the earlier settlement: the low revenue that it yielded. Setting this settlement aside as a "rough guess settlement" and one that was not done in the "proper way", a conference was held in Jalpaiguri in 1874 by the then Lt. Governor. Richard Temple, and a resettlement was announced. As the date itself would signify, by this time tea had already made its forays into the Duars, and from now on it would play a decisive role for the future of this region. The Commissioner of Rajshahi Division, Ulick Browne, under whose supervision this resettlement was conducted, admitted: "I do not think the test of prices is as good a test in backward districts fast being cultivated, and in which a railway and tea gardens have been lately opened as in many advanced districts in which cultivation has not much increased between two period settlements."¹⁸²

While the earlier settlement yielded a rental of Rs. 88,618, the new settlement yielded Rs. 1,51,862. Out of the total area surveyed (1,119,322 acres), 217,294 acres were settled and 19,607 were already under tea lease as the gardens had just begun to sprout in the Duars. Still there were about 3 lakh acres of "culturable waste" waiting to be "opened up" in the region while the reserved forests went up to 267,220 acres.¹⁸³

We must take a quick look at the land-tenure system as it took shape in the Duars by the last quarter of the 19th century. Revenue was now collected from the jotedars. While there were 3,440 jotedars in 1874, their numbers rose to 23,339 by 1895. A jotedar is a person who holds a jote or land directly under the Government. He is basically considered a tenant with a heritable and transferable title in his holding, vested in him by his lease and by the fact of possession, with the power to transmit this title to those to whom he sublets. He has the right to resettle the land included in his jote on the expiry of the term of settlement, but that would be subject to an enhancement of rent in case the Government so decides. His title to possession of his jote is, however, always subject to the superior right of the government as proprietor to resume any portion required for public or other purposes: a

¹⁸² 'Revenue History', Survey And Settlement of the Western Duars in the District of Jalpaiguri 1889-95, Calcutta: Printed at the Bengal Secretariat Press, 1895, Secretariat Library, Kolkata

¹⁸³ *ibid*

proportionate abatement being consequently made in the rental, and compensation allowed for any permanent improvements. A jote may be acquired (1) by direct settlement with the government, (2) by purchase, and (3) by inheritance. By 1895, there were about a thousand jotes covering 384,895.91 acres in the Duars. The average number of jotedars per jote is 2.34. The area of the largest jote was 2608.95 acres, and that of the smallest was 0.06 acres. The number of resident jotedars was 21,724 and that of non residents was 1615. The latter was constituted predominantly of men from the Koch Bihar State, as also of pleaders, mookhtars, and traders and money lenders of Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, Monghyr, Dacca, Nadia, etc.¹⁸⁴

The tenant immediately below the jotedar is the chukanidar or mulandar. The rent payable by him is also fixed for a term of settlement. His title to his holding was heritable and transferable. He was not allowed to sublet but is permitted to employ adhiars. There were 14,016 chukanidars in the Duars in 1895 (compared to 4,027 in 1872) holding 11,176 chukanis which covered an area of 128288.42 acres. The average area per holding was 11.4. Other classes of under-tenures – the dar-chukani and dar-a-dar-chukani that had taken roots in the Duars - were not recognized by the Government.

The Adhiar was the lowest class of tenants and has no rights to land. Their precarious existence was already taken note of, but this hapless class was crucial to the jotedari system, and hence their condition was left untouched despite all the “concerns”. Along with the garden workers, they formed the most exploited sections of the Duars populace. The Commissioner of Rajshahi, Mr. Nolan, agreed with the Settlement Officer Mr. Sunder’s description of the adhiar “as much more of a labourer than a tenant.”¹⁸⁵ He was at best a landless labourer with no means of subsistence of his own, not even a shelter or farm implements or seeds, and was always at the mercy of the jotedar on whose land he served or of the moneylenders. He could only claim half of the harvest.

The adhiar paid rent in kind. He was in a chronic state of indebtedness for which he alone was blamed. In official discourses, adhiars are accused of “doing little or nothing to improve his position”. The settlement of 1895 explained that on entering a jote the adhiar or proja receives from the jotedar an advance of 2 bis of paddy (about 12 maunds) as bhuta or bhutali, until he harvests a crop. Some adhiars also received an advance of Rs5 to Rs10. These advances carry no interest, but they have to be repaid before the adhiar leaves the jote. If after receiving the advance he left the jote and went over to

¹⁸⁴ *ibid*

¹⁸⁵ Commissioner of Rajshahi Mr. Nolan’s response to the Settlement Officer Mr. Sunder’s report. *ibid*

another jotedar, he had to pay nengura, which amounts to a fine at the rate of 25%, of the bhuta which had been advanced to him. At the time of sowing, the adhiar received seedlings from the jotedar which had to be returned after the paddy was threshed if the adhiar left the former the jote. If he decided to remain, he could keep the seedling advance so long as he continued under the same jotedar. If the adhiar's supply of bhuta was exhausted, the jotedar lent him more paddy. In the cultivated land this loan carried interest at 50%. For ploughing purposes, if the land was full of jungles, both bullocks would have to be provided by the jotedar; in already cultivated land the jotedar gives only one bullock. The jotedar also had to give the adhiar a plough, a spade and one or two huts would be given instead. If huts were not provided, building materials had to be given by the jotedar. The adhiar got the panji-jhara, namely, all the paddy that had fallen off or was lying on the ground where the panji or stack of paddy had been kept.

The adhiar's wife received pathna-jhara, namely, the paddy that got scattered in the courtyard during the process of winnowing when straw and dirt were removed after thrashing. She got it by sweeping the compound. In the division of paddy after reaping and threshing, which was always made in the jotedar's compound, the jotedar first took away his half share. Then he recovered, with interest, the paddy which he had lent the adhiar. If the whole of the proja's or adhiar's share be absorbed in clearing the debt and if some amount still was not paid back, the unpaid portion would be carried over and the jotedar recovered when the next crop was reaped.¹⁸⁶ In the Duars, the adhiars were primarily Rajbansis and also adivasis from Chotanagpur, who were sometimes related to the garden workers.

Colonial rulers retained the jotedari structure as it existed, albeit with increased rent. They did "lament", nonetheless, this "objectionable method of taking the rent of land, inasmuch as it deprives the farmer (read *the real tiller of the soil*) of one-half of the usual motive for industry." But immediately thereafter they justified this feudal debt-bondage which they retained as, after all "it is not a bad way of paying a labourer, as it gives him an interest in his work, inferior no doubt to that of the owner working his own field, but far superior to that of the ordinary farm hand."¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ 'Revenue History', Survey And Settlement of the Western Duars in the District of Jalpaiguri 1889-95, Calcutta: Printed at the Bengal Secretariat Press, 1895, Secretariat Library, Kolkata

¹⁸⁷ Commissioner of Rajshahi Mr. Nolan's response to the Settlement Officer Mr. Sunder's report. *ibid*

The significance of this arrangement surfaced powerfully in the context of the garden workers as well as for the region as a whole, decades later during the Tebhaga uprising (1946-47) when the adhiars demanded two-thirds of the share of the crops.

Transformations in this region also involved its forests and its grazing lands – resources upon which depended the lives, customs and livelihood of the local population, particularly the indigenous tribes. Forest rights and grazing rights were especially affected which were bound to have far reaching implications for the region and its landscape. Ultimately they were in direct contravention of the subsistence needs of the local populace. Most of these changes, were to a considerable extent propelled by the needs of the emerging tea industry.

The introduction of forest conservancy in the second half of the nineteenth century by way of the demarcation of reserved forests was to cater to the express purpose of ensuring the colonial economy's ever-increasing needs for timber. The particular needs of the planters to safeguard or "reserve" their exclusive rights over the valuable timber in the forests that fell within their vast perimeters also played a key role. This was considered crucial by the planters for their fuel requirements and for the construction of tea-chests. These restricted the livelihood of local tribes" who depended upon free access to these resources. In fact, almost all of these changes were precisely designed to counter what the state considered to be the "detrimental impact" of the way of living of these people.¹⁸⁸

Most of Darjeeling was already out of bounds to them as plantations had established their firm grip on the hills. Cultivation was not possible at higher altitudes, much of the hills were either already gardens or reserved forests, and the hot climate in the lower elevations put off hill-tribes from work. A Lepcha headman articulates his concern regarding the high mortality among those of his tribe who in the lower slopes of the hills outside the tea area. He says that he has "constantly observed the heat

¹⁸⁸ Progress Report of the Forest Dept, Bengal, for the year 1866-67, From T. Anderson, Esq., M.D., Conservator of Forests, Lower Provinces, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Government of Bengal. Revenue Department: Forest Branch. Proceedings for January 1868. Pr. No. – 5 to 6. Submission of the progress report of the forest Dept Bengal for the years 1866-67 and also the report on the contemplated operations of the Department for 1868-69. (Cultivation of Tea in Sikkim & Terai), WBSA

of the lower elevation tells on the Lepcha families, and one by one they die off.”¹⁸⁹ So, there were fewer options that were available to these people.

In the Terai, for instance, the Meches are perceived in official discourses as “most inveterately” adhering to the mode of cultivation known as Joomai (or jhoom, or slash & burn) especially in growing cotton.¹⁹⁰ The settlement report describes them as a nomadic tribe who shift their cultivation and homesteads from place to place so that they get the fullest benefit of the virgin soil.¹⁹¹ We find the Forest Department lamenting the fact that “a considerable extent of land in the Terai, especially between the rivers Mech and Mohanuddee, is now covered with a low *useless* jungle of shrubs and tall grasses. The stumps of large Sal and other trees show that these lands were once covered with *valuable* forest which never will be replaced naturally.”¹⁹² (emphasis mine). The state’s exasperation with these tribes who apparently rendered “useless” what was “valuable”, succinctly captures the imperatives that drove its policies. Writing of the Meches in 1875, Colonel Money, the Deputy Commissioner of Jalpaiguri says - “As we know that Meches find the proximity of permanent cultivation not to be congenial with their own habits, and the tract in which we find the decrease in revenue from dao tax, (i.e., the nominal tax payable for slash and burn cultivation) are those in which tea cultivation has been extended.” So, he explains the constant easterly movement of the tribe as a result of being pushed “due to the opening out of tea gardens.”¹⁹³

Finding themselves “ousted from their lands by the tea planters on the north and by Rajbansis and Muhammedans on the south” at last they were forced to change their peripatetic cultivation habits

¹⁸⁹ From A.A. Wace, Esq., deputy Commissioner of the Darjeeling Division, to The Commissioner of the Rajshahye & Cooch Behar Division. No. 2034, dated Darjeeling, the 28th December 1882., Proceedings of the Hon’ble the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal during August 1883. Revenue Department. Forests., WBSA

¹⁹⁰ Progress Report of the Forest Dept, Bengal, for the year 1866-67, From T. Anderson, Esq., M.D., Conservator of Forests, Lower Provinces, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Government of Bengal. Revenue Department: Forest Branch. Proceedings for January 1868. Pr. No. – 5 to 6. Submission of the progress report of the forest Dept Bengal for the years 1866-67 and also the report on the contemplated operations of the Department for 1868-69. (Cultivation of Tea in Sikkim & Terai), WBSA

¹⁹¹ The Meches, Survey And Settlement of the Western Duars in the District of Jalpaiguri 1889-95, Calcutta: Printed at the Bengal Secretariat Press, 1895, Secretariat Library, Kolkata

¹⁹² Progress Report of the Forest Dept, Bengal, for the year 1866-67, From T. Anderson, Esq., M.D., Conservator of Forests, Lower Provinces, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Government of Bengal. Revenue Department: Forest Branch. Proceedings for January 1868. Pr. No. – 5 to 6. Submission of the progress report of the forest Dept Bengal for the years 1866-67 and also the report on the contemplated operations of the Department for 1868-69. (Cultivation of Tea in Sikkim & Terai), WBSA

¹⁹³ The Meches, Survey And Settlement of the Western Duars in the District of Jalpaiguri 1889-95, Calcutta: Printed at the Bengal Secretariat Press, 1895, Secretariat Library

and to settle down permanently. In some places they also reportedly left cotton and began growing vegetables, cereals and pepper “of which they find a better and more remunerative sale in the tea garden hats than for cotton.”¹⁹⁴ So, “the most strenuous efforts” seems to be exerted by the Forest Department “to put a stop to this savage mode of cultivation within the boundaries of the reserved forests.” And of course it was articulated in the language of helping the Meches “advance in civilization”.¹⁹⁵ Their dispossession from the forests is also justified with the caveat that there would still be plenty of land available for them outside the precincts of what is “reserved”.

Under the Bhutan government, the rich forests of Duars with all their timber and cane used to be leased out to zamindars in exchange of a fixed revenue. Zamindars, in their turn, used to sublet it to timber merchants who visited the forests annually. Despite stiff opposition, “unrestricted felling” of timber was from now on to be brought under certain restrictions with rates being steeped beyond a certain fixed weightage.¹⁹⁶

Grazing lands were also fast diminishing because of the sale of much of the waste land in the Terai. Alongside, we are also informed that “tea-planters now object to cattle being grazed on the patches of forest still left on many of the tea-estates”.¹⁹⁷ This, in turn, increased the receipts from the grant of leases to graze cattle in the reserved forest tracts in the hills. These restrictions and exclusions were to soon affect the people in more ways than one.

In the accounts of the planters and the state, or in the dozens of histories of the tea industry we are told of the triumphant tales of tea that opened up an unproductive hellish terrain and turned it into gardens of Eden, ushering in the dawn of civilization to this savage area. Let’s look at one such tale. “We can behold in prospect, hundreds of thousands of acres of virgin soil, now lying waste and uncultivated, - lost to the country, and wholly profitless to government – covered with rich and highly

¹⁹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁹⁵ Progress Report of the Forest Dept, Bengal, for the year 1866-67, From T. Anderson, Esq., M.D., Conservator of Forests, Lower Provinces, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Government of Bengal. Revenue Department: Forest Branch. Proceedings for January 1868. Pr. No. – 5 to 6. Submission of the progress report of the forest Dept Bengal for the years 1866-67 and also the report on the contemplated operations of the Department for 1868-69. (Cultivation of Tea in Sikkim & Terai), WBSA

¹⁹⁶ Report on the contemplated forest operations to be under-taken in the year 1868-69 Sikkim Division. Revenue Department: Forest Branch. Proceedings for January 1868. Pr. No. – 5 to 6. Submission of the progress report of the forest Dept Bengal for the years 1866-67 and also the report on the contemplated operations of the Department for 1868-69. (Cultivation of Tea in Sikkim & Terai) WBSA

¹⁹⁷ *ibid*

productive crops, affording employment to hundreds of thousands of (oft) starving people, paid, for the most part, by foreign gold, and returning Govt. a double revenue.”¹⁹⁸ There are tales of British ingenuity that made this transformation possible and which soon made the region one of the most remunerative pillars of the commercial interests of the state. *“The greater part of the primeval forest has disappeared and mile after mile has been replaced by great expanses of tea gardens.”* The reports are silent about the impact of these monumental transformations on the local populace. We will take up a single such instance of land acquisition for tea acreage to understand the various implications of the actual process.

In official correspondence¹⁹⁹ we are informed of a particular settlement in the hills of about 34 houses which were inhabited mostly by Nepalis and also by some Lepchas scattered over three or four different places. They needed to be vacated as their stay and cultivation were clashing with “the intention of the Government to open this tract for tea.” The manner in which this is sought to be achieved is revealing. To start with, the Lepchas were to be given “more consideration” in regard to compensation or relocation for two reasons. “In the first place, they were the first to open up the settlement. In the second place, they cannot hold their own against tea.” The Lepchas, like the Meches, the Bhooteahs, and the Paharias were also one of the costs of the triumph of tea and the empire.

The similar right of the Nepali ryots to the same compensation was to be over-ruled because “the first planter who took up land at this point would at once, in his own interests, attach the Nepalese to himself, and they would be sure to have some of the land for their own cultivation.” Nepalis were expected to automatically become workers who would cater to the labour needs of the mushrooming plantations. The question as to whether they, as erstwhile ryots, would wish to continue as before, or would choose to be garden-workers, was obviously irrelevant. So, they could be dispossessed and forced “to make their own terms with the planter.” It is apprehended that “the Lepchas, however,

¹⁹⁸ W. Nassau Lees, *Tea cultivation, cotton and other agricultural experiments in India: A review*, London: [W.H. Allan and Co., Thacker, Spink, and Co.](#), 1863 p.3

¹⁹⁹ From A.A. Wace, Esq., deputy Commissioner of the Darjeeling Division, to The Commissioner of the Rajshahye & Cooch Behar Division. No. 2034, dated Darjeeling, the 28th December 1882. Proceedings of the Hon’ble the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal during August 1883. Revenue Department. Forests, WBSA

would probably not care to work for the planter; and unless their interests are secured some way by us, they would assuredly give way in two or three years to the planter or the Nepalese.” So, rehabilitation was sought. Leaving the nomadic tribes as they were inimical to revenue maximization which was called “improvement” of land productivity. So the tribes were forced to settle down. The Deputy Commissioner for Darjeeling Division is heard saying:

Anxious as I am to secure permanently the interests of Lepchas in this district, I cannot shut my eyes to the fact that, as they exist in our unsettled tracts, they are an obstacle to all improvements in cultivation or increase of revenue. They settle in a forest, clear a bit and sow it, and then pass on to cut down new forests, without giving any return for the valuable timbers destroyed. What we should aim at is to see them as they are in our settled tracts, contented and settled, and making the most of such land as they can afford to pay an easy rent for. As regards to the Lepchas on the tract under reference, I would give them the option of building on 15 or 20 acres each where they now are, securing their interest by giving them one of our Kalimpong leases, or of moving to the Lepcha blocks north of Kalimpong on payment by the planter of a liberal compensation for removal.²⁰⁰

It was claimed that “three objects would be gained” if compensation was granted in this manner of issuing notices for their removal to the settled blocks to the north of Kalimpong. Apart from being considered “best” for the tribes themselves, the author, in a self-congratulatory note, considers it also best for the health of the reserved forests as well as the needs of tea. “The whole area which it seems desirable on other grounds to allot to tea would be secured for that industry.”

Transforming a region with tea:

There were significant ways in which the region was shaped to make way for tea as we saw; but once tea came to dominate the region overwhelmingly over the years, it was to have its own impact transforming the economy, society and polity of the region.

²⁰⁰ *ibid*

Once established, the scale and needs of the plantations and particularly their huge reserve of workers were bound to lead to a huge stress upon the food requirements of the region. In the Duars itself, population increased from 417,855 in 1872 to 580,570 in 1881 to 680,736 in 1891 to 787,380 in 1901. By 1901 more than one-fifth of the population was composed of immigrants.²⁰¹ Shortage, panic and crisis were just a step away. With its transformation into a tea-district, the region's self-sufficiency in terms of crop-outturn was to be the first casualty. The unprecedented influx of immigrant tea-workers, coupled with the particularity of the tenural arrangements (jotedari), was to ensure that the slightest shortage could be capitalized by the grain-dealers or such a crisis could also be manufactured (or precipitated) by the jotedars themselves. These became particularly manifest during the period of the Tebhaga Andolan. The first signs of strain on the region's food outturn, however, surfaced with the coming of tea as early as in the 1870s.

Even though the "surplus and exports were large, yet there occurred a panic in May, grain riots were raised, and the troops had to be called out." With regard to the scarcity of 1875, Mr. R.H. Renny, (Assistant. commissioner, who was then in charge of the Buxa subdivision), wrote - "The year under report dawned with the gloomiest forebodings of evil. Scarcity and famine were raging round about, and notwithstanding that the crops in the subdivision had been very ordinary ones, yet in the latter end of May and the beginning of June there was supposed to be much reason to fear that there would be famine, and that relief works would have to be resorted to. I myself was not of this belief, for I was well aware that there was food sufficient in the Duars to carry the people through..What caused people to fear that famine would break out in the Duars was this, viz., there had been some serious grain robberies..The result was that the owners of grain began to fear that their property was insecure, and consequently refused to expose it in the markets: this sent up prices enormously. I do not wish for one moment to deny that a crisis was not impending. All I wish to assert is that I never doubted that was food sufficient in the Duars to feed the people."²⁰²

Then again, at the end of 1896, apprehension was voiced in some government circles that the "supply to be obtained from such a harvest is not sufficient for local wants."²⁰³ Though widely discredited as

²⁰¹ W.S. Meyer, J.S. Cotton, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India* Vol. XIV, London: Oxford, 1908, p. 34

²⁰² *Physical History, Survey And Settlement of the Western Duars in the District of Jalpaiguri 1889-95*, Calcutta: Printed at the Bengal Secretariat Press, 1895, Secretariat Library, Kolkata

²⁰³ From P.Nolan, Commissioner of the Rajshahi Division to The Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal, Revenue Department, No. 794 Mct, dated Camp Rampur Boalia, the 14th Ddec. 1896. Proceeding Volume January 1897, Revenue Department, Agriculture Branch, WBSA

exaggeration or false alarm, the figures are revealing in themselves as are the observations upon the role of tea in precipitating such a shortage:

186,500 acres were sown with bhadoi, which at the rate of 10 maunds the acre, will give, in ordinary years, 18,65,000 maunds. To this we must add the produce of 383,000 acres sown with aman, which, in ordinary years, give, at 15 maunds an acre, 57,45,000 maunds; and in 1896 with a 9 ½ anna crop, 34,11,094 maunds. The whole supply is thus 44,60,156 maunds. The population at the census of 1891 was 681,352 persons; it may now, allowing for immigration to the Duars, be 750,000. These persons would require for food, at the rate of ¾ seers a day, 51,32,812 maunds in the year. We have to add 10 per cent on the normal produce for seed, 895,700 & 5 per cent on the year's produce from waste, 380,600, making a total of 64,09,112 maunds. It will be seen that the supply falls short of the demand by 19,48,956 maunds...*An observation which seems to me to have more weight is that a considerable portion of the people live by growing tea, not rice. These are ordinarily paid by the surplus produce of the rest of the district.* If their wants are supplied this year by importation, it will be found that the food-supply is about sufficient for the rest of the population.²⁰⁴

The inquiry into the crop outturn was triggered by a general apprehension of “distress” in the Duars among local native newspapers. The Deputy Commissioner of Jalpaiguri, however, refuted claims that people were flocking to the towns in search of employment or that the rate of theft/crime was on the rise. As to the report that some people were consuming boiled *kachu* for subsistence, he said that the “low caste people, such as Meches” supposedly had a “general tendency” to eat boiled *kachu* and it was “not unusual”. This was apparently to “economize their rice in order to profit by selling the surplus at high rates in the neighbouring tea gardens.”

The fact that the Meches were suffering from a severe food shortage for about a quarter of the year, forced them to rely upon the mahajans. But Gordon's conclusions were: “The people seemed quite confident and without any fears for the future, and if they have no fears, it is perhaps superfluous for us to have any.” He found the “illustrations” of “distress” in the native papers to be “greatly exaggerated”. There was “not a single report of actual starvation” he claimed and hence advised that “there was no cause for anxiety for the present.”²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ *ibid*

²⁰⁵ From Lt. Col. A.Evans Gordon, Deputy Commissioner, Jalpaiguri to The Commissioner of the Rajshahi Division. No. 2428G, dated Camp Alipur Duars, the 13th Jan 1897. Proceeding Volume January 1897, Revenue Department, Agriculture Branch, WBSA

What he could not refute, however, was the fact that in the tea gardens and in the mufassils, coarse rice was selling at the rate of 7-8 seers per rupee, while the best quality rice was selling at 5-6 seers per rupee. While reporting back to the Commissioner, Rajshahi division, Gorden observes that “the price of food grains have been on the increase, partly owing to the apprehension of scarcity and partly on account of the increasing demand of the tea gardens.”²⁰⁶

Owing to its submontane position and plenty of rainfall, there are no natural causes that might lead to scarcity or famine in the Duars. According to the locals, there never had been any famine or absolute scarcity in the region till its “opening up” by the state.²⁰⁷ Tea, with its huge influx of workers, created its own ripples upon the demand side. That apart, as the Commissioner of Rajshahi Mr. Nolan suggests, there is always a reason “to be very watchful particularly in the Duars, where there are no villages, and the cultivators may sell when the market is good, without reserving a sufficient stock for seed and subsistence.”²⁰⁸ This was the danger that always loomed largely owing to the jotedari system. With the increase in demand, they could push up the prices at any point through hoarding, since they cornered the bulk of the harvest in their own grain stores. The resultant high prices were to cause havoc “to those who do not themselves produce rice, or whose crops have entirely failed.” A glimpse was seen in 1873-74.

What has been described both by Mr. Renny and Mr. Nolan is the region’s new found vulnerability to artificial scarcity and the resultant ‘shortage’, shooting prices and panic. The alarming pull on the demand side placed by the massive influx of immigrants into the tea gardens and the peculiarity of the jotedari system (instrumental in precipitating shortage) on the supply side - were both responsible for such a transformation. Most vulnerable were the adhiars and the garden workers. With the indiscriminate expansion of tea acreage at the cost of rice-lands, the situation was bound to deteriorate.²⁰⁹ The more the tea-acreage expanded, the more favourable became the position of the existing jotedars to precipitate a crisis at any opportune moment. The second world war seemed to have been one such opportune moment. Jotedars were not willing to sell at controlled prices and held

²⁰⁶ *ibid*

²⁰⁷ *Physical History, Survey And Settlement of the Western Duars in the District of Jalpaiguri 1889-95*, Calcutta: Printed at the Bengal Secretariat Press, 1895, Secretariat Library

²⁰⁸ From P.Nolan, Commissioner of the Rajshahi Division to The Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal, Revenue Department, No. 794 Mct, dated Camp Rampur Boalia, the 14th Ddec. 1896. Proceeding Volume January 1897, Revenue Department, Agriculture Branch, WBSA

²⁰⁹ Conversion of Jote lands into Tea, *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Indian Tea Association For the year 1918*, Calcutta: 1919 pp 29-30

up stocks waiting for prices to soar.²¹⁰ The far reaching implications of such a scramble for land, though hinted by some, found few listeners. The rush for tea was deafening.²¹¹

Older established planters, (almost all of them being Europeans) had their own vested interests in opposing any further extension of tea-acreage and hence they were one of the foremost and most influential voices against expansion of tea-acreage who could use their weight around in the Indian Planters Association or the Duars Planters Association. Nonetheless, the plethora of contending opinions on the subject does bring to the fore certain pressing concerns about the manner in which such expansion was taking place and the long-term impact of the galloping acreage of tea into jote-lands. Discussions of the “General Policy to be adopted in the matter of Extension of Tea Cultivation in the districts of Jalpaiguri & Darjeeling” was triggered by an application of one Babu Tarini Prasad Ray and others asking for permission to purchase lands from jotedars in Jalpaiguri district in order to establish tea gardens. One set of arguments said that the grants of leases for tea cultivation should be encouraged, and in consequence, present rules should be modified “so as to render less difficult the conversion of jote lands for tea cultivation.”²¹²

Certain restrictions had been imposed (through rules 36 & 42 in the Bengal Wastelands Manual) in 1919 regarding the conversion of jote-lands. One of the main grounds for the opposition to such “unrestricted extension” of tea was that it “would have the effect of trenching on the area which would otherwise be used for food production and will consequently tend to diminish the food supply of the district.”²¹³ While the Board of Revenue demanded the removal of any such restrictive rules, there were several opinions to the contrary. C.J. Cunning, of the Revenue Department, for instance, remarked: “I dissent entirely from the note that there is no necessity for any such rules; on the contrary they have become urgently necessary. The problem of where the cultivation of a food crop

²¹⁰ Letter dated 14th November 1944 from Chairman, Duars Planters’ Association to the Executive Engineer C &W Dept, C &B Branch, Jalpaiguri Division, Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1944. p 18, WBSA

²¹¹ For a study of the impact of expansion of tea acreage on the subsistence sector in Assam read Keya Dasgupta, ‘Plantation Economy and Land Tenure System in Brahmaputra Valley, 1839-1914’, Reviewed work(s), *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 18, No. 29, July 1983

²¹² General Policy in the matter of the extension of tea cultivation in the districts of Jalpaiguri & Darjeeling, Letter No. 1008 WL dated the 27th Jan 1927, from the Board of Revenue, Bengal. File. No. L.R. 3-L – 5 of 1927, Sr. Nos. 1-2, K.W. – A Proceeding for Aug 1928, No 6-7, WBSA

²¹³ From FW Robertson, Secretary to the Board of Revenue, Bengal to The Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal, Revenue Department. General Policy in the matter of the extension of tea cultivation in the districts of Jalpaiguri & Darjeeling, Letter No. 1008 WL dated the 27th Jan 1927, from the Board of Revenue, Bengal. File. No. L.R. 3-L – 5 of 1927, Sr. Nos. 1-2, K.W. – A Proceeding for Aug 1928, No 6-7, WBSA

is to end and the cultivation of a non-food crop is to begin is no small one and requires for its decision a wider outlook.”²¹⁴

An account of the process as to how jote-lands are converted into tea lands is given in Mr. Strong’s description in 1918. He illustrates how a prospective tea planter first buys a jote in the middle of a taluq and then makes advantageous offers to the neighbouring jotedars. Over a short span of time, having established himself in an influential position in the vicinity “he proceeds to put pressure on his neighbours to sell their jotes to him. Gradually he acquires a foothold of about 500 acres or so and then posing himself as the representative of a tea company seeks sanction upon his appeal for conversion. Once sanctioned, the company is formed and its shares boom in the speculative market. From here on, the company intensifies its intimidation of the neighbouring jotedars to sell off their land. The latter in turn knows that “if they refuse, the cattle of the tea garden coolies will be allowed to stray over their fields and their irrigation facilities curtailed. After a year or so of such treatment, the jotedar realizes that his jote is not worth holding under such circumstances, and so he sells probably at a lower price than he would have otherwise demanded...In this way, the paddy supply of the district is depleted, cultivators are induced to make bad bargains and to give up their means of livelihood.” Mr. Strong thereby strongly recommends “that the time has come to stop the process [he has] described, and to let it be known that the conversion of any more jotes will be disallowed unless for very special reasons.”²¹⁵

The Board of Revenue, however, considered this ground for opposition to be “not a very serious one”. It largely rubbished the apprehensions by insisting that “the conversion of a few thousand acres of jote land to tea will make no appreciable difference in the price of rice in the district.” It claimed that with the advent of the railways and modern means of communication, no district was any longer solely dependent on its own produce. So, for the Board, this could be no valid ground for discouraging the expansion of tea even if at the cost of paddy land.²¹⁶

²¹⁴ Grounds Against Unrestricted Extension Of Tea Cultivation, Appendix, General Policy in the matter of the extension of tea cultivation in the districts of Jalpaiguri & Darjeeling, Letter No. 1008 WL dated the 27th Jan 1927, from the Board of Revenue, Bengal. File. No. L.R. 3-L – 5 of 1927, Sr. Nos. 1-2, K.W. – A Proceeding for Aug 1928, No 6-7, WBSA

²¹⁵ Mr. Strong’s letter No. 2378, dated 2nd Aug 1918, Grounds Against Unrestricted Extension Of Tea Cultivation, Appendix, General Policy in the matter of the extension of tea cultivation in the districts of Jalpaiguri & Darjeeling, Letter No. 1008 WL dated the 27th Jan 1927, from the Board of Revenue, Bengal. File. No. L.R. 3-L – 5 of 1927, Sr. Nos. 1-2, K.W. – A Proceeding for Aug 1928, No 6-7, WBSA

²¹⁶ From FW Robertson, Secretary to the Board of Revenue, Bengal to The Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal, Revenue Department. General Policy in the matter of the extension of tea cultivation in the districts of Jalpaiguri

The other somewhat related ground for apprehension regarding any further “unrestricted extension” of tea was that the “impoverished jotedars will be induced to part with their lands, and that, after the purchase of the jote, the tenants may be ejected by unfair means.”²¹⁷ The worst sufferer in this unbridled hunt for tea-land was not the jotedar (who, owing to his legal right could extract at least some compensation or even benefit) but the under-tenants – the adhiars in particular – who, under jotedari, had no right to the land and, therefore, were not entitled to any compensation. They were simply ejected.

The majority of the jotedars in the Duars have quite as much land as they require, while many of them have very big jotes, and I see no object in settling more land with them, but the sub-tenants, and especially the adhiars or agricultural labourers, are very poor, and every effort should be made to improve their position by giving them land wherever land is available.²¹⁸

This particular fate of the under-tenants was a fact and not an exaggeration - as was accepted by even the Board. Their interest had to be sacrificed over thousands of acres under the juggernaut of tea and the interest of the planters – an account in the history of transformation of the region of Duars that gets lost in the annals of the empire and its idyllic gardens. “[T]heir presence on the land should not be allowed to stand in the way of the establishment of a tea-garden if the land is thoroughly suitable for this purpose.”²¹⁹

The Board of Revenue has a very interesting - one may say unabashed - way of justifying it. It draws a wedge between the “aboriginal” whom the government was supposedly more duty-bound to protect, than those “able to take care of themselves” and hence dispensable. “It is true that the conversion of jote land to tea may result in the ejection of a number of resident cultivators, but it may be pointed out that these cultivators are no longer the aboriginal Meches and Garos who, on account of their

& Darjeeling, Letter No. 1008 WL dated the 27th Jan 1927, from the Board of Revenue, Bengal. File. No. L.R. 3-L – 5 of 1927, Sr. Nos. 1-2, K.W. – A Proceeding for Aug 1928, No 6-7, WBSA

²¹⁷ *ibid*

²¹⁸ Mr. Strong’s letter No. 2378, dated 2nd Aug 1918, Grounds Against Unrestricted Extension Of Tea Cultivation, Appendix, General Policy in the matter of the extension of tea cultivation in the districts of Jalpaiguri & Darjeeling, Letter No. 1008 WL dated the 27th Jan 1927, from the Board of Revenue, Bengal. File. No. L.R. 3-L – 5 of 1927, Sr. Nos. 1-2, K.W. – A Proceeding for Aug 1928, No 6-7, WBSA

²¹⁹ From FW Robertson, Secretary to the Board of Revenue, Bengal to The Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal, Revenue Department. General Policy in the matter of the extension of tea cultivation in the districts of Jalpaiguri & Darjeeling, Letter No. 1008 WL dated the 27th Jan 1927, from the Board of Revenue, Bengal. File. No. L.R. 3-L – 5 of 1927, Sr. Nos. 1-2, K.W. – A Proceeding for Aug 1928, No 6-7, WBSA

ignorance and simplicity deserved special protection and for whom the area was originally reserved. The existing cultivators are local Bengalis or ex-tea garden labourers, both well able to take care of themselves.”²²⁰

Refuting the two objections to the indiscriminate extension of tea-acreage, the Board of Revenue gives priority to the growing enterprise of tea above any other interest. And this is how the region and its people are made to continually shape themselves to the exigencies and growing demands of the plantations: “Not only is tea growing a prosperous industry which adds very materially to the wealth of the province, but it is an industry which of late years has attracted Indian capital for investment, and, in the opinion of the Board, any suitable project which is able to attract Indian capital should be encouraged.”²²¹ Between Indian labour and Indian capital, the state chose the cause of capital unhesitatingly.

The third kind of opposition, largely sounded by the older, established planters, stemmed from their vested concerns over an intensifying labour-shortage in their estates that the opening of more gardens would risk. Though they and their associations did lend their voice in articulating the other grounds for opposition to varying extent, yet there remains little doubt that this was their most pressing, if not the only concern. In a classic instance of revelation of the farce of “free labour” in the Duars, the planters have voiced “[T]hat a serious labour shortage already exists in the Duars tea gardens, and that any rapid extension of tea cultivation by the establishment of new gardens will gravely enhance the present difficulties and cause great loss and retardment of development to existing gardens.” The old European planters, through various planters’ associations, spoke of the “high cost of recruitment” and the “shortage of labour”. They complained that the newly created Indian controlled gardens do not adhere to the Labour Rules, nor do they take any steps to recruit coolies for themselves. They are accused of obtaining “whatever supplies they require from the neighbouring gardens.”²²²

Though the Board of Revenue was sympathetic to the “great hardship that old established gardens should have their coolies tempted away from them by newly established gardens”, yet, in the final

²²⁰ *ibid*

²²¹ *Ibid* On the eve of the transfer of power in 1947, there were about 104 European owned gardens and 51 Indian own gardens in Jalpaiguri as per the Annual Report of the Jalpaiguri Labour Act for the year ending 30th June 1944, Government of Bengal, Dept. of Public Health & Local Self-Government (Bengal Govt. Press, Alipore, 1945) DBITA Archive, Haldibari T.E.

²²² *ibid*

assessment, it found it “injudicious to interfere with honest competition.” It refuted this as the basis for any restrictions upon opening up of new gardens as it considered it unnecessary to forbid a new plantation (that might be offering better conditions) because there was the risk of workers in a neighbouring garden being “seduced”.²²³

So, there are two contending sets of opinions that we encounter on the matter of conversion of jotelands into tea-lands. While not yet being ready to entirely forfeit the control of the government over such conversions, the Board of Revenue on one side advocates that *“the extension of tea cultivation should be encouraged and the restrictions on that extension which at present exist should be reduced.”*²²⁴ The other contending opinion articulated by officials and non-officials alike argued that *“there is no room for much more tea in this district” and hence any further extension should be actively discouraged.*²²⁵ The government, we find, is largely inclined towards the opinion of the former as it *“accepts the Board’s conclusions generally and are of the opinion that the general policy should be not to discourage the development of the tea industry”*²²⁶ albeit retaining some of the already existing restrictions which the Board wished to be omitted. The government, therefore, at a policy level, stands by the opinion of the Board and thereby prioritizes the interest of the growing tea enterprise that is hungry for more and more paddy-lands to be converted to tea. This policy of active promotion of tea that continues to shape the transformations of the region and unfolds the encounters with its people.

Yet another significant factor that acted as a catalyst leading to a further transformation of the region as a whole was the introduction of railways – the Bengal Duars Railways to be precise. This development again, if not entirely, was to a large extent triggered by tea. It was largely the planter’s needs of “opening up” the region that had a direct bearing upon both the urgency with which the railways were built as well as the rail-routes that would cater to the gardens.

²²³ *ibid*

²²⁴ *ibid*

²²⁵ Mr. Strong’s letter No. 2378, dated 2nd Aug 1918, Grounds Against Unrestricted Extension Of Tea Cultivation, Appendix, General Policy in the matter of the extension of tea cultivation in the districts of Jalpaiguri & Darjeeling, Letter No. 1008 WL dated the 27th Jan 1927, from the Board of Revenue, Bengal. File. No. L.R. 3-L – 5 of 1927, Sr. Nos. 1-2, K.W. – A Proceeding for Aug 1928, No 6-7, WBSA

²²⁶ From FA Sachse, Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal, Revenue Department to The Secretary to the Board of Revenue, Bengal. File. No. L.R. 3-L – 5 of 1927, Sr. Nos. 1-2, K.W. – A Proceeding for Aug 1928, No 6-7, WBSA

The 'Maps of the Proposed North Bengal Railways' reveal that the Duars assumed significance in terms of penetration by the railways only with the boom in the tea industry. In 1872, just before tea steps into Duars, these tracts seemed non-remunerative for the railways. "With regard to the proposal to lay a line along the Caragola and Darjeeling road with a branch cut to the east from Titalya or thereabout, through the Duars or Cooch Behar towards Assam, I can only say that I do not think it would pay commercially..you would get very little from Cooch Behar and the Bhootan Duars at present".²²⁷ The assessment, however, changes drastically as we would see, in a few years with tea stepping into the Duars that necessitates the coming into being of the Bengal Duars Railways to reach deep into what would soon become a "Tea District".

The document named 'Claim to compensation under a certain provision in the form of lease for tea grants in Jalpaiguri' (1890) indicates that the "opening up" of these tracts through the penetration of the railways closely followed the boom of the plantation sector and was dovetailed to meet the needs of tea. The "want of good roads from the tea-tracts up to Jalpaiguri" was sounded as a "great difficulty in the tea industry" and the opening of the Bengal Duars Railway had "considerably abated this trouble" of the planters.²²⁸ The Duars railways (its workers' union later would play a crucial role in the 40s) was specifically sanctioned in the 1880s to connect Jalpaiguri with the Tea Districts in the western Duars. All land required for the purpose was to be provided for free by the government. This was pursued with a sense of urgency which is evident in the government's willingness to expedite the process of the construction by eliminating bureaucratic procedures in the process of land acquisition.²²⁹

By 1895, the Bengal Duars Railway passed through three parganas of the Mynaguri tahsil, the stations being located at Jalpaiguri, Tista, Domohani Hat, Lataguri, Chulsa road, Mal Bazar, Dam Dim and Ramsahie Hat. By then the extension of the railway (1) from Mal Bazar eastwards to Chulsa, (2) from Ramsahie Hat to Sulka Hat, and (3) from Ramsahie Hat across the Jaldacca river, northwards and eastwards, along the base of the hill to Lankapara was already under consideration. The third of the

²²⁷ The Maps of the proposed N.B. Railway, Dated Berhampore, the 19th April 1872 From W. LeF. Robinson, Esq. To The Secretary to the GoB, Calcutta. Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, General Department, Calcutta, May 1872, WBSA

²²⁸ Survey And Settlement of the Western Duars in the District of Jalpaiguri 1889-95, Calcutta: Printed at the Bengal Secretariat Press, 1895, Secretariat Library, Kolkata

²²⁹ Claim to compensation under a certain provision in the form of lease for tea grants in Jalpaiguri., No. 1124 R, Govt. of Bengal, PWD, Railway, To the Secretary to the Board of Revenue, Dated Calcutta 16th May 1890 File No. 44 (Misc Revenue) Proceeding: Bundle No 31 Year 1893 Land Revenue Dept., WBSA

proposed projects was for instance already criticized as with its “alignment along the foot of the hills the line will be of use to planters. Tea gardens alone, instead of the people and country generally, will benefit by it, and loss to the Company must ensue.”²³⁰ But, by then, the benefit to the planters and catering to the needs of tea in this region had already become the predominant concern of the state. The rest were secondary.

The Northern Bengal State Railway was extended up to Siliguri in 1878, a year before the last settlement of the Terai was made. The Darjeeling-Himalayan Railway was opened in 1881. The latter had a great impact on the cultivation of both jute and tea – the two cash crops that formed the backbone of the colonial economy in Bengal. It is due to the extension of the railway that the cultivation of jute was said to have been increased by more than double in the Terai region. The coming of railways had a great bearing on the export of jute from the Terai and import of rice and other articles from Calcutta and the neighbouring districts.²³¹

The process of laying the railroads in the Duars was interesting as in vast stretches they had to pass through tea-land. The Chief Engineer of the Bengal Duars Railway, in a correspondence with the Secretary to the Bengal Government (in the PWD), for instance, describes one such process of acquiring tea-land for railways and the hurdles thereof: “A total of about 31 acres. The compensation to be paid for this will, I roughly estimate be about 18,000/- Every effort has been made to avoid the tea land. A considerable amount of land has been brought under cultivation since the original surveys were made in 1888, and it would not now be possible to find an alignment which would not pass through a large area of tea.” There were suspicions regarding the possibility of Managers planting fallow lands with tea only to procure large sums of compensation in the process of giving them over for railways. The Deputy Commissioner of Jalpaiguri states, “it is quite impossible to run the line so as to avoid passing through portions of tea estates as the country between Mal and Damdim is simply a network of tea estates which were established many years ago before any question of making a railway was thought of.”²³² But by the end of it, the railways were to cater to the supply requirements of the tea industry to and from the port of Calcutta; easy passage for labour recruitment from Chota

²³⁰ *Railway, Survey And Settlement of the Western Duars in the District of Jalpaiguri 1889-95*, Calcutta: Printed at the Bengal Secretariat Press, 1895, Secretariat Library, Kolkata

²³¹ *ibid*

²³² Claim to compensation under a certain provision in the form of lease for tea grants in Jalpaiguri., No. 342 G From Lt. Col H. Boilean, Deputy Commissioner Jalpaiguri To The Commissioner of the Rajshahy Division Dated Jalpaiguri May 10th/16th 1892, File No. 44 (Misc Revenue) Proceeding: Bundle No 31 Year 1893 Land Revenue Dept., WBSA

Nagpur; the importation of rice in an increasing grain-deficient region owing to focus on cash crops; exportation of tea and jute; growth of markets and the supply thereto.

So, if the garden transformed the region, the region itself also shaped the gardens. It was reflected even in the pattern of migration and the ethnicized landscapes that came about in the Darjeeling hills and the Jalpaiguri Duars. At the beginning of the plantations in the hill areas, Nepalis constituted the work-force and were preferred as “settled agriculturists” and “ideal” workers as compared to the sedentary tribes.²³³ As land in the hills was exhausted by the early 1870s, in their bid to engulf more and more acreage under the gardens, the planters opened the Duars chapter of plantations which, in its own way, threw up specifically new demands of capital and an entirely different context that was to ask for essential changes in the recruitment pattern. The Nepali workers refused to descend along with the gardens onto the rain-fed dense tropical “notoriously malarious” tracts of the Duars down hill. So, an acute shortage of labour supply gripped the planters. This had been anticipated by J. W. Edgars as early as 1873: “Nepal ought to be able to supply enough for the hills. But there was some uneasiness in the Terai owing to the increased extension, and there was pretty general talk of getting up Dhangars.”²³⁴ Since then the difficulties increased.²³⁵ From now on in the recruitment discourse, ethnic stereotypes about various categories of labourers were adjusted accordingly. The erstwhile ideal settled agriculturists suddenly became “excessively settled” or “lazy” to be the ideal wage-earners. The Dhangars or adivasi immigrants from Chotanagpur suddenly became the “ideal jugli bodies” as they were put to the harrowing task of clearing the tropical woods. This ethnicization of the labour force was written into the topography of the region and the distinct recruitment patterns that evolved historically as colonial capital encountered specific challenges on its way.

To conclude, as the region was transformed with the coming of plantations, it went through multiple changes – in land relations, migration patterns, and demography. Our larger understanding needs to bring them together and see how they intricately combined and influenced developments within the garden-economy.

²³³ Piya Chatterjee, *A Time for Tea: Women, Labour and Post-Colonial Politics on an Indian Plantation*, New Delhi: Zubaan, 2003, p. 60

²³⁴ Dhangar became a generic term used by the colonial state officials to refer to the tribals of the Chota Nagpur region.

²³⁵ Edgars, *Papers regarding the Tea Industry in Bengal*, p. 122

Chapter II

The Plantation Regime: *Interrogating “Free” Labour*

A study of Recruitment, Labour Relations & Conditions of Work

The Tin Box, Tin House, Hot box or Sweat Box was a method of torture in solitary confinement used upon the black slaves across plantations in America in the 19th century. Anyone placed in a Tin House would experience extreme heat, dehydration, heat exhaustion, even death, depending on how long and when one has been put inside one.²³⁶

But then that was slavery. What mushroomed across South-East Asia after the formal abolition of slavery in the west, was Contract Labour. In Assam there was the infamous Penal Contract which was criticized heavily in several quarters for merely replacing formal slavery with the brute force of ‘contractual slavery’. In the Duars, however, it was presumed and carefully maintained that the labour was *free*. Without any penal contract to coerce them, the claim was that in recruitment or in working relations, the Duars was worked by free labourers. Before we understand, interrogate and observe closely such terms and the prevailing conditions & relations of labour, let us first attempt to put to test such presuppositions regarding free labour in the Duars.

“Free” labour & The Tin Box: the questions raised & the answers buried:

²³⁶ Randall G. Sheldon, ‘Slavery in the Third Millenium, Part II – Prisons and Convict Leasing Help Perpetuate Slavery’, *The Black Commentator*, Issue 142, June 16, 2005; James Matthews, ‘Recollections of Slavery by a Runaway Slave’, *The Emancipator*, August 23, 1838

Sometime in early 1893, in the Rangamati garden of Duars, a garden-worker named Gobind was locked up in a Tin House for several days - presumably for around three or four days under the order of the British manager Mr. Murray. While Govind maintained that he was merely going to the bazaar when he was apprehended and brought before the manager, the latter's justification was that Govind was attempting to escape, and as such he was well within his rights to take punitive measures. He boasted before the District Superintendent of Police (DSP), that he would have those who attempted to escape beaten in public: "A few cuts with a cane at muster and then locked up in a tin house for some nights."²³⁷

If Govind got locked up in a ten feet by ten feet Tin House, the rest of workers were also not free. Evidence indicates that the workers of this garden were "practically always in a state of duress." When off work they are kept within the guarded enclosure, and even when they are at work in the tea garden, they are watched by guards.²³⁸ The manager surrounded their lines with a fence of barbed wire with chaukidars stationed to guard the roads. They weren't even allowed to visit the bazaar when not at work, at least not without special permission, and even then under certain conditions. Since they were not given free access to the market, the manager had to provide them with food, and he did so by paying part of their wages in kind. This was clearly in violation of the agreement which bound him to pay only in cash.²³⁹ But then this was not the only violation. Nor was it the only reason for discontent amongst the workers triggering frequent desertion even at the risk of flogging and the notorious Tin House. If we dig a bit deeper into this specific instance we see ingrained structural violations rather than a simple aberration.

Rangamati, where Govind worked, had about 400 workers sent by Messrs. Finley, Muir & Co. on account of the North Sylhet Tea Company from as far as the Ganjam district of Southern Orissa in the Madras Presidency. They arrived at the Haldibari garden in the Duars in 1890, 1891 and 1892.²⁴⁰ An enquiry into the terms of their recruitment reveals that the agreements

²³⁷Correspondence from P.Nolan, Esq., Commissioner of Rajshahi Division To The Secretary to the GoB, General Dept., Nos. 3-4, File 2-1/22, No. 408Mct., dated Darjeeling, the 4th September 1893, Inspection of Tea Gardens in the Duars, Proceedings of the Liuetenant-Governor of Bengal; General Department – Emigration; Calcutta, December 1893, West Bengal State Archives [WBSA]

²³⁸Extracts from the Judgment recorded by their lordships Justices Princep and Trevelyan in the case of Mr. Murray, Inspection of Tea Gardens in the Duars, Proceedings of the Liuetenant-Governor of Bengal; General Department – Emigration; Calcutta, December 1893, WBSA

²³⁹Correspondence from P.Nolan, Esq., Commissioner of Rajshahi Division To The Secretary to the GoB, General Dept., Nos. 3-4, File 2-1/22, No. 408Mct., dated Darjeeling, the 4th September 1893, Inspection of Tea Gardens in the Duars, Proceedings of the Liuetenant-Governor of Bengal; General Department – Emigration; Calcutta, December 1893, WBSA

²⁴⁰ibid

were either obsolete, illegal or non-applicable in the Duars gardens. It can safely be presumed, as did the Deputy Commissioner of Jalpaiguri, that “the fact that such agreements were not in force in the Jalpaiguri district must have been known to the person or persons who recruited these men. The coolies, men from a distant country, were quite ignorant on the subject.” He opined that “if the recruiters intentionally deceived these men” they should be held accountable and duly punished.²⁴¹

Some of the workers were recruited under the penal code that binds the emigrant under Act XIII of 1859 for a period of 939 working days in exchange for an advance of Rs.1.8. This followed the Assam precedent which was not supposed to be in force in the Duars where labour was allegedly “free”. Some others were recruited for a period of three years under section 492 of the Penal Code (as practiced in Assam) which again is not applicable in the supposedly free labour zone of Duars. Wages specified in these agreements were Rs.5 and Rs.4 for male and female workers respectively which in both instances are a Rupee less than the current rates (of some other garden workers) in the district. So, after their arrival, discontentment was obvious and expected, particularly when they figured out that they got less for the same work than their fellow labourers in the same garden. There certainly does not seem to have been any uniformity in such matters. Desertions followed right after. At this juncture the manager “took steps to retain the labourers, whether they wished to remain or no.”²⁴² Hence the Tin House torture for Govind, the public flogging of those supposedly recaptured while escaping, and the barbed wire with guards for the rest. The Deputy Commissioner is again of the opinion that the workers in fact were under no agreement; “rather they were erroneously under the impression that they had made engagements under Act XIII of 1859 (an Act not in force in the district), and this was the chief reason that they submitted to the treatment they received.”²⁴³

²⁴¹Correspondence from Lt. Col. H. Boileau, Deputy Commissioner of Jalpaiguri To the Commissioner of the Rajshahi Division, No. 839J, dated Jalpaiguri, the 24th June 1893, Inspection of Tea Gardens in the Duars, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal; General Department – Emigration; Calcutta, December 1893, WBSA

²⁴²Correspondence from P.Nolan, Esq., Commissioner of Rajshahi Division To The Secretary to the GoB, General Dept., Nos. 3-4, File 2-1/22, No. 408Mct., dated Darjeeling, the 4th September 1893, Inspection of Tea Gardens in the Duars, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal; General Department – Emigration; Calcutta, December 1893, WBSA

²⁴³Correspondence from Lt. Col. H. Boileau, Deputy Commissioner of Jalpaiguri To the Commissioner of the Rajshahi Division, No. 982J., dated Jalpaiguri, the 25th July 1893, Inspection of Tea Gardens in the Duars, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal; General Department – Emigration; Calcutta, December 1893, WBSA

He also expresses his concern and ponders upon the fact that such a sorry state of affairs continued for nearly two years, and yet no complaint was ever lodged with the police or even with him as the magistrate of the district.²⁴⁴ In fact it was only a matter of chance and thereafter an uncharacteristic (or very rare) case of overcoming some well designed road blocks that the case finally somehow reached the doors of the High Court. But there was a lot to traverse before that.

To begin with, though, the trickle of desertions continued unabated, but even after all the ill-treatment in Rangamati including the fate suffered by Govind in the Tin House, there was still no general movement until 17th April. By this time the agreements of those engaged in 1890 had expired. At this instance, the management asked them to renew their contracts but apparently only at their old lower rates again. While nine of the workers renewed on the above terms, “probably under coercion,” three hundred of their fellow workers deserted in a body to the neighbouring factory of Nimglass (where presumably the wages were higher on offer). Infuriated at this mass desertion, Mr. Murray, the manager, contemplated legal proceedings against the deserters. Now a large number of them, accompanied by Mr. Patterson, the manager of Nimglass, went to Jalpaiguri and filed a complaint against Mr. Murray at the Deputy Commissioner’s office. Alongside, they demanded that “he will see to it that no action, criminal or civil, shall proceed against them until there has been a full enquiry (against Mr. Murray); that the contracts be cancelled; and that they be protected against seizure in the bazaars by factory chaukidars.”²⁴⁵

Though they did not specifically ask for any action against Mr. Murray, what followed was an outcome of the earlier situation. The petition was thereafter forwarded to the DSP for enquiry and it was on the basis of his report that Mr. Murray was summoned and eventually sentenced to one month’s imprisonment and a fine of Rs.500 for “wrongful restraint and wrongful confinement” by the Deputy Commissioner.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁴Correspondence from Lt. Col. H. Boileau, Deputy Commissioner of Jalpaiguri To the Commissioner of the Rajshahi Division, No. 839J, dated Jalpaiguri, the 24th June 1893, Inspection of Tea Gardens in the Duars, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal; General Department – Emigration; Calcutta, December 1893, WBSA

²⁴⁵Correspondence from P.Nolan, Esq., Commissioner of Rajshahi Division To The Secretary to the GoB, General Dept., Nos. 3-4, File 2-1/22, No. 408Mct., dated Darjeeling, the 4th September 1893, Inspection of Tea Gardens in the Duars, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal; General Department – Emigration; Calcutta, December 1893, WBSA

²⁴⁶ibid

But there were more obstacles to cross before the complaint got a hearing, whether in front of the Deputy Commissioner or, later, at the High Court. To start with, Mr. Murray, the manager, tried to use deceit and unfair means to shut the case. He connived with the local police to trap the workers – Govind & Mukund - into signing a “razinamaah” or an out of court settlement so as to stall hearing and thereby any punishment. Under instruction from Murray, the Bengali razinamaah was written by the daroga from Damdim, i.e., the police officer from the local police station of the tea garden which further clouds the role of the police acting in favour of the manager. It read: “We, Gobind Uryah, Godai Uryah, Mukund Uryah, and Bonomali Uryah, who have brought a case against Mr. Murray charging him with wrongful confinement and assault, make a settlement (razinamaah) of the case of our own accord. We will not proceed with the case, and Mr. Murray also shall not be competent to institute any criminal case against us.” A simultaneous English draft was also prepared by Mr. Murray that read: “I hereby agree with these Ganjam people that there shall be no legal proceedings of any kind taken against them, with the exception of those who have not completed their agreements.” The DSP testified to having received the above documents in person from the complainants and the manager and he also testified to their authenticity and to the fact that the complainants had signed voluntarily and in full knowledge of the contents. Now, in all likelihood, with the DSP Mr. Gouldsbury’s assistance, this would have sufficed in burying the Tin House once and for all.²⁴⁷

But the District Magistrate had a different impression and a rare inclination for the rule of law. He again unearthed the Tin House for scrutiny. He opined that the contents of the Bengali paper were not read out and explained by Mr. Gouldsbury to Gobind so as to make them intelligible for a person ignorant of Bengali. The Bengali *razinamaah* was evidently signed in Odiya language by the complainants. The Magistrate also argued that there is no certainty that the English document was ever explained to Gobind. He concluded: “It is therefore impossible to find that the nature of the agreement under which the composition was settled was ever made intelligible to Gobind, who is a rude, ignorant cooly coming from Ganjam on the further side of Orissa and within the Madras Presidency.” Moreover, the circumstances of the supposed compromise are further “contradicted by Govind’s prosecuting his complaint without any hesitation a few days later.” The other complainant Mukund said that he signed the Bengali paper because “the sahib (Mr. Murray) told him to put his name to it”. According to Mukund,

²⁴⁷Extracts from the Judgment recorded by their lordships Justices Princep and Trevelyan in the case of Mr. Murray, Inspection of Tea Gardens in the Duars, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal; General Department – Emigration; Calcutta, December 1893, WBSA

neither was it read out to him, nor was there any talk about withdrawing the case. The magistrate thereby did not foreclose the case and went ahead with the hearing that finally resulted in the ruling against Murray.²⁴⁸

Murray then brought the matter up to the High Court, arguing not against the findings of the District Magistrate, but against his authority to hold the trial despite the case being settled out of court. When the Tin House reached the High Court in front of the bench of Justices Princep & Trevelyan, it threw up a plethora of questions and concerns regarding the conditions of labour in the Duars and the much trumpeted “free labour” that apparently worked the gardens there. But to start with, both the judges, after considering the matters and the doubts invoked, ruled in favour of the Magistrate and dismissed Murray’s appeal saying “there is no compounding such as would deprive the Magistrate of jurisdiction.” The High court ruling severely exposes the conduct of Mr. Murray as being illegal and unacceptable. They criticized him for “arrogating to himself absolute control over the coolies” employed in the garden as long as their agreements last. The workers were meanwhile deprived of “any freedom of action.” The judges maintained that the manager “practically reduced them for the term of their engagements to a state of slavery.”²⁴⁹

They opined that if as it appears such conditions are more rampant in other gardens, it would be desirable that very strict action is taken against anyone caught practicing such illegal means of holding a labourer captive. Mr. Princep in his judgment adds that there are certain circumstances under law that allows the employer to arrest an absconder, and that too under certain prescribed conditions. But, “under no circumstances is it justifiable to subject labourers to restraint against their declared wishes, in order to prevent the *possibility* of escape!” Mr. Princep also rubbishes the defense of the accused that he was unaware that he was acting contrary to law. He rules that at the age of thirty and being in management for about six years there can be no probability of his being unaware of such particularities. While seconding Princep Trevelyan further seals the matter in the following words:

I cannot assume that the Manager of a tea garde, aged 31, has so little education that he considers that he is entitled to treat his fellow-subjects like cattle, to let them go or come at his will, and at his pleasure to sentence them to imprisonment. Mr. Murray has endeavoured to reduce his coolies to a state of slavery. He ought to have known that slave-holding in any

²⁴⁸ibid

²⁴⁹ibid

form is repugnant to every right-minded British subject. I do not think there is any mitigating circumstances. I think the fact that he used barbed wire for imprisoning these wretched men much aggravates his case. The effect, if not the object, of using wire of this kind, would be to injure coolies trying to leave the cooly lines.²⁵⁰

But then, the next question would be – was Rangamati an exception? Because if it wasn't, then there are larger questions to ask and bigger assumptions to put to test. And if we are to take District Magistrate (or the Deputy Commissioner) Lt Col. H. Boileau's opinion, (who had sentenced Mr. Murray,) then there are ample grounds for it being a far more general phenomenon. In his official communication with the Commissioner, Rajshahi, he clearly states:

[T]he unsatisfactory state of things on the Rangamati Tea Estate continued for two years, and yet no information came to the police, or to me as magistrate of the district. The case only came to light indirectly. I have some reason to believe (though I have no positive information, as such is not easily obtainable,) that on other gardens in this district a very similar state of things have existed.²⁵¹

The legal counsel of Mr. Murray in his defense is said to have himself urged that Mr. Murray's conduct was no exception, but rather the norm in these parts. Such practices apparently existed in other gardens too. Such suggestions were made to the magistrate too. Mr. Boileau continues:

I am unable to state from personal knowledge whether such a state of things exist or has existed in other gardens. As is well known to Government, so far back as in 1888 that the tea garden tract of the country in this district was a *terra-incognita* to the local authorities, and I proposed the introduction of chaukidars as a partial remedy.²⁵²

The same concerns echo in the High Court judgment. In the words of Mr. Princep: “We have little doubt that the helpless condition of these ignorant coolies, who were in a strange part of India, at a considerable distance from their homes, and amongst strangers who speak a different vernacular, sufficiently explains the difficulty of their position, their reluctance to complain,

²⁵⁰ibid

²⁵¹Correspondence from Lt. Col. H. Boileau, Deputy Commissioner of Jalpaiguri To the Commissioner of the Rajshahi Division, No. 839J, dated Jalpaiguri, the 24th June 1893, Inspection of Tea Gardens in the Duars, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal; General Department – Emigration; Calcutta, December 1893, WBSA

²⁵²Correspondence from Lt. Col. H. Boileau, Deputy Commissioner of Jalpaiguri To the Commissioner of the Rajshahi Division, No. 982J., dated Jalpaiguri, the 25th July 1893, Inspection of Tea Gardens in the Duars, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal; General Department – Emigration; Calcutta, December 1893, WBSA

and the delay in making any complaint of ill-treatment. It does not appear, nor is it even suggested, that they ever had a reasonable opportunity of complaining”²⁵³

Now, here the High Court judges seem to have been under the impression that “under the orders of Government, some system of inspection or supervision is in force” in these gardens.²⁵⁴ They seem to be “surprised” at finding out that there was none. The Deputy commissioner confirms this: “Mr. Justice Princep was probably under the impression that the inspection and the supervision that are exercised in Assam, where the Labour Act is in force, are also exercised here. This idea is an erroneous one.”²⁵⁵ Such an impression obviously emanated from the fact that in Assam there were legal provisions that necessitated such responsibilities on the part of the government. This was because, in Assam, there were “Act coolies”, i.e., the garden workers in Assam were recruited under the Penal Code as contract labourers bound by a particular Act. Apart from legally necessitating it for the management to take up a share of social/welfare responsibilities of the workers, such Acts also compelled the government to hold regular inspections, supervisions, annual enquiries and reports that would be published. This is attested to by the plethora of government records pertaining to the Assam gardens, as one surfs through the archives. On the contrary, workers in Duars, not being under any Act – were supposedly “free” of any such inspections. No agreements meant no responsibilities on the part of the planters and no enforcement of the same by the government. It meant no apparent need for the government to intervene, inspect, report, document or provide aid, considering the workers were “free”. Hence they are largely invisible or are scantily recorded.

The same erroneous impression is alluded to by the District Magistrate in the matter of recruitment in the home districts too. At Rangamati we saw how workers were brought into Duars deceitfully using penal provisions and Assam Acts that were not in force in the area. The Magistrate while referring to the High Court judgment says, “His Lordship was probably unaware of this point, it not having been brought to his notice. Had he known it, his

²⁵³Extracts from the Judgment recorded by their lordships Justices Princep and Trevelyan in the case of Mr. Murray, Inspection of Tea Gardens in the Duars, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal; General Department – Emigration; Calcutta, December 1893, WBSA

²⁵⁴ibid

²⁵⁵Correspondence from Lt. Col. H. Boileau, Deputy Commissioner of Jalpaiguri To the Commissioner of the Rajshahi Division, No. 982J., dated Jalpaiguri, the 25th July 1893, Inspection of Tea Gardens in the Duars, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal; General Department – Emigration; Calcutta, December 1893, WBSA

condemnation of the course adopted towards these coolies by agents as well as by Manager would have been still more severe.”²⁵⁶

But, if the “Lordships” in Calcutta High Court were not adequately informed, how can one expect the workers in remote Ganjam district or Hazaribagh to know the exact terms of agreements and their “rights” therein duped as they are by the agents or sirdars as also by their circumstances. So, the differences that were said to have existed between Assam and Duars – between contract workers and “free” workers – were more notional than real. Formally, in official parlance, it was always maintained that unlike the servile, controversial and much criticized conditions that prevailed in Assam, the Duars gardens were free from all such taint. But then, Rangamati and the apprehensions of the Deputy Commissioner and those of Princep & Trevelyan certainly point towards a different reality. It effectively shows that formal laws had hardly any relevance beyond a certain point in determining labour conditions on the ground. Rather, as we would see, the absence of formal legal parameters and the resultant notional sense of “free” labour was in fact advantageous to both the management and the Government. For the workers, of course, there hardly seems to be much of a difference. Michael Anderson has reflected on this aspect of labour relations in India wherein it is futile to rely upon the formal presence or absence of any law to understand actual conditions on the ground – whether in the shop-floor or in plantations.

In the opinion of Anderson, for the employers in India, the creation of a formally “free” labor market had hardly any impact as their system of control ultimately relied not on penal contracts but on the authority of intermediaries (like sardars or jobbers) and on holding wages in arrears. Penal compulsion had never been a practical solution not only for the concomitant humanitarian objections, but also because it was too expensive. Here, the employers cleverly forced the costs of discipline, labor mobility, and social reproduction back upon the work force. “This task was achieved through a formally free labor market, which housed multiple forms of informal coercions.”²⁵⁷ Where labour relations were determined primarily by relations of hierarchy and deference, pre-capitalist/feudal mechanisms, or paternalistic ma-bap idioms; the terminology of the law found little social use. The colonial state never intended to challenge

²⁵⁶ibid

²⁵⁷ Michael Anderson, ‘India, 1858-1930: *The illusion of Free Labour*’ in Douglas Hay & Paul Craven ed., *Masters, Servants and Magistrates in Britain & the Empire, 1562-1955*, London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004, p. 450

the existing social relations by attacking slavery and bondage beyond legal papers. Slavery and servitude were banned in law but tolerated in practice. Under such a context of *un-freedom*, it is not surprising that penal sanctions for breach of contract continued to be used widely in some sectors over the whole period even after its repeal. Though the presence of laws could occasionally open up certain fractures within the plantation regime at times leading to its interrogation; but as is obvious in the above narrative itself – Rangamati or such instances are just few and far spaced. They are in fact aberrations. Tyranny being the rule.

But if conditions in the Duars were or at least could be as bad (if not worse) as in the Assam gardens, then the pertinent question would be shouldn't the Government institute regular inspection and annual surveys in Duars too? Shouldn't there be a state monitoring of the labor relations and conditions of labour in the Duars gardens? Through the apprehensions sounded in the judgment regarding the Rangamati case, Princep & Trevelyan strongly suggest the need of such a mechanism and they lament the lack of any. In their words:

Justice Princep: "We have little doubt that the helpless condition of these ignorant coolies, who were in a strange part of India, at a considerable distance from their homes, and amongst strangers who speak a different vernacular, sufficiently explains the difficulty of their position, their reluctance to complain, and the delay in making any complaint of ill-treatment. It does not appear, nor is it even suggested, that they ever had a reasonable opportunity of complaining...the facts elicited in this case show the necessity for some system of periodical inspection so as to give the labourers who may so desire an opportunity to bring such matters as are made the subject of trial in this case to the notice of those whose duty it is to afford protection and redress."²⁵⁸

Justice Trevelyan: "I agree with Justice Princep...The circumstances of this case go to show the necessity for an efficient inspection of tea gardens. It is intolerable that the accused should have been permitted without provocation to act as he had done for so long a time."²⁵⁹

²⁵⁸Extracts from the Judgment recorded by their lordships Justices Princep and Trevelyan in the case of Mr. Murray, Inspection of Tea Gardens in the Duars, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal; General Department – Emigration; Calcutta, December 1893, WBSA

²⁵⁹ibid

The Deputy Commissioner Mr. Boileau seems to confirm the apprehensions as also the suggestions made by the High Court Bench. Bolstering it, he also hints at the absolute and unchallenged authority of the planters in matters concerning the labour force as also for the law & order in this region. The picture that emerges is of complete executive authority in the hands of the planters who, in a collective works, as a powerful lobby to ensure no administrative or state intervention in the garden areas so as to safeguard their near-feudal control over their workforce. And underlying this, what is also apparent is the state authority's connivance and compliance with the demands of the planters. Referring to the stiff opposition of the planters to the introduction of Chaukidari Act in this region he says:

The tea planters on the recent occasion of Sir Charles Elliot's visit to Jalpaiguri to discuss the question of the introduction of provisions of the Chaukidari Act, put forward the proposition that the appointment of chaukidars who would be looked upon as Government servants was detrimental to their interests, as it would undermine their authority and prevent the exercise of proper and necessary discipline over the coolies. The facts disclosed in this [Rangamati] case point to the exercise of a most improper system of discipline and control.²⁶⁰

Going along with Princep & Trevelyan's suggestion for the introduction of "some system of periodical inspection", he also opines that "some system is required", but he remarks that "no executive measure will meet the case" in this matter. Rather he suggests that the "only remedy lies in the introduction of a short Labour Act suited to the requirement of the districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri." In his opinion, a legislation that could enable the planters to "enforce" their contracts, would then eventually make way for steps that had to be taken "to guard and protect the labourers by providing for their inspection, etc., etc."²⁶¹

But it is in the pro-planter response of the Commissioner of the Rajshahi Division, Mr P Nolan, that brings to fore significant differences between different layers of colonial officials: contradictions that play themselves out before us, helping us to understand better the logic of the colonial state. In this case, the details of the differences of opinions and their respective

²⁶⁰Correspondence from Lt. Col. H. Boileau, Deputy Commissioner of Jalpaiguri To the Commissioner of the Rajshahi Division, No. 839J, dated Jalpaiguri, the 24th June 1893, Inspection of Tea Gardens in the Duars, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal; General Department – Emigration; Calcutta, December 1893, WBSA

²⁶¹Correspondence from Lt. Col. H. Boileau, Deputy Commissioner of Jalpaiguri To the Commissioner of the Rajshahi Division, No. 982J., dated Jalpaiguri, the 25th July 1893, Inspection of Tea Gardens in the Duars, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal; General Department – Emigration; Calcutta, December 1893, WBSA

logic, articulated through the correspondences of the Deputy Commissioner of Jalpaiguri and his superior P. Nolan, the Commissioner of the Rajshahi Division that demonstrate the unwillingness on the part of the state to take up additional responsibilities for labour-welfare, to guard or protect them through measures like inspection, et al. The thrust was towards allowing the Planter Raj to continue as it is in these tracts again in the name of “free labour”. The extent of absurdity in Mr. Nolan’s justification of the Rangamati case in favour of Mr. Murray, the manager in particular, and the planters in Duars in general, is worth surfing through.

- (a) He opines in no uncertain terms that no matter what one may think of the form of the contracts being signed with the workers in Rangamati, “they were not in substance unfair.” While agreeing to the fact that the wages payable as per these agreements were lower than the rates prevalent in the area, he says “it is just that these Ganjam coolies should for a time receive less” considering the planter has spent a certain amount in their transportation. He adds subsequently, that it is again not unfair to pay them less because the wages paid are “not inadequate to the workman’s needs” and because “it must be more” than what the emigrants could have earned in their home.”
- (b) He pays no heed to the fact that the agreements themselves were illegal as they did not apply to the supposedly “free labour” norms of Duars. Instead he goes on to say that though the invocation of the penal provisions was inapplicable in Duars. But the manager, he says, was well within his rights to enforce the terms of the agreements by any means.
- (c) He acknowledges that “the right of an employer to arrest labourers who desert exists only in regard to those who have contracted to work in Assam. In Bengal generally, and therefore in the Duars, the law on this point is the same as in England, that is to say, it does not permit one party to any contract to arrest another on an allegation of breach.” But, thereafter, he goes on to once again justify the Tin House episode by simply stating that the existence of this right of private arrest in neighbouring provinces [read Assam] might have had an the effect of “making planters more disposed to exercise it here to their own great risk.” This yet again points towards the futility of such legal nuances when it comes to the planters’ rights of exercising extra-legal coercion on a supposedly “free” workforce.
- (d) So far as the Deputy Commissioner’s suggestion about the introduction of a short Bill is concerned, he immediately takes recourse to the “free labour” argument to counter

it. He states that “in the district of Jalpaiguri there are many tea gardens, and in almost all the system of free labour prevails.” He exceptionalizes the Rangamati case saying “there has never been any previous case indicating that coolies were retained in a plantation against their will.”

- (e) To the suggestion of Princep & Trevelyan about periodical inspections being made mandatory, he goes on to say that had there even been one such mechanism in place already in Rangamati, it would not have served any purpose. He says that it is very doubtful whether the workers would have ever availed of the opportunity to register any complaint. And he goes to a ridiculous extent in his desperation to explain himself. He adds that the deserters upon leaving the garden must have passed by police stations, some of them must have even reached Jalpaiguri where they couldn't have missed the presence of Magistrates and pleaders. But, nonetheless, they still didn't complain till they were threatened of a legal step against themselves by Mr. Murray. And this he says, is “quite consistent with the character of the Uriya race, to which they belong. They come to Jalpaiguri to obtain employment at better wages, not to seek criminal justice on wrong-doers.” Considering the workers hardly ever attempted to step out and complain against their masters on their own, he rules out garden inspections as a solution.
- (f) He says that if at all there needed to be a system of inspection, it had to be inquisitorial in character and hence also supported by a legislation. And such a system, he says, “with all its inconveniences, I would not hesitate to recommend, if the Rangamati Garden could be taken as typical of other plantations in the division. But I believe that the state of things found there was very exceptional. My general conclusion is that legislation to authorize the inspection of tea gardens in Bengal is unnecessary, the cases in which abuses of the kind prevalent in Rangamati are to be apprehended being few, and the grounds for each apprehension in any instance decreasing.”²⁶²

So, while the High Court bench asked for periodical inspections to safeguard the rights of the workers vis-à-vis “excesses”, the Deputy Commissioner suggested the same but with a legislative Act as its basis. The experience of “Act coolies” in Assam meant at least a legal

²⁶²Correspondence from P.Nolan, Esq., Commissioner of Rajshahi Division To The Secretary to the GoB, General Dept., Nos. 3-4, File 2-1/22, No. 408Mct., dated Darjeeling, the 4th September 1893, Inspection of Tea Gardens in the Duars, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal; General Department – Emigration; Calcutta, December 1893, WBSA

obligation for the management to ensure certain welfare measures and supervision. As is evident, the planters of course abhorred such arrangements.²⁶³ The same responsibility was imposed on the government to ensure inspections, enquiries, safeguards and regulation. What we see in Duars, if we read closely the pro-planter narrative of Commissioner Nolan, is an anxious aversion to any such obligations. He rules out government inspections and suggests any possibility of such a measure would be contingent upon a legislative Act which again he rules out summarily. Finally, the Lt. Governor, of course, “after a careful consideration of the matter”, agreed to Mr. Nolan that “no sufficient case has been made out for the establishment of a special investigating agency for tea gardens in the Duars.”²⁶⁴ And hence the Tin House episode and all the questions that it threw up were shoved aside. Far from being based on experiences like Rangamati or the context of the unchallenged authority of the planters on ground, the abstract idea of “free labour” seems to have been used merely as convenience to avert any social cost and obligations and thereby allow the Planter Raj to continue. So, was there therefore a coming together of the interests of both the government and the management in Duars in this matter? Probably we’ll get a better idea if we look at the labour relations from the recruitment end of the picture.

For, this purpose, we shall attempt to sieve the discourses of the planters and the government and mark the shifts therein to enquire into the question of any convergence of interest so far as recruitment is concerned. But, before that, first we should briefly look into the process of recruitment in the Duars and its (apparent and real) differences from Assam.

“Act coolies”/contract system of recruitment in Assam versus “free coolies”/sirdari system of recruitment in Duars – claims versus reality:

²⁶³ The nearest idea of their perception comes forth from a pro-planter narrative wherein the author describes the labour inspector or the “Protector of Cooly” in the following words: “What a description! Who invented it I wonder? A clever man, doubtless, for Government interference was probably his hobby and he quickly perceived the very title would, more or less, render the office necessary!” He goes on to say that the “meddling interference” of the Government destroys the “kind feeling which should exist between the proprietor or manager and his men. He says that the “imported coolies on Tea plantations would be better off in many ways were Government interference abolished.” in Edward Money, *Essay on the Cultivation and Manufacture of Tea*, Calcutta: Wyman & Co. Publishers, 1874, p 10

²⁶⁴ Correspondence from M Finucane, Esq., Offg. Secy to the Govt. of Bengal, General Dept. To the Secretary to the Govt. of India, Revenue and Agriculture Dept., No. 7, File 2-1/14, No. 2768, dated Calcutta, the 28th November 1893, Inspection of Tea Gardens in the Duars, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal; General Department – Emigration; Calcutta, December 1893, WBSA

The major share of the workers in the gardens of Duars were recruited from Hazaribagh, Chota Nagpur, and Santhal Parganas. “The method employed to obtain these coolies is to send down sardars or recruiters, who collect coolies from their respective districts, sufficient money being advanced to them to pay their road expenses back to the gardens.”²⁶⁵ This is the sardari system of recruitment, as opposed to the employment of arkattis, i.e., professional recruiters or contractors who are engaged to recruit agreement-workers for the Assam gardens under penal contracts. In this system, the sardar either recruits himself or selects men from his own “*patti*” or gang of workers to send down as recruiters. If on the other hand he goes to the recruiting district himself, he takes along men from his own gang to assist him and “it is usual to select men who have not been long enough on the garden to have lost touch with their villages.” If the recruiters are successful, the sardar benefits by earning his daily commission on the earning of the worker along with a commission of Rs 2-5 per worker (as per the rates in 1911). If the recruiter selected by the sardar fails to return, he has to refund the advances made to him.

Till the late 19th century, there seemed to exist “considerable difficulties” with regard to the recruitment of workers in the above manner for Duars. The main problem seems to have been “the opposition or obstruction caused by professional recruiters or arkattis. The price paid for a ‘contract coolie’ to Assam varied from Rs 80-120 per head, “and as the expenses incurred in transit of the coolies to these districts only amounts to about Rs. 20 to Rs. 30 per head, the profit obtained in this trafficking of human beings is enormous, and has unfortunately led to every form of villainy and abuse being practised that human agency can conceive. The Duars sardars and recruiters returning with coolies have to run the gauntlet of the arkatis along the whole route, and a considerable number of coolies who originally leave their villages with the object and under promise of being taken to the Duars gardens are lured away by the arkatis and carried off to the Assam districts, to change hands there there at Rs 100 per head and placed under contracts...the fear of being transferred by their sardars into the hands of arkatis still makes new coolies of Chota Nagpur and the Santhal Parganas extremely reluctant to leave their homesteads for work in the Duars gardens.”²⁶⁶

²⁶⁵ District Census Handbook, Jalpaiguri 1951 pp ccxx

²⁶⁶ *ibid*

Thus, in terms of the method of recruitment adopted, the Duars garden labourers were considered 'free' in the sense that they were not indentured labourers subject to penal measures like the plantation workers of Assam. The Royal Commission on Labour (Whitley, 1931) maintained, "that it is the absence of penal contracts, as much as any other factor, which has been responsible for the comparative absence here of the serious difficulties which have attended recruiting for the neighbouring province of Assam."²⁶⁷

Expectedly, the official position was as follows:

With free labour it is unnecessary for the Government to reserve the right of inspection, or of interference in the matter of wages, tasks, or the general management of estates. Any abuse of authority would entail its own punishment, as the coolies would desert the estate and would find no difficulty in obtaining employment elsewhere.²⁶⁸

The reportings from ground however pointed to the contrary. The Deputy Commissioner of Sonthal Parganas for instance is heard communicating to the Secretary of Duars Planters Association that recruiting for the Duars was only carried out in the tract known as the Damin-i-koh and the headquarters generally selected by the Local Agent are katikund in the Dumka sub division and Amrapara in the Pakour subdivision. He points out "I recognize that recruiting for the Duars in this district has been characterized by the absence of abuses in the past, and that Managers desire nothing more, than that their agents and recruiters should act in a fair and open manner. But since the district has been closed to contractors, offences against the Emigration Laws have become of very frequent occurrence, and the temptation offered to recruiters to dispose of their coolies illegally are often extremely strong; it is thereby possible, though, I hope, not probable that circumstances may arise in the future which might need for the framing of more stringent rules. *Rules regarding the recruiting of coolies for tea districts of the Duars*: No person shall be allowed to reside in the Damin-i-koh for the purpose of recruiting coolies for the Duars, unless he is acting on behalf of a responsible proprietor or firm and recruiting for a definite garden or group of gardens."²⁶⁹

²⁶⁷Royal Commission on Labour in India, *Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India*, Whitley, 1931, Calcutta: Government of India, Central Publication Branch, 1931 pp

²⁶⁸ DCH Jalpaiguri pp ccxxiv

²⁶⁹ Letter dated 22nd September 1910 from Deputy Commissioner, Sonthal Parganas to the Secretary, Duars Planters Association; Recruitment. *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1910*, pp 224-225, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

But borrowing from Steinfeld, it can most certainly be argued that the absence of any such penal system as per law in the Duars tea plantations of North Bengal, does not necessarily mean that they were ‘free’.²⁷⁰ Though officially the work-force in the Duars was considered ‘free’ in comparison with the indentured labour in Assam, the pecuniary measures were severe enough to make such claims meaningless and thereby enforce ‘involuntary servitude’. A deeper study of the debates and varied opinion and concerns around the question of recruitment would give us a more nuanced understanding and the logic of the planters as well as of the government. There has always been a lack of sufficient records directly referring to the recruitment (from the same source areas in Chotanagpur) for the Duars gardens. Compared to that the correspondences dealing with the same for the Assam gardens, nonetheless, go to a great extent in giving a broad idea regarding the state of affairs as they existed in the recruitment districts.

If one talks about the “contract coolies” being recruited from Poorulia, Hazaribagh or such districts to Assam, the discrepancies or fraudulent practices of the recruiters are manifest. When the emigrants are herded into central Depots, or for instance the one in Raniganj, they are “told to say” that they came down from their village by themselves “of their own free will.” But as the Assistant Magistrate of Raniganj himself points out, “it is absurd to suppose that they left their homes without any influence or persuasion. It is very improbable that men, women and children in such numbers will leave their villages and come down to Raneegunge many days journey on the chance of finding employment” without being persuaded by some people. And this job, he says are done mostly by unlicensed recruiters often being referred to as the notorious “decoy ducks”.²⁷¹ The euphemism being of a man-made object resembling a real duck that are used in duck hunting to attract the real ducks. And enticing, kidnapping or lies were used not so infrequently to herd them to the licensed recruiters in Raniganj, who in turn bring them to the Depot while the nameless-faceless decoy duck immediately slips away. Even when, for instance, the Assistant Magistrate in the Depot during his inspection would ask them as to where they were recruited, they would only mention the place where they were handed over to the licensed recruiter. And “it is only with the utmost difficulty and the most persistent cross-examination that the truth is sometimes elicited, even then it is a mere chance whether the decoy duck who has probably given a false name is found.” This is how the contractors (mainly

²⁷⁰Robert J. Steinfeld, *Coercion, Contract and Free Labour in the Nineteenth Century*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp 10

²⁷¹Correspondence from G.E. Porter, Esq., Assistant Magistrate of Raneegunge To Captain C. Burbank, Superintendent of Labour Transport, Calcutta, No. 260, dated the 6th June 1865, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Emigration Department, Fort William, August 1865, WBSA

European) run the show sitting in their Calcutta headquarters while leaving the ground operations in the hands of decoy ducks and agents for them to run the show by any including fraudulent means.²⁷²The Assistant magistrate suggests that the contractors should be held primarily accountable and responsible for such malpractices while the government passes the blame solely onto the decoy ducks who for the most part are unidentifiable.²⁷³

However, this is not to say that it was only the “contract coolies” or the “Act coolies” whose recruitment was fraught with such gross irregularities. Though that is how it began to be projected increasingly since the 1860s in official parlance, yet the alternative that was sought and promoted in the form of the sardari system was not without its own share of problems if not more. The Tea Commission (1868) amongst other things was primarily constituted to enquire into and report on the emigration and treatment upon arrival of garden labourers into Assam. One of the most crucial suggestions of the Commission was to encourage private or sardari recruitment in place of the contract system. The Commissioners echoed the desire of the planters arguing in their favour that these “sardari coolies” ought not to be subjected to the compulsory supervisions and regulations that are mandatory for the “contract coolies”.²⁷⁴ The government by this time, with its Assam experience, also seem quite supportive in encouraging the sardari system of recruitment. But at the same time, the government at this juncture seems to strongly defend the significance of government interference, supervision and protection to the labourers recruited in their home districts. In the words of Col. Agnew:

Private recruitment is, to all concerned, directly or indirectly, infinitely to be preferred to the present mode of obtaining labour, and deserves the utmost encouragement. But I venture to differ with the Commissioners in regard to their wish to exempt the labourers thus obtained from appearing before the Registering Officers; that is to say, the Civil Surgeon of the District in which the recruiting takes place. I think that the Commissioners expect greater honesty on the part of garden sardars than they would be found to possess. They are by no means a scrupulous class, and could not be trusted, I think, to recruit only robust healthy men...I decidedly think therefore that the “careful medical examination” provided by section 81 in the case of labourers engaged by Contractors should take place in respect also to those hired by sirdars.²⁷⁵

²⁷²ibid

²⁷³Correspondence from S.C. Bayley, Esq., Junior Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal To the Superintendent of Labour Transport, Calcutta, No. 510, dated the 24th August 1865, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Emigration Department, Fort William, August 1865, WBSA

²⁷⁴Correspondence from the Hon’ble A. Eden, Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal To the Secretary to the Govt. of India, Home Department, No. 5999, dated Fort William, the 28th December 1868, Proceedings of the Hon’ble Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal during December 1868, General Department: emigration, Fort William, December 1868, WBSA

²⁷⁵ibid

A sharp critique of the process of recruitment comes at this point from the colonial state itself to argue in favour of retaining the government's right to supervision. It also helps us fathom the extent of exploitation and compulsive circumstances that were woven into the process of such emigrations to the "idyllic gardens" in the east. It serves to shatter the very idea of a "free choice" being made by the emigrants as was claimed in legal parlance. The Lt. Governor comments:

The inferior quality of many of the emigrants is a necessary consequence of the circumstances in which emigration is undertaken. As long as a family is thriving and doing well in its native village, the members of it will certainly not think of emigrating to the Tea Districts. It is when they are pinched for food, and when scanty living for a long time has done its work, that the recruiter finds his offer acceptable. The simple fact is, that the wages which a Planter can afford to give in Assam, are not sufficient to induce people who are in good circumstances to run the risks of emigration in order to secure them. It is in the long run true of agricultural labour, no less than of artizan's labour, that first class work can only be obtained by offering first class wages.²⁷⁶

Lalita Chakrabarty, in a seminal work, reflects upon and severely calls into question the farcical notion of "choice margin" or "free choice" involved in the process of emigration. It helps further our understanding of the *un-freeness* of the migrant worker – whether under the 'contract system' or the supposedly 'free' labour outside indentures. She abandons the categories pertaining to 'analytical labour economics' that runs in terms of marginal calculations involving free choice on the part of the migrant. Rather she identifies the push factor in subsistence agriculture as the main explanatory factor behind labour migration. In this vein, she questions a basic tenet of exchange economics that assumes that a labourer moving from agriculture to wage labour is thereby making a rational choice between different possibilities. Making a significant and very relevant distinction between a peasant and an agrarian proletariat (or landless agricultural labour), she contends that while the aforesaid choice margin may be relevant for a peasant, it does not apply to the latter who constituted the main force of migrant workers in India. Free labour migration, she observes, is supposed to be determined (in volume and direction) by the income differential between the sending and the receiving sectors. But these choice margins "really detract attention from the fact that many early migrant labourers were (and many of the migrants still are) members of the agrarian proletariat for whom the choices were (and are still) either to die working with bare hands or

²⁷⁶ibid

die starving.” Most migrant workers from the labour catchment areas moved out, risking death, disease, being cheated and the attenuation, if not destruction, of all primal social ties like family and kinship allured by the immediate gain of one blanket, one change of clothes per year, and two rationed meals a day. Obviously, the village community did not provide enough security of steady livelihood even on these meager terms. “When a prospective “coolie” migrant is pushed so hard in his place of origin, is it meaningful to talk of a choice margin open to him?”²⁷⁷ So, rural misery was the first link in the causal chain of migrants.

Let us return to the argument of the planters that “sardari coolies” could be recruited “free” of supervision. The colonial state while in favour of promoting sardari recruitment in place of “contract coolies”, was still avowedly against the idea of it being completely outside the purview of Govt intervention/supervision. The Lt. Gov. therefore adds:

Practically, the labourer will be taken to the garden for which he has been engaged, and will there, as a matter of necessity, have to enter into a contract. How, in a strange country, can he possibly resist? At best he will take an advance, and be bound under Act XIII of 1859, if not under the Labour Law. There will be no security that he really knows where, or for what purpose, or with what prospects he will be going away from his own District, and there will be no check on the mortality in transit. It appears to the Lt. Gov. that the presence of the men recruited before the District Registering Officer is indispensable, and must under all circumstances be insisted on. Indeed it seems to the Lt. Gov. that the proposal, as it now stands, is a virtual abandonment of all Govt. protection to the labourer either in the way of ascertaining that he really knows where he is going, and on what terms; and also in the way of obtaining that security for his proper accommodation and medical attendance in transit, which really has formed the chief ground for government interference in any form.²⁷⁸

The Commissioner of Assam in fact rebukes the Commissioners for their extremely one-sided pro-planter presentation of facts and conclusions. The Chief Commissioner of Assam’s opinions were to change drastically in this regard by the 1880s as we would see subsequently in this chapter. But for the time being his criticism is most scathing about the 1868 Tea Commission:

I may here give expression to a reflection which has occurred to me reading this Report of the Commissioners, that it is very remarkable that in ‘having inspected a considerable

²⁷⁷ Lalita Chakravarty, ‘Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in a Dual Economy – British India, 1880-1920’, *IESHR*, XV, No.3, 1978, p 266

²⁷⁸Correspondence from the Hon’ble A. Eden, Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal To the Secretary to the Govt. of India, Home Department, No. 5999, dated Fort William, the 28th December 1868, Proceedings of the Hon’ble Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal during December 1868, General Department: emigration, Fort William, December 1868, WBSA

number of gardens, and recorded the evidence of numerous gentlemen interested in tea cultivation,' they should have supposed they had done all that their subject required, so far as eliciting information went, and that it did not occur to them – at least there is no indication in their Report that it did – that for their enquiry to be in any sense exhaustive, they should have addressed themselves to the systematic examination of some of the large class who, as coolies or labourers, have *their* interest in tea cultivation as much as the 'gentlemen' have theirs..I wonder what would be said of the proceedings of a Commission of Inquiry to an English manufacturing town, where the relations between master and woekmen had been troubled, if they closed without hearing what the workers had to say for themselves.²⁷⁹

The situation on ground doesn't seem to change much in a decade's time, but what is apparent is a gradual change in the position of the colonial state's role vis-à-vis supervision/intervention in the process of recruitment. As far as recruiting practices in Chota Nagpur for the gardens in the east is concerned, we hear of licensed recruiters and their agents "in the habit of enticing away married women from their husbands, sons from their parent, and debtors from their creditors." To avoid potential emigrants being dissuaded by their friends or family, the recruiters are also "in the habit of" taking them away from their home district to some adjoining district for registration. The Deputy Commissioner of Manbhoom, for instance, gives the example of a 11 year old child being taken away from the guardianship of its mother, sold to a recruiter, and registered as the dependent of a stranger going to the tea districts.²⁸⁰ Similar observations, for instance, were forthcoming from even the Deputy Magistrate of Lohardaga who complains that "under the present state of the law, he is entirely unable to reach the bottom of the villainy which is being perpetrated, or to check it in any way, however slight."²⁸¹ Here it is imperative to state that the recruitment for the Assam gardens were under Emigration Acts and were thereby closely observed. The nature of discrepancies, coercion, ill-practices that were a part and parcel of the process of recruitment (as described in great details in these records) and the farce of government supervision that was mandatory under the Act only serve to demonstrate the state of labour who were being recruited without such Acts – like in Duars – where emigration was supposedly "free".

²⁷⁹ibid

²⁸⁰Correspondence from R.L. Mangles, Esq., Offg. Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal, Judicial Dept. To the Commissioner of the Chota Nagpore Division, Division File 10-9, No. 1438, dated Calcutta, the 10th April, 1877, Recruitment of Labourers for the Tea Districts of Assam, etc in the Districts of Chota Nagpore, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, General Department, Emigration Branch, Calcutta, April 1877, WBSA

²⁸¹ibid

Further, he also attempts to draw the government's attention to the fact that "advantage" was being taken of the provisions in the new law that allowed for "free emigration". Workers were induced by a whole lot of people other than just licensed garden sirdars or recruiters. No supervision and control could be exercised over these persons and as such "occasion is afforded for many malpractices which cannot be checked." He thereby recommends that the clause allowing for "free" emigration should be repealed. Simultaneously, he also maintains that the same malpractices are being carried out, of course, "on an equal degree by licensed sirdars and recruiters." He also complains about the Depots where all the emigrants – whether recruited by licensed recruiters or not – are taken considering their condition to be "radically bad and beyond control". He describes them as "overcrowded, filthy and badly ventilated prisons, in which persons who have been either forced or deceived into engaging as emigrants have been in many cases confined for many weeks without a chance of escape, or any opportunity of seeing their friends or relatives." What he suggests in its place to "remedy this evil" is the abolition of all private depots and replacing them with public depots to be placed under the immediate supervision of government officers.²⁸²

But in the upper echelons of the colonial state in the corridors of power, the mood seems to be changing already. The criticisms, dissatisfactions and complaints are met with apathy and irritation. In fact, there is direct reprimand, arguing that the complaints were nothing more than use of "sensational language" and "sweeping assertions". Instead of paying any heed to the ground level details, the response of the state by now is simply that the existing laws are enough to attend to the malpractices and no further investment is necessary from the part of the state in this regard. It chooses to simply blame district officers for neglect of duty whether regarding the malpractices or the condition of depots. At one stroke it rebuffs all suggestions for a closer monitoring or additional responsibilities on the part of the state in such matters. Far from any concern about whether it is for licensed or unlicensed sirdar/recruiters, the laws are merely on paper, in its response the state in fact rebukes the district officers for having such an "unsatisfactory" and callous report.²⁸³

Finally, we would see by 1880, a definitive shift in the approach of the state when a Commissioner's report is sought by the government of India to figure out possible "relaxations

²⁸²ibid

²⁸³ibid

of the law” that could be adopted with regard to: (a) “The operations connected with the recruitment and registration of the labourer, and his dispatch from the recruiting to the labour districts”; and (b) “The relations between the planters and his labourers after arrival of the latter in the tea districts.”²⁸⁴ The Commissioner in turn obliges by voicing a number of such relaxations that the planters have been eager to obtain with regard to what they called “unnecessary restrictions” supervisory roadblocks in the process of recruiting. The overwhelming mood can be gauged from the “List of answers received from the District Officers & other” to the Commissioner.²⁸⁵ “Free emigration” is cited to be much more desirable as also cheaper “than those recruited under the Act”.²⁸⁶ Consequently “cheaper imported coolies” by way of “free emigration” were also beneficial to the planters by way of bringing down the general wage level.²⁸⁷ Hence, there was also a demand to expand the maximum number of workers who could be recruited by a garden sirdar. While some said it should be doubled, others suggested it to be made unlimited.²⁸⁸ Recruiters, it was suggested by some, should have the “most free access to the recruiting districts” and “no fee ought to be required from the recruiter”.²⁸⁹ Restrictions of every kind – like mandatory licenses, or their being restricted to one district, etc. were sought to be abolished. A garden sirdar was also not to be “prevented from making his own arrangements regarding the journey up, whether the number of coolies be in excess of that allowed by the government or otherwise.”²⁹⁰ It was also demanded that government officials should be severely penalized for “vexatious obstructions”. It would be largely better, they said, if instead of being registered at the recruiting district, the

²⁸⁴Correspondence from C.J. Lyall, Esq., CIE, Offg. Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam To the Secretary to the Govt. of India, Home, Revenue and Agriculture Dept., No. 2065, dated Shillong, the 28th October 1880, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, General Department: Inland Emigration, Calcutta, December 1880, WBSA

²⁸⁵List of Answers received from the District Officers and others to Circular No. 14, dated the 17th May 1880, issued from the Chief Commissioner’s Offices, Revenue Department, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, General Department: Inland Emigration, Calcutta, December 1880, WBSA

²⁸⁶Correspondence from J.H.S. Gilman, Manager, Sonapore Tea Concern, and H.F.D. Bell, Manager, Lower Assam Company, Limited To the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, dated Gauhati, the 4th June 1880, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, General Department: Inland Emigration, Calcutta, December 1880, WBSA

²⁸⁷Correspondence from C. Donavon, Esq., Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup To the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No. 469G, dated Gauhati, the 7th July 1880, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, General Department: Inland Emigration, Calcutta, December 1880, WBSA

²⁸⁸In accordance with a resolution passed at a general meeting held at Nazira to reply to a memorandum of the Chief Commissioner, Meeting held at Attah Baree, 3rd July 1880, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, General Department: Inland Emigration, Calcutta, December 1880, WBSA

²⁸⁹Correspondence from W. Aitchinson, Esq., Chairman of the Meeting To the Deputy commissioner of Cachar, dated Doloo, Cachar, then 19th July 1880, Minutes of the Meeting, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, General Department: Inland Emigration, Calcutta, December 1880, WBSA

²⁹⁰Correspondence from J.T. Jamieson, Esq., Manager, Hanwal Tea Company, Limited To the Assistant Commissioner of Jorehat, dated Moriani, the 12th June 1880, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, General Department: Inland Emigration, Calcutta, December 1880, WBSA

entire registration business happens in either Calcutta or Dubri – far from the home districts.²⁹¹The planters’ contempt for the supervision and restrictions and government interventions in general is apparent: “unnecessary detention of sirdars, and by Magistrates refusing to pass *one sickly* cooly in a batch, thereby detaining the whole party, and influencing them to such an extent that it very often happens the whole batch ultimately refuse to leave home at all.”²⁹² Obviously, such undesirable if not rare “influences” by the Magistrate could actually mean correctly informing the emigrants of the terms of service at their destinations whereby emigrants could decide otherwise to the great irritation of the planters, more so their pockets. We can, for that matter, hear planters being extremely critical of government appointed Emigration Officers who through such “unnecessary detention in depots as well as en route” are inconsiderate towards the “interest of the importers” as “each detention of a batch of coolies means extra expense which falls entirely upon the planters.”²⁹³One of the Managers in fact put the planters’ demand most succinctly to capture the general mood:

I do not see why such an establishment as that of cooly protector or inspector should be kept at all. In practical working it seems to me to be a farce... The day has gone passed when the planter was supposed to require looking after in this respect, and moreover to pay for it.²⁹⁴

The Commissioner, sympathetic to the “plight” of the planters and the “high cost of recruitment” also locates the problems primarily in the current arrangement that requires the contractors as also the garden sirdars to take his batch of emigrants through depots controlled by local agents. It is in such depots that the garden sirdars are required to receive their funds, transact the business of registration, feed the emigrants, get them medically examined, supervised, and so on. In the words of the Commissioner, “it is in this direction that reductions of expenditure can most effectively be looked for.” Giving voice to the concerns of the planters in this regard, the Commissioner suggests to the government of Bengal to “give garden sirdars increased facilities in comparison with “recruiters”, to leave them as free as possible to make

²⁹¹Correspondence from W. Aitchinson, Esq., Chairman of the Meeting To the Deputy commissioner of Cachar, dated Doloo, Cachar, then 19th July 1880, Minutes of the Meeting, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, General Department: Inland Emigration, Calcutta, December 1880, WBSA

²⁹²Correspondence from Lieut.-Col. A.E. Campbell, Deputy Commissioner of Sibsaugor To the Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts, No. 875G, dated Sibsaugor, the 20th August 1880, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, General Department: Inland Emigration, Calcutta, December 1880, WBSA

²⁹³Correspondence from J. Phillips, Esq., Chief Superintendent, Assam Company To the Deputy Commissioner of Sibsaugor, dated Nazira, the 11th August 1880, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, General Department: Inland Emigration, Calcutta, December 1880, WBSA

²⁹⁴Correspondence from J.T. Jamieson, Esq., Manager, Hanwal Tea Company, Limited To the Assistant Commissioner of Jorehat, dated Moriani, the 10th July 1880, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, General Department: Inland Emigration, Calcutta, December 1880, WBSA

their own arrangements for housing and forwarding the coolies whom they collect, and above all, to avoid forcing them into contractors' depots in Calcutta."²⁹⁵ The urge to "minimize interference" and keep the sirdari recruits out of local depots effectively translates into doing away even with the practice of minimal government supervision for whatever it was worth. For instance a related suggestion from the Commissioner was that "medical inspection should be confined to the question of fitness to travel, that of fitness to labour being left absolutely to the recruiting agents." For the purpose of encouraging sirdari or "free" recruitment/emigration in place of the contractor recruitment under an Act, he also suggests that while contract recruiters were to pay a certain fee to obtain licenses, garden sirdars should not need any such license to proceed on recruitment.²⁹⁶

However, at the same time, the same enthusiasm to promote "free" (and cheaper) recruitment is not reflected when it came to relations between the planter and the labourer. The Commissioner for instance categorically mentions: "In turning now to the second great branch of the subject, I am to impress on the Government of India that the circumstances to the tea interest in Assam still require the protection of a penal labour law. If there were anything like a labour market for planters to fall back upon, the incidents of the contract might with immense advantage be left to regulate themselves as elsewhere, and no special protection would be needed for either party...the circumstances of tea gardens are still so far exceptional as to require exceptional treatment and exceptional legislation to regulate the relations between planters and his labourers."²⁹⁷

Contrary to the conclusions regarding recruitment of garden labourers on the occasion of the Tea Commissioner's Report in 1868, the response of the state shifts significantly by 1880. We may attempt to trace in this phenomenon a coming together of the planters' dissatisfaction with expensive arrangements like supervision/inspection with the government's apathy to undertake the responsibility. So the motive force behind this move towards the so called free labour force is suspect as it seems to be located in the issue of cost of social responsibilities than anywhere else. But the problem still remained in the demand for the continuance of penal labour law.

²⁹⁵Correspondence from C.J. Lyall, Esq., CIE, Offg. Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam To the Secretary to the Govt.of India, Home, Revenue and Agriculture Dept., No. 2065, dated Shillong, the 28th October 1880, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, General Department: Inland Emigration, Calcutta, December 1880, WBSA

²⁹⁶*ibid*

²⁹⁷*ibid*

Any such law would automatically necessitate a certain degree of responsibility/protection being made mandatory and hence both of them could not go hand in hand.

However, a resolution seems to have been arrived at in the Duars experiment. There seems to be a tacit understanding between the government and the planting class – and both parties moved away from the Assam model for their respective advantages. No agreements meant no responsibilities on the part of the planters and no enforcement of these. At the same time, it meant no apparent need for the Govt to intervene, inspect, report, document or provide aid considering the workers were “free”. The planters in Assam had already begun complaining about the monitory burden of such supervision and were arguing in favour of “free” recruitment. In Duars it seems both the interests of the planters and the state coincided in keeping the workers in virtual bondage (as observed in the earlier half of the chapter) without any obligation of inspections regarding their recruitment, working or living conditions away from public scrutiny within the plantations where for all practical purposes Planters’ Raj prevails – a reality that is alluded to in certain correspondences of lower level officials that are carefully brushed aside. Such moorings regarding “free’ labour of course does not stop planters to demand government intervention on certain other occasions to keep a captive labour force in their gardens. On such occasions the government for all practical purposes tilts towards planters and acts (or does not act) under their sway. We’ll test the validity of such an argument also in the field of work relations in the gardens as well as conditions of work, in subsequent sections of this chapter.

“Free” of decent workers’ lines, proper housing, safe water, sanitation or inspection – working/living conditions of workers in the Duars gardens:

If one were to delve into the matters of working/living conditions of the workers in the gardens, we find the same narrative of government apathy in the name of “free labour”. It would also be an opportunity to understand and illustrate the conditions of labour as they existed in the Duars which otherwise is least documented in comparison with Assam, being outside the

purview of regular inspections. Municipal, Sanitation and Medical branches however provide us with some useful insights into the conditions in Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri. There are considerable contradictions and disagreements that emerge between higher and local officials of the colonial bureaucracy, and again even between the different departments of the same colonial administration. But as has been our experience so far, the final moves of the government always tend to be in a direction favourable for the interests of the planters. These counter voices and arguments, however, help us immensely to understand better the logic of the colonial state.

“The unhealthiness of parts of the districts named”, as observed by the Municipal Department, “has become proverbial. The frequent occurrence of outbreaks of cholera in an epidemic form, and the ravages of fever of a severe type in the Darjeeling Terai and Western Duars, have long occupied the attention of the Sanitary Commissioner and the Bengal Government.”²⁹⁸ This has been the recurring theme of the official narrative about these tracts from the beginning as they embarked upon taming it with tea and turning it into the gardens of elysium. But the “jungly”, “malaria-infested”, “moist and humid” tracks of Duars could never really be fully tamed and the brunt was of course borne by the labourers. “The fact that the lands lying at the foot of the Himalayas are unhealthy, has been known since the period of their acquisition. Unfortunately, this characteristic is not confined to the limited area under the name of the Darjeeling Terai. The whole of the Jalpaiguri district, much of Rangpur, and that part of Dinajpur which lies north of the elevated tract called Barind, suffer from endemic fever.”²⁹⁹

Mr. P. Nolan, the Commissioner of Rajshahi Division, with whom we are by now familiar, opines by 1895 that the colonial state “can never make the sanitary conditions of the ordinary inhabitants of the Terai equal to that of the European residents; and they suffer in an equal degree from the endemic fever. The unhealthiness prevalent is due to the climatic conditions in a jungle at the foot of a great mountain range, and can be removed only by a change in the general character of the country.”³⁰⁰ Climatic conditions certainly was not suited for healthy

²⁹⁸ Correspondence from J.A. Bourdillon, Esq., Offg. Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal, Municipal Dept. to the Commissioner of the Rajshahi Division, File S-9V/6 10, No. 30975, dated Calcutta, the 24th November 1892, Proceedings of the Hon’ble the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal during December 1892, Municipal Dept., Sanitation Branch, WBSA

²⁹⁹ Correspondence from P. Nolan, Esq., C.S., Commissioner of the Rajshahi Division to the Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal, Municipal Dept., No.s 3-4, File S 2-S/ 1 1., No. 101J, dated Jalpaiguri, the 31st July, 1895, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Municipal Dept., Sanitation Branch, Calcutta, January 1896, WBSA

³⁰⁰ *ibid*

habitation, but having facilitated the emigration of lakhs of the poorest from central and eastern India into these uninhabitable tracts, there was obvious apathy from both the planters and the same from the state who made no efforts to improve matters however slightly.

As early as 1872, when tea had just made its descent from the hill tracts to the Duars, the question of medical aid for the labourers in Darjeeling was raised with some alarm by officials at the ground level. The not so infrequent outbreaks of cholera at an epidemic scale caused havoc in loss of lives in these tracts. That drew some attention to the need for providing medical protection to the garden-workers. In one of these brief phases of general enthusiasm on the matter from certain quarters, the Officiating Commissioner of Cooch Behar Division, Mr. GN Barlow “noticed that according to existing conditions, the necessity for the supply of medical treatment on the gardens to the coolies employed was beginning to be recognized, and suggested that use should be made of this feeling in the way of moral pressure to bring the planters into agreement with our views.”³⁰¹ The latest strike of cholera was said to have wiped out 10% of the total garden workers in Darjeeling and had thereby raised considerable alarm. Barlow said that cholera attacks were known to have struck in 1851-52, once in 1861, in 1869 and, even as he spoke, in 1872.

While Mr. Barlow clearly stated that “the time has come for consideration of the question as to whether tea gardens should not be made compulsorily to afford medical aid”; the Dispensary Committee constituted to look into the medical concerns, however, cleverly dodged the real question. Being constituted by members like Mr. Lloyd who was himself “the owner of considerable property in tea gardens” it was not surprising, as pointed out by Mr. Barlow that they would do so.³⁰² The Dispensary Committee, while agreeing “in principal” with Mr. Barlow’s suggestion, left the matter to the planters themselves saying that “if the planters can be got themselves to make and maintain such arrangements, they will take more interest in the matter than if the same are introduced by Government.”³⁰³ It thereafter added, that if planters

³⁰¹ Correspondence from G.N. Barlow, Esq., C.S.I., Offg. Commissioner, Cooch Behar Division to the Offg. Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal, Revenue Dept., No. 671C, dated Julpigoree, the 20th July 1872, Medical Aid For Labourers in the Darjeeling Tea Gardens, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Medical Department, Calcutta, July 1872, WBSA

³⁰² *ibid*

³⁰³ Extract from the proceedings of a Meeting of the Charitable Dispensary Committee held at Deputy Commissioner’s Office on the 2nd July 1872, No. 48, Medical Aid For Labourers in the Darjeeling Tea Gardens, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Medical Department, Calcutta, July 1872, WBSA

did not oblige satisfactorily in say six months time, the state would be forced to legislate on the matter.

Mr. Barlow eloquently expressed the logic of the planters, which, as we would see, was also the logic of the colonial state by now. He said that if the government was sincere about the recommendations of the Dispensary Committee, and if it deemed fit to use compulsion, then a few strong rules of the simplest kind for the planters could be a good beginning. He continued:

The cry of the dissatisfied planter will be (as I have already seen it once in the Darjeeling paper in connection with the present stir) that the relations with labour are being interfered with, or that there being no contract for labour as in Assam, the demand for medical protection for the coolies is unnecessary and unjust; but neither of these pleas are worth a moment's thought... It is true that they [the workers] are not under contract to work; but themselves foreigners almost without exception, they are attracted by high wages to locate themselves for the purpose of laboring in unhealthy places and under unfavourable conditions, which naturally results in sickness and death to many of them. Such labourers, as these are entitled, on the broad principles of humanity, to the best treatment that can be given them, and no plea of impossibility can be raised against the system on the score of the poverty of the tea interest. There is no intention, as there is no necessity, for interfering with the relations of labour between masters and servants.³⁰⁴

He suggests that (a) plantations employing more than 300 labourers should supply certain hospital accommodation with a licensed doctor in charge under penalty; (b) managers and proprietors be bound down to provide quarterly returns to the district office with data regarding number of labourers employed; (c) the district officer and the civil surgeon be authorized to have the right to inspect gardens and hospitals in person and also have the right to enforce penalty; (d) the native doctor be instructed to submit medical reports to the Civil Surgeon.³⁰⁵

The alarming situation and the want of government intervention is expressed in desperation by local level officials as they narrated the sub-human conditions of existence of workers in the gardens. The Civil Surgeon of Darjeeling, Dr. T. Duka, for instance says that “in the emergency like the present, the want of sanitary and medical organization in the numerous and extensive plantations of the district comes prominently forward.”³⁰⁶ But all such alarming figures, dismal

³⁰⁴ Correspondence from G.N. Barlow, Esq., C.S.I., Offg. Commissioner, Cooch Behar Division to the Offg. Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal, Revenue Dept., No. 671C, dated Julpigoree, the 20th July 1872, Medical Aid For Labourers in the Darjeeling Tea Gardens, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Medical Department, Calcutta, July 1872, WBSA

³⁰⁵ *ibid*

³⁰⁶ Correspondence from Dr. T. Duka, Civil Surgeon, Darjeeling to the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling, No. 70B, dated Darjeeling, the 6th June 1872, Medical Aid For Labourers in the Darjeeling Tea Gardens, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Medical Department, Calcutta, July 1872, WBSA

reality and suggestions for government intervention - to ensure minimum health and sanitation for the workers – were met with complete apathy. The Lieutenant Governor closes the chapter in the following words:

...as your letter discloses a desire on the part of the owners and managers of these gardens to furnish their labourers with all reasonable medical aid, comforts, and accommodation, without any pressure, His Honour is willing to leave the matter for the present in their hands.³⁰⁷

Conditions of course remained unchanged in this regard within gardens. In the absence of any provisions for inspections or supervision, only a few facts about such abysmal records ever reached the public domain. Correspondences between officials from and to Sanitation or Municipal Departments thereby one of those few sources that give us a glimpse into the conditions in the Duars towards the close of the century. Dr. Weatherly, the Civil Medical Officer of Kurseong, for instance, said, “Fever has been of a virulent type during 1891, and there were a large number of deaths from this cause on tea estates.”³⁰⁸ Then again, the Medical Officer of Siliguri, in his annual report said, “the year 1891 was unprecedentedly a bad one. Fever was unusually prevalent throughout the year. Few people escaped an attack, and when once attacked there were several relapses.”³⁰⁹

Figures of deaths in 1891: Deaths	Fever Deaths	Total Death	% of Fever Deaths/Total
Darjeeling sub-division	918	2011	45.6
Kalimpong sub-division	150	270	55.5
Kurseong sub-division	1091	1717	63.5
Siliguri sub-division	2563	3089	82.9 ³¹⁰

³⁰⁷ Correspondence from T.J. Chichele Plowden, Esq., Offg. Under-Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal to the Commissioner of Cooch Behar, No. 3298, dated Calcutta, the 30th July 1872, Medical Aid For Labourers in the Darjeeling Tea Gardens, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Medical Department, Calcutta, July 1872, WBSA

³⁰⁸ Correspondence from the Surgeon Lieut.-Col. W.H. Gregg, M.B., D.P.H., Sanitary Commissioner, Bengal to the Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal, Municipal Dept., File s-9-V/6 9, No.74T, dated Darjeeling, the 16th September 1892, Fever Mortality in the Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling Terai, Proceedings of the Hon’ble the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal during December 1892, Municipal Dept., Sanitation Branch., WBSA

³⁰⁹ *ibid*

³¹⁰ *ibid*

As is evident in the figures on Siliguri, more than the cooler hilly slopes of Darjeeling, Kalimpong or Kurseong, it is the submontane Terai plains that suffered the most. It is not difficult to imagine the conditions in the gardens of the Jalpaiguri Duars which had a similar climate as Siliguri. The following figures give a certain idea:

Darjeeling:

Total Population: 223,314

Year	No. of deaths from fever	Ratio per thousand of population per annum
1887	2,978	24.73
1888	3,762	25.89
1889	3,569	24.94
1890	4,566	26.83
1891	4,722	30.24 ³¹¹

By 1894, the Sanitary Commissioner of Bengal's Annual Report shows a death rate of 64.67 per thousand which was "the highest in Bengal for any rural area, except Toto in Lohardaga, where the death rate was 76.85 per thousand."³¹²

In the words of R.T. Greer, Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling, the average working strength in a garden for a year included a large number of hillmen whom he referred as "cold-weather birds. He claimed they were more healthy in general and thereby "did not add to the death rate". Most of the deaths seem to have been amongst the "permanent hands in the unhealthy season – a comparatively small population in many cases – and the percentage of deaths among this number is proportionately high, much beyond the reported number."³¹³ The paucity of medical attendance and certified doctors across the gardens was conspicuous. Attempting to communicate the magnitude of the crisis to Mr. Nolan, Mr. Greer gives us a picture of the situation on ground:

³¹¹ *ibid*

³¹² Correspondence from P.Nolan, Esq., C.S., Commissioner of the Rajshahi Division to the Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal, Municipal Dept., No.s 3-4, File No. S 2-S/1 1, No. 101J, dated Jalpaiguri, the 31st July 1895, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Municipal Dept., Sanitation Branch, Calcutta, January 1896, WBSA

³¹³ Correspondence from R.T. Greer, Esq., C.S., Deputy Commissioner, Darjeeling to the Civil Surgeon, Darjeeling, No. 1931J, dated Darjeeling, the 27th March 1895, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Municipal Dept., Sanitation Branch, Calcutta, January 1896, WBSA

He considered the death rate to be “sufficiently serious to call for exceptional measures on the part of Government.”³¹⁴ The points of utmost importance were water supply, medical attendance and house accommodation. Having enquired into the gravity of the situation, he says that “the population is more or less saturated with malaria in a most acute form. The sickly appearance of the inhabitants, combined, combined with the high rate of mortality and the deserted appearance of the country, point to the need of some notice on the part of the authorities. The tract forms a Government estate, and in its administration should furnish an example to landowners throughout the country.”³¹⁵

As far as housing in the labour lines is concerned, he adds that “much may be done in tea gardens to house coolies in more healthy and comfortable manner...The construction of plinths, and the necessity of having the walls and roofs proof against wind and rain are the chief points which require attention under this heading.”³¹⁶ Even the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling exclaimed that “the poor class of houses on some tea estates strikes one accustomed to the coolie lines in Assam under Contract Labour Law.”³¹⁷

The Deputy Sanitary Commissioner Mr. Peck’s own field notes suggest “that the importance of sanitation has not been understood by the planters of this part of the district.”³¹⁸ We get an idea regarding the unhealthy conditions prevailing in the workers lines which were “for the most part dirty and badly built” or in some cases very old and dilapidated. They are surrounded by jungles and the ventilation of the huts are ruined by the high growth of the maize crop in the adjoining land. Managers blamed these upon the workers themselves who it seems “on the slightest interference in the matter of putting down huts or stopping cultivation decamp in a body and obtain work on some other garden where they will not be meddled with.” But despite his sympathy for the managers, Mr. Peck still holds that there there was a “want of interest in the condition of the coolies and an ignorance of first sanitary principles on the part of some

³¹⁴ Correspondence from R.T.Greer, Esq., C.S., Deputy Commissioner, Darjeeling to the Commissioner of the Rajshahi Division, No.518J, dated Darjeeling, the 19-15-20th June 1895, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Municipal Dept., Sanitation Branch, Calcutta, January 1896, WBSA

³¹⁵ *ibid*

³¹⁶ *ibid*

³¹⁷ Correspondence from R.T. Greer, Esq., C.S., Deputy Commissioner, Darjeeling to the Civil Surgeon, Darjeeling, No. 1931J, dated Darjeeling, the 27th March 1895, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Municipal Dept., Sanitation Branch, Calcutta, January 1896, WBSA

³¹⁸ Correspondence from B. Lidderdale, Esq., M.D., Deputy Surgeon General, Sanitary Commissioner for Bengal to the Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal, Municipal (Medical) Branch, No. 4196, dated Calcutta, the 1st August 1887, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Sanitation Department, Calcutta, July 1888, WBSA

managers.” To the extent that some of them would even argue that “it was not worth the trouble attempting to keep the lines clean,” as according to them “cholera was the result of chill,” and hence the Government was expected to “interfere and compel the coolies to wear more clothes.” No attempt was made by the management to establish latrines or even to set apart portions of jungle to be used for the purpose. Mr. Peck also blamed the lack of supervision in the garden *hats* (markets) where rotten fish or fruits were sold which again contributed to illness.³¹⁹

As far as water supply is concerned, workers were mostly forced to rely upon streams or rivers that flowed by the gardens. The small mountain streams which run very low, or get altogether dry during cold weather, collect in their beds a large quantity of filth and excrement from the gardens and bustees which they pass through. These are all washed down by the first rains or by the melting snow. These periods are “most notorious” for the outbreak of cholera as the workers are forced to rely upon these streams for their water supply in the absence of any other arrangement. Mr. Peck for instance, was aghast to learn that in Bamundanga garden at the time of the flooding of the Jaldhaka river when the waters are muddy, the workers are forced to drink “the water from the drains in their lines” or they “caught the drippings from the thatch of their houses.” He also observed that gardens that happened to have natural springs, as in Hope, Chuppaguri & Looksan tea-estates, were comparatively free from outbreaks of cholera. He said that the workers lines where there happened to be tube wells were freer from cholera than others.³²⁰

As far as medical facilities and general health are concerned, Mr. Peck observes that “the general unhealthy condition of the coolie population in these malarious jungle undoubtedly acts as a predisposing cause. Constitutions saturated with malaria doubtless fall easy victims during an epidemic of cholera.” He however adds that “the medical arrangements on these gardens are very defective.” There are no doctors in the entire region – whether European or “native”, the latter “having absconded” owing to the unhealthiness of the tracts.³²¹

³¹⁹ Correspondence from Surgeon F.S. Peck, M.D., Offg. Deputy Sanitary Commissioner, Darjeeling Circle to the Sanitary Commissioner for Bengal, No.229, dated Darjeeling, the 23rs July 1887, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Sanitation Dept., Calcutta, July 1888, WBSA

³²⁰ *ibid*

³²¹ *ibid*

In his recommendations, Mr. Peck suggests the provision of deep tube wells, the establishment of latrines, clearing of jungles or maize fields from the vicinity of workers' lines, well spaced out aerated housing that are frequently inspected by the garden manager, police supervision over the gardens *hats*, appointment of native doctors, compounders for every garden and European doctors over a group of gardens, and so on.³²²

But at the end, his most important recommendation and the one he particularly stresses is to put the workers under an agreement or Act (as in Assam). He considers this to be the only remedy. He insists that it is only by means of binding the workers under some sort of contract or agreement that conducive conditions can be made for the planters to undertake changes to improve conditions of labour. In his words: "As far as I have seen, and all the managers agree with me, it is absolutely necessary that the coolies should work under an agreement. It is impossible that anything can be done to improve the sanitary condition of the lines, unless some hold is obtained by managers over their employees."³²³ Preempting the most obvious and logical counter-argument to this view he even goes to the extent of putting forth the most rabid negative stereotype of the *advasi* worker: in effect blaming the workers themselves for their terrible conditions. In his words:

It may be argued, on the other hand – that if managers improve their lines, that coolies will gladly live in them – that they can have no possible objection to do so. This line of reasoning is, I am convinced, fallacious. The *Dhngars*, *par excellence*, prefers dirt and filth, and actively resent any attempt of civilization.³²⁴

With this premise he moves on to his cardinal point that "the outlay required for the proper sanitation and medical treatment of the sick" can only be "enforced" upon the planters without any objection in this regard from them by giving them in return a certain legislation that would bind the workers for at least a year under a contract, Act or agreement. And once this is done, he suggests, the gardens must also be placed under regular government supervision and inspection modeling the example in Assam.³²⁵

What emerges from the Tin Box incident or in the narrative of the various sanitation and medical officials is that almost always the only option available for the workers to resist the

³²² *ibid*

³²³ *ibid*

³²⁴ *ibid*

³²⁵ *ibid*

conditions or ill-treatment was individual or more effectively mass desertions to adjoining gardens. As was seen in the instance of Rangamati or in many of the gardens facing insalubrious conditions or outbreak of epidemics workers would often shift out en-masse and seek employment with another manager willing to exploit the situation to his own advantage. For instance, the manager of the adjacent garden facilitated the filing of the complaint by the decamping workers of Rangamati for his own advantage. In this context, as it appears from the correspondences, whenever the question of miserable conditions in the gardens emerged, the immediate response of the planting community was predictable and uniform. Whenever under scrutiny, they would immediately cry hoarse about the “susceptibility of the coolies to interference” and their general tendency to desert en-masse, making capital outlays for improvement expensive and unprofitable. So, if the government was willing to bind the workers under some law, then, and only then they would be more than willing to undertake necessary measures to better the working/living conditions of the workers. “Supported by agreement and Government supervision, they would carry out the measures necessary.” Without any such agreement or contract Act they expressed their steadfast unwillingness to undertake any improvement.

This also reflected in the logic articulated by E.E. Lowis, Commissioner of Rajshaye Division. He summarizes the same in the following words:

...it is clear from Mr. Peck’s report that the recent cholera epidemic in the Julpigoe gardens was due in a great measure to the bad state of the coolie lines and the want of proper sanitary arrangements; and as the managers profess the inability to enforce any sanitary measures among their coolies, we may reasonably expect another outbreak next season. It appears to me that the want of agreements on the part of the coolies lies at the bottom of the difficulty, for the managers are apparently willing enough to carry out any improvements that may be suggested if they had any hold on their coolies.³²⁶

Apprehending the logical counterargument, he adds:

It is true that the fact of coolies having signed agreements will not prevent their absconding from fear of cholera, but that appears to be no argument against taking agreements; for it is expected that when the managers are practically safe from losing their coolies, they will enforce such sanitary regulations as will prevent an outbreak of the disease from occurring. Until the coolies are bound under agreements, any further enquiry during the coming cold

³²⁶ Correspondence from E.E. Lowis, Esq., C.S., Commissioner of the Rajshahye Division to the Chief Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal, File 27. – 4, No. 392Jct, dated Darjeeling, the 28th October 1887, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Sanitation Department, Calcutta, July 1888, WBSA

season by the deputy Sanitary Commissioner would be of no avail; for it is clear that the managers dare not carry out any suggestions he may have to offer.³²⁷

So, it is apparent that the question of desertion and hence the need for agreements was a convenient alarm to be raised whenever planters and administration were faced with the possibility of shouldering any welfare measures. The other set of responses to the suggestions from various quarters of the administration which were more in sync with the prevailing mood of the colonial state are equally interesting.

Mr. Dalton, Deputy Commissioner, in response to Mr. Peck's suggestions, promptly and summarily considered such agreements "unnecessary". He expands: "From what I know of tea coolies, I think agreements would give the managers endless trouble and be difficult to enforce and tend to diminish influx of free labour, which is likely to increase on the opening of the Behar-Assam Railway. ...no agreements would keep coolies on gardens if cholera or small pox were to break out epidemically."³²⁸ Rather, as even the Deputy Surgeon General, Sanitary Commissioner for Bengal Mr. Lidderdale also says, - the other recommendations of Mr. Peck for general improvement should be heeded to by the planters: i.e., provision of tube wells, laying out and construction of proper lines, removal of cultivation from the vicinity, provision of latrines, constant supervision and daily inspection of the workers lines by the "native" doctors on the management's payroll, and so on and so forth. The cardinal (and predictable) point from the state's perspective, however, follows hereafter:

I am not prepared to say that Government should take up supervision of these gardens and appoint a special medical officer for the purpose, but companies might reasonably be asked to combine and provide a competent medical man to look after a large group of gardens like that east of the Jaldhaka.³²⁹

The Lieutenant-Governor seals the debate with his final words reflecting most succinctly the general approach of the colonial state. He categorically voices the government's opinion:

...the state of things disclosed by Dr. Peck's report to be very unsatisfactory. The want of any arrangements for the supply of proper drinking water, and the defective method in force

³²⁷ *ibid*

³²⁸ Correspondence from B. Lidderdale, Esq., M.D., Deputy Surgeon General, Sanitary Commissioner for Bengal to the Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal, Municipal (Medical) Branch, No. 4196, dated Calcutta, the 1st August 1887, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Sanitation Department, Calcutta, July 1888, WBSA

³²⁹ *ibid*

for the disposal of the dead, are evils calling urgently for remedy; but in many of the matters indicated by Dr. Peck, the condition of the Duars tea gardens is no worse than that of most of the villages in the Julpigoree district. It is to be hoped, however, that the tea planters themselves will realize the great need for improvement, and will make efforts to that end... The Lt. Governor can see no adequate reason why, with care and sustained effort on the part of the planters on the Duars tea gardens, results should not be achieved in the Julpigoree district; and he is not therefore prepared to undertake any special legislation either to enforce the execution of agreements by the coolies, or to provide exceptional arrangements for the supervision of sanitary conditions of these plantations.³³⁰

What is noteworthy is the consistency in the argument of the state over the decades despite alarm bells being rung repeatedly. We hear the same apprehensions and the same snubbing by the state. And again we see the same illogic twenty years later as the Report by Captain SR Christophers & Dr. CA Bentley on “Malaria in the Duars” and the Report of the Duars Committee are placed in front of the Lieutenant-Governor. Christophers & Bentley described the Duars as an area of “malaria hyper-endemicity”. And the Duars Committee criticized the inadequacy of arrangements in tea gardens for the treatment of sick coolies. The Lieutenant-Governor of course disagrees along with the Committee and with the two officers’ report that alleged that it was the specific “free” labour system existing in the Duars that was responsible for the worse health conditions therein. He thereby negates the necessity of “protective legislation” to “meddle with” the “free labour” of the Duars. The idea of “imposing upon the employers a legal obligation to provide satisfactory medical and sanitary arrangements” is decried. Instead it was yet again argued that it would be better “to rely upon the good sense of the managers”.³³¹

So, on the one hand, planters, whenever faced with any criticism, made it clear that as long as the workers are “free” (i.e., without agreements) they would not undertake any reasonable measures to improve their working conditions. On the other hand, by this time, the state is averse to taking up the trouble of any responsibility of supervision. So, most of the time it rejected the grim picture being portrayed by lower level officials, considering them to be “generalizations” or “unnecessary sensationalization”. And even while reluctantly acknowledging the unfavourable conditions, it strictly averted any legal compulsion upon the

³³⁰ Correspondence from J. Wake Edgar, Esq., C.S.I., Chief Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal to the Commissioner of the Rajshahye Division, File 27. – 5, No. 827P, dated Calcutta, the 29th February 1888, Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Sanitation Department, Calcutta, July 1888, WBSA

³³¹ Letter dated 11th May 1910 from Mr. WJ Reid, Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam in the Municipal Department, Sanitation Branch to the Chairman, Duars Planters Association; Recruitment. *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1911*, pp 44-45, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

planters or the need/justification for inspections or supervision on its own part. So, it would always conveniently foreground that the workers in Duars were “free” and hence required no such interference on the part of the state. The planters on the other hand would always foreground the question of agreement whenever under the scanner or being pressurized knowing that agreeing to this demand would obligate the state to undertake compulsory supervision which it unwilling to. So, this arrangement of convenience in effect symbiotically bound both planters and the state.

A similar approach was followed when it came to the matter of education for workers’ children in the gardens. The DPA did not wish garden managers to be held responsible in any way it, leaving the matter to the good will of the garden managers – “No agreement should be necessary in view of contemplated periodic inspection of such schools. Nor should a manager be regarded as in a position to enter into any such agreement. He is seldom so fully the master of circumstances as would warrant this. It should suffice that on inspection the money can be shown to be spent or still unspent at all.”

The fetters of unfreedom on this “free” labour that are under study, in fact, went deeper. At the time of recruitment, for instance, workers are given an advance in order to pay off their debts and to meet their travel expenses. This in itself evokes the impression among the new recruits that they were not free. The agreement bond of 6 months that they are made to sign in the estate where they are engaged, adds to the feeling of immobility among the labour force. Once within the estate, beatings, floggings, physical torture and such other directly coercive methods were quite common. Unlike in Assam, there is no system of inspection of tea gardens in Bengal.³³² The considerable influence of Indian planters in the Duars belt also ensured that this region received almost no public attention and government enquiries regarding the conditions of labour.³³³ Considering that the Duars plantation area was a non-Regulation tract, “the ordinary laws and regulations were not in force in the area” thereby accruing immense authority including judicial and police powers into the hands of the planters. The presence of the North Bengal Mounted Rifles, a private coercive machinery organized and maintained by the planting class ensured the quelling of any kind of dissent.³³⁴ The unfreedom of the “coolies” was indeed ingrained in the very structure of work, in the relations of work as also in the production process

³³² Rege Committee, 1946 p 77

³³³ Ranajit Das Gupta p 66

³³⁴ Ranajit Das Gupta p 68

of the plantation regime. The mechanism of control extended far beyond direct physical intimidation or violence. It was rather structurally woven into the plantation system. An overview of the nature and range of work gives us a better understanding of the labour process and their linkage to the labour relations (*refer to Appendix I*).

A regime characterized by “Un-freedom” – labour relations & production process:

The organization of labour within the plantation has historically comprised of a strict hierarchy that continues virtually unaltered even today. This hierarchy is one of the prime tools for ‘disciplining’ workers. The manager is at the top, while the daily-rated workers are at the bottom of this hierarchy. The structure can be placed under four broad categories: management, staff, sub-staff and the ‘coolie’. The management consists of the manager or the legal representative of the employer as also the most important authority within the garden space. Throughout the colonial times they were essentially Europeans. He is assisted by the assistant managers who form the second rank in the management category. This usually comprises the factory supervisor, generally an engineer. The staff consists of clerks along with garden/factory assistants. The garden babus or the clerical staff are predominantly Bengalis, and hence outsiders, monopolising this task from colonial times owing to their literacy. The sub-staff denotes primarily the supervisory staff.

However, a section of the sub-staff does not have a supervisory role. They are promoted from among the workers and besides having a slightly different nature of work from the rest, they are also paid more. They comprise the garden ‘sardars’ who help the assistants, munshi and chaprasi in their task of carrying out orders from the top and keeping an eye on the sub-staff below them.³³⁵ The traditional or religious hierarchy of adivasis is also in a way superimposed on the structure of sub-staff or overseers that was made in order to exercise ‘control’ over predominantly adivasi workers. For instance, the bhagats, or the faith-healers in their society would generally find a place within the supervisory staff. Sardars, being also the ones paying advances during recruitment and being a money-lender to the workers, exercise immense control over the work-force. “Unlike in Assam where the sardar’s work usually ended once the recruitment work was over, in the Duars gardens the sardar was in a sense the key element

³³⁵ Pranneswari, ‘Industrial Relations in Tea Plantations: The Duars Scene’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 19, No.24-25, June 16-23, 1984, p 956

putting the labourers to work and exercising discipline over them.”³³⁶ It is the “labour elite” within the field operations upon whom the planter remains most dependent for two reasons. Firstly, “the dispersion of a large workforce in a variety of different tasks, means that planters and administrative staff must rely upon overseers at the grass roots of field operations to carry out their commands.” Secondly, “it is impossible for a small managerial elite to be aware of every detail of daily labour deployment and practice. Consequently, a chain of command beginning with the garden babu and ending with the dafadar is critical for daily field work.”³³⁷ The *Royal Commission on Labour in India* or the Whitley Report found that sardars get a commission from those who work under him and give advances to workers when they need. Defending such an arrangement of intermediaries, planters argued that “the sardar here is generally an oldish man; his coolies are in a sense his own people and consequently he looks after them. He gets a commission from the garden too. The management depends on the sardar therefore to get the work done and in case work is poorly done or if any grievances. Number of workers under a sardar is said to be varying 10- 100 depending on his personality.”³³⁸

Michael Anderson explained the structural significance of a position like that of the sardar’s in a plantation labour regime in particular, or the roles of sardars and jobbers in controlling the Indian working class in general. In his words, “If Indian industry held any hope of competing against foreign imports without absurdly high tariffs, it would need to force the costs of discipline, labor mobility, and social reproduction back upon the work force. This task was achieved through a formally free labor market, which housed multiple forms of informal coercions.”³³⁹ In this context he locates the crucial role of the labour intermediary, or the sardars, their most important function being control and discipline. For all practical purposes, it was the *sardar* or jobber, rather than the manager or owner, who were the real employer of labour. They not only possessed the power to hire or fire at will but often controlled access to credit, housing, shops, and medical care as well. Where labour relations were determined primarily by relations of hierarchy and also deference of pre-capitalist/feudal mechanisms, or paternalistic ma-bap idioms; the terminology of the law found little social use. These pre-

³³⁶ Ranajit Das Gupta p 69

³³⁷ Piya Chatterjee p 150

³³⁸ Correspondences on Recruitment, *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters’ Association for the year 1930*, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

³³⁹ Michael Anderson, ‘India, 1858-1930: *The illusion of Free Labour*’ in Douglas Hay & Paul Craven ed., *Masters, Servants and Magistrates in Britain & the Empire, 1562-1955*, London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004, p 450

capitalist ties or identities (though always in a flux), were crucial, if not the only identities of the workers.

In this differentially maintained hierarchy, the munshi is the most senior overseer on the supervisory chain of command, and he sits directly below the two administrative staff in-charge, the garden babus of the main plantation. Planning and deployment of various field tasks are relayed directly to him from the staff. “Experience as a worker from the lowest level of the labour chain, skills in all field tasks, and basic literacy are the explicit criteria for holding this office. Time-tested loyalty to the planter’s order is also a prerequisite.”³⁴⁰

Situated directly below the munshis are two boidars, “who bicycle in at the beginning of each shift” with a muster to take attendance, and corroborate their figures with those of the munshi. “The boidar...is a visible figure of authority. The watch and the small notebook combine in a symbolic coupling of one aspect of plantation disciplines: the management of time.”³⁴¹ The boidar is followed by the daffadar and the chaukidar. The post of the dafadar is an important one as it forms the link between the workers and the management. Four chaprasis supervise this last and largest cadre of supervisory staff, the daffadars. In the colonial period, sirdars employed daffadars directly to organize their work batches.. As “foremen of gangs,” they were controlled by chaprasis who controlled “several gangs or section of work.” There is also the paniwala or the supplier of water to the workers at the work place, davawala (or health-assistant), drivers, cleaners, and so on.³⁴²

This structure of work and the resultant relations of labour was a fundamental and defining characteristic of the plantation regime. “To the majority of the plantation’s working communities, the layered hegemony of the supervisory strata is well understood under a rubric of legitimation. Acceptance of feudal norms is a given. It defines the “company’s men” as *bara aadmi* (big people).”³⁴³ It is this feudal mode of organization of labour within the gardens that propped up mechanisms of extra-economic coercion and appropriation which in turn formed an essential basis upon which the entire plantation system rests. These aspects of the plantation regime would be discussed with more clarity in the subsequent portion of the chapter.

³⁴⁰ Piya Chatterjee p 150

³⁴¹ Piya Chatterjee p 151

³⁴² Pranneswari, ‘Industrial Relations in Tea Plantations: The Duars Scene’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 19, No.24-25, June 16-23, 1984, p 956

³⁴³ Piya Chatterjee p 152

The duration of work for the longest time in the gardens remained arbitrary and unregulated, defined solely by the needs of the estate at any given time. “There is elasticity as regards hours of work, within certain limits.”³⁴⁴ The workers on the fields have to do the most tedious task under extreme conditions of the outdoors in all seasons under conditions of intense heat, torrential downpour or cold. And as Rege Committee (1931) discovers, “there are no fixed hours of work and no muster for field workers.” Generally the labourers would start working at almost 8am and work continuously till about 2pm when they go home for meals and do not return for work. The pluckers however work till 5pm or even later with a mid day break of about an hour or so for meals. Sanders, in 1895, reports about plucking work in the cold and the rainy season going on till 6pm in the evening.³⁴⁵ During the peak plucking times, field workers are made to work even on Sundays.³⁴⁶ In the factories the hours of work vary according to the amount of leaf brought in at different periods. During the heavy flush, some factories “work the whole day and even far into the night on a shift system.” During such times, garden labourers are also employed in factories.

The Rege Committee also reports that the overtime work in factories is not paid for according to the Factories Act and “there is no uniformity” about the method of payment.

One garden in the Duars and the Terai each pays an extra *hazira* for any time worked over 8 hours in a day. In a Darjjeling garden overtime is paid for at one anna per hour. Two gardens, one in the Duars and one in Darjeeling, pay overtime allowance according to the amount of tea manufactured per day over the normal output. The Duars garden pay it on a sliding scale from 1 to 3 *haziras*, there being an increase of $\frac{1}{4}$ *hazira* for every extra 20 or 25 maunds of tea. Strictly speaking, this is not an overtime payment but a sort of production bonus.³⁴⁷

A relatively high rate of absenteeism in the gardens of Duars is explained as “the labourer has his own cultivation to attend to.” This explanation does not appear to be valid as the Rege Committee observed that “even during the months when a cultivator has little to do on his own land, absenteeism in tea-garden is high.” Many managers explained it as the result of the inherent “laziness on the part of the workers and to their belief that they earn sufficient for their needs by working about four days in a week.” The workers, on the other hand, ascribe it to “the

³⁴⁴ Rege Committee p 5

³⁴⁵ Industry in 1895 DCH Jalpaiguri

³⁴⁶ Rege Committee pp 82

³⁴⁷ Rege Committee pp 83

need for rest after the tiresome and arduous work in the tea-gardens.” Sickness, chiefly, malaria, Rege Committee observes, is also an important cause of absenteeism.³⁴⁸

The Indian Tea Association has given the following percentages of absenteeism in its reply:

Table 49

District	percentage of absenteeism			
	men	women	children	total
Duars (101 gardens)	33.3	26.6	46.1	31.8
Terai (20 gardens)	31.1	21.5	41.3	27.7
Darjeeling (33 gardens)	34.0	24.7	24.9	27.6

The discrepancies and sheer illegality of the standard practices of the management become apparent in the system of wage determination. Generally payment is in two forms: Piece-rate System and Time-rate System depending upon the nature of work. Payment is generally on the *hazira* and *ticca* system. Though there is no standard *hazira*, the *hazira* rate for men, women, and children in the Duars is 0-4-0, 0-3-0, and 0-2-0 respectively. Some gardens pay children at 0-1-6. The *hazira* is usually completed in about 4 hours.³⁴⁹ Formerly the system of payment was to fix a *hazira* for the daily task, while the worker if he desired, could in addition earn overtime, which was known as *doubli*. However, the management in order to avoid increasing the rate of wages, eventually decreased “the task by introducing the system of a second and even a third *hazira*.” It was also possible theoretically to have a third and four *hazira* at times. But in actual practice, to depress wages it was found that two tasks (one *hazira* and one *doubli*) were the usual output.³⁵⁰ In the Terai, the *hazira* rate is 0-4-0, 0-3-0, and 0-1-6 while in Darjeeling it is 0-5-0, 0-4-0, and 0-2-6 for men, women and children respectively. The *hazira* in Darjeeling takes about 6 hours to finish. The term *ticca* is also applied to the daily task in some of the Darjeeling gardens and in the cinchona plantation.

In some of the gardens in Darjeeling, the management deprives the workers of their legitimate daily wage or *hazira* by splitting the basic *hazira* and converting a part of it into “attendance bonus.” This makes a certain portion of the daily wage incumbent upon a specific weekly or monthly attendance record. For instance, in one garden, the normal *hazira* rates are reduced by

³⁴⁸ Rege Committee, pp 77-78

³⁴⁹ Rege Committee p 78

³⁵⁰ Whitley Committee

0-0-6, but 6 pies per day are given to workers, if they are present for 5 days in a week. In another garden the basic rates are 0-3-8, 0-3-1, and 0-2-3 for men, women and children respectively, but an attendance bonus of Rs 1 per month is given to all workers for full attendance. The bonus is proportionately reduced when the attendance is between 14 and the maximum number of working days. When the attendance falls below 14 days, no bonus is given.

Payment of wages for the task of plucking too remained arbitrary as per the observations made during the Rege Committee enquiry. In Duars, it is paid on the same *hazira* rates as for other work for a fixed weight of leaf plucked. The weight varies from 16 lbs to 24 lbs for men, 10 lbs to 20 lbs for women, and 10 lbs for children. Any leaf plucked over and above the first task is paid at the rate of 3 or 4 ½ pies per seer or 2 lbs. In the Terai and Darjeeling, some gardens pay for plucking at a flat rate of 3 pies per lb. while others pay on the *hazira* basis. The task is usually 20 to 24 lbs for men, 16 to 20 lbs for women and 12 to 16 lbs for children. While for extra leaf plucked over and above the task, payment is made at the rate of 3 pies per lb. An arbitrary deduction from their weight of plucked leaf on account of moisture has also been noticed in several gardens. It varies from 5 percent to 15 percent, according to the whims of the manager. Some gardens which do not deduct in this manner resort to changing the amount of task in wet months or during the rains. And finally, labourers are generally not paid anything for carrying leaf to the factory.³⁵¹ Such work as cannot be formulated on a task basis is paid for on piece-rates. The *chaukidar*, *daffadar* and others are also paid on a monthly basis.

But the most peculiar and significant aspect of the mode of payment in the plantations unlike in any other industry was the payment of wages as per “family unit”. The wage earning of the male worker in the garden was kept far below the cost of reproduction of labour power. This would be the basic mechanism to force the entire ‘family unit’ to work as opposed to the individual working as a wage-worker. Conversely, by employing the entire family and considering them as a unit in the calculation of individual wages, the wages were thereby kept depressed to the advantage of the planters. “The family rather than the individual is the unit of recruitment. All the adult members and older children of the family work on the plantations.” This is one of the special features of the plantations as outlined by the Rege Committee.³⁵²

³⁵¹ Rege Committee p 78

³⁵² Rege Committee p 5

Using the 1946 figures, we see that of the 4.16 average number of members per family in the plantations of Bengal, 2.52 are earners and 1.64 dependents. Out of the 2.52 earners, 1.06 on an average are men, 0.93 women, 0.21 boys and 0.53 girls.³⁵³ The cash contributions of females and children to the total family income is considered to the extent of 27.7% and 20.4% respectively.³⁵⁴ And therefore instead of determining wages in terms of an individual wage-earner, as should be done in case of an organized industry supposedly run along capitalist lines to bear the cost of reproduction of the family, what we see in plantations is determining the wage of the above 'family unit'. Rege himself quotes with approval from R.K. Das's *Plantation Labour in India*, "A system of wages which requires the worker to depend upon the earnings of his wife and children or upon a subsidiary industry just in order to earn the necessaries of life, not to talk of decencies, luxuries and savings, can scarcely justify its existence from the point of view of social welfare or national economy."³⁵⁵ S.R. Deshpande in his analysis of the cost and standard of living of plantation workers for instance differentiates "that while a cultivator works on the field with his family for his own subsistence, the plantation industry is an organized industry with a profit motive behind it."³⁵⁶ But then he proceeds to justify it in the most peculiar and vague fashion. "In the *present stage of our economic evolution*, therefore, it may not be entirely unjustifiable to maintain that in determining the family wage the earnings of the other members of the family, including the wife and others, should be taken into consideration."³⁵⁷

The façade of "free labour" is further busted by the continual efforts on the part of the planters with the tacit support of the state to ensure a captive labour force whose mobility and free choice of employers is sought to be restricted. The Duars Labour Rules "were designed" by the planters' association precisely "to discourage enticement of labour from one garden to another, and to prevent coolies from evading their just liabilities by a change of employers."³⁵⁸

³⁵³ Report on an Enquiry into the Cost and Standard of Living of Plantation Workers in Assam and Bengal, Labour Bureau Ministry of Labour Govt. of India, by S.R. Deshpande, director Labour Bureau, 1947 p 38[Henceforth Report on an Enquiry into the Cost and Standard of Living of Plantation Workers in Assam and Bengal]

³⁵⁴ CHB Jalpaiguri 1951 pp lxxxvi

³⁵⁵ Report on an Enquiry into the Cost and Standard of Living of Plantation Workers in Assam and Bengal, p 65

³⁵⁶ *ibid*

³⁵⁷ Report on an Enquiry into the Cost and Standard of Living of Plantation Workers in Assam and Bengal, p 65

³⁵⁸ Letter dated 7th October 1912 from O. McCutcheon, Officiating Secretary, Duars Planters Association, to the Chairman, Darjeeling & Duars Sub Committee, Intian Tea Asscoiation; Labour Rules, *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1913*, p 157, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

Similarly, an objection was raised by Darjeeling planters to the recruitment of Nepali workers from Darjeeling district to Assam & Duars gardens through “enticement”, i.e., by offering higher wages. Such recruitment was argued to be detrimental to the local tea industry. Darjeeling planters asked the Bengal government to completely prohibit it. So it was notified in 1907 that only licensed garden sirdars could recruit. But Darjeeling planters considered this “insufficient” and “they urged that the government should extend it to an absolute prohibition of recruitment of any kind within Darjeeling.” This was supported by the General Committee of the Indian Tea Association on grounds that “no recruiting operations for Assam was possible in Darjeeling without interfering with and endangering already settled labour on Darjeeling gardens.” Any recruitment of Nepalese labour should be pursued in Nepal instead. The same complaint was extended to the Duars and Terai planters too. Darjeeling planters complained “there have been numerous instances of sirdars from the Duars and the Terai having been found on and near Darjeeling gardens endeavouring to entice with money coolies actually working on Darjeeling gardens. Cases have also occurred of labour recruited from Nepal, and put under advances by Darjeeling garden sirdars, having been stopped en route and enticed to other districts. The Darjeeling Planters have their own labour rules and have practically stopped the enticing the recruiting of labour from one garden to another, but the recruiting of labour for Duars and the Terai is a matter which they are powerless to put a stop to without the aid of the Association.” These kinds of restrictions make a complete mockery of the claims that Duars and Darjeeling were ‘free labour zone’ wherein workers are supposedly “free” to choose their own employers based on the best possible offer. This is dubbed by the planters as “enticement”.³⁵⁹ Similarly, planters remained extremely critical of the recruitment (or in their words “enticement”) of Gurkhas by the government in the army by offering them higher wages which they sought to be stopped with immediate effect to preserve their captive labour force under depressed wages.³⁶⁰ Planters in the Duars also complained of the fact that their hard earned labour was being “enticed” by the Forest Department for higher wages for a few months. When they return, the planters complained, “they are so flush with money’ that they refuse to work for several days leading to losses for management.”³⁶¹

³⁵⁹ *ibid*

³⁶⁰ Correspondences on Recruitment in Darjeeling, *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1913*, pp 134-136, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

³⁶¹ Correspondences on Recruitment by Forest Department, *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters’ Association for the year 1909*, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

Alongside, another most potent means of depressing wages and in turn maintaining a captive labour force was to shift a portion of the cost of reproduction of labour onto the subsistence economy. This was achieved through parceling out pieces of land for cultivation to the workers which in turn had far reaching implications for defining the plantation economy.

On the face of it, the parceling out of land for the purpose of cultivation might appear contrary to the management's interest. In official parlance, "...rice is expensive and arduous to grow and tea garden managements cannot afford to let their labour consume time and energy over rice cultivation. They would rather buy rice at a high price and import it by costly airlifts than turn over land to paddy."³⁶² But the practice on the ground is sharply different. And there is a clear rationale for this from the management's or from capital's perspective.

The figures of estate as well as other land cultivated by labourers are supplied only for the Duars and Darjeeling tea districts by the Indian Tea Association. They relate to 93 gardens in the Duars and show that 87.8 percent of the families possess land and that the average holding per family is 0.78 acres. Majority of the gardens did not charge any rent while the others charged between Rs. 1 and Rs. 5 per acre. Rent in most cases is charged only for paddy land. In Darjeeling 97.4 percent of the families possess land, the average holding per family being 0.64 acres.³⁶³

As we would see, the wage earnings of the entire family would only contribute between 62-78% of the family expenditure. For the rest, workers were made to depend upon the non-capitalist subsistence economy as peasants on plots of land that were allotted to them. This of course served the non-economic purpose of reducing the plantation workers to a semi-servile status by tying them down. In this way the management came to possess immense powers to exercise extra-legal, extra-political, non-market constraints over the freedom of mobility that is formally ascribed to workers. Considering that the workers had no legal rights to the lands, they remained entirely at the mercy of the management who could use the same to discipline the workforce.³⁶⁴ Planters took note of the subsistence economy while fixing the wages and a large share of the cost of reproduction of labour was thereby met by keeping the worker tied to the land. There was an "intensification of capitalist exploitation from above and feudal conditions of servitude below."³⁶⁵ Under the colonial set up therefore "there was no need for

³⁶² CHB Jalpaiguri 1951 pp liii

³⁶³ Rege Committee p 84

³⁶⁴ Ranajit Das Gupta, 'From peasants and tribesmen to plantation workers: colonial capitalism, reproduction of labour power and proletarianization in North-East India', *EPW*, Vol 21, No. 4

³⁶⁵ Amalendu De, 'The plight of the Assam tea garden coolies and the reaction of the Bengali intelligentsia' in *Tea garden Labour in North East India*, p 68

the employers of labour to demand any radical change in the employer-employee relationship.”³⁶⁶ In the specific case of plantations, the rent exacting planter and the worker-peasants were tied together through agrarian feudal relations of debt-bondage.³⁶⁷

The total average weekly income from land in the Duars as per the ‘Report on an enquiry into the living conditions of plantation workers in Jalpaiguri district (Duars), West Bengal, 1951’, was Rs.0.578 out of which 86.68% is actually consumed by the family and the rest 13.32%, is obtained by selling in the market.³⁶⁸

In Baradighi in Duars, for instance, there were 200 acres of khet land most of which the Manager bought over the years. A total of 1100 acres were put under tea. As for the rest, a piece of land was given to a worker family or a sardar to help him with his family. If a man worked for 4 months regularly and was a respectable person and asked for khet land, he would be given a piece of it to cultivate. The Manager thereafter was found trying to buy more khet land. Out of the total 2000 enrolled workers in Baradighi, on an average about 1285 of them worked in the garden in October. The figure dwindled to 999 in December when they cut paddy in their respective plots. In September it would be around 1340. 1182 in August when they plant dhan. Attendance would be the highest again in April touching 1355.³⁶⁹

Planters did not hide the motive behind this when it came to maintaining a captive labour force tied to ground. They asked for the provision of buying more land adjacent to the gardens “to allow the Tea Companies to acquire land suitable for ordinary paddy cultivation to enable them to settle these lands direct with their labourers and thus encourage the labourers to settle permanently in the Tea Gardens.” Thereafter they demanded certain modifications in the rules of purchase of jote lands. They demanded that such lands which are suitable for tea cultivation and are adjacent to the fenced boundary of the estate should be allowed to be converted to tea land if necessary. Sub-letting of such lands to adhiars should also be allowed. The latter demand gives us a glimpse into the organization of labour within estates and the specific status enjoyed

³⁶⁶ Sanat Bose, ‘Genesis of plantation labour legislation in India’, in *Tea Garden labour in N.E. India*, p 104

³⁶⁷ R.K. Bhadra, ‘Some features of tea plantations and surplus labourers in Assam’, in R.K. Bhadra and Mita Bhadra (ed.), *Plantation labourers of North East India*, Dibrugarh: N.L. Publishers, 1997, p 208

³⁶⁸ Report on an enquiry into the living conditions of plantation workers in Jalpaiguri district (Duars), west Bengal, 1951 pp 28-29

³⁶⁹ Correspondences on allotment of land, *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters’ Association for the year 1930*, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

by the garden sardars and their perceived role in the garden hierarchy. In justification for the demand for subletting, the planters argue: “We have experienced practical difficulties on account of this clause. It is perhaps known to the Deputy Commissioner that the coolies generally have their sardars and the Tea Estates have to respect the wishes of these sardars. Sometimes these sardars require these lands on money rent and would have been cultivated by adhiars. They do not always like that the lands should be settled with coolies independently and separately. We may mention here that many old gardens have considerable area which is not fit for tea and which they can easily give their sardars. New gardens and those old gardens which have no such lands, and which have now to purchase land at very high prices stand at great disadvantage on account of this clause.”³⁷⁰

One of the retarding implications of this leasing out of land to the plantation workers was that it played an instrumental role in minimizing the dependence of garden labour on the local market.³⁷¹ By cutting down on the money wages of the garden workers their income and standard of living were kept below the subsistence minimum. And thereby agriculture and small scale manufacture in the region received negligible demand-pull from the tea garden workers.³⁷² And this brings us to the question of the far reaching structural consequences that foreign capital investment had in store for such a region.³⁷³ So, it does not suffice to merely state that the plantations “brought backward and isolated areas into the modern world economy.” Rather the most important question here is “whether the [plantation] system makes it possible for these economies to achieve structural transformation of a self-sustaining pattern of growth and development.”³⁷⁴ With the coming of the plantations, the subsistence economy with a variety of pre-capitalist relations of production “became all the more entrenched” both within and outside the estates despite the “phenomenal growth of the plantation enterprise that

³⁷⁰ *ibid*

³⁷¹ Virginius Xaxa, ‘Colonial Capital and Underdevelopment’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 20, No 39, Sept 28, 1985, p 1663 [Henceforth Colonial Capital and Underdevelopment]

³⁷² Asim Chaudhuri, *Enclaves in a Peasant Society: political Economy of Tea in western Duars in Northern Bengal*, (New Delhi, People’s Publishing House, 1995) p 101 [Henceforth Asim Chaudhuri] Similar argument forwarded by Keya Dasgupta cited in Sharit Bhowmik, ‘Plantation Labour in North-East India’, Reviewed work(s), *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 20, No. 13, March, 1985

³⁷³ Colonial Capital and Underdevelopment, p 1659

³⁷⁴ B.G.L. Beckford, ‘The Economics of Agricultural Resource Use & Development in Plantation Economies’, in Henry Bernstein (ed.), *Underdevelopment & Development: The Third World Today*, Penguin, 1973 pp 115-151

was modern in character.”³⁷⁵ So, the development of the plantation economy ultimately served to perpetuate underdevelopment in the entire region of North Bengal.³⁷⁶

As observed by Gunnar Myrdal, the plantation economies of South Asia with all their capital inflow ultimately continued to perpetuate the general economic stagnation and very little filtered through, thereby leaving the social pattern by and large unchanged. In fact, it was part of colonial policy “not to ‘disturb the natives’, but to preserve a tranquil environment for burgeoning economic activity of primary benefit to the industrialized West.”³⁷⁷ The development of the plantation industries, being initiated and controlled primarily by foreigners, as Myrdal says, left managerial functions and ultimate control in the hands of the colonizers. And as such, the dividends, as well as a large part of the salary, were either remitted off abroad to the metropolis or were used to purchase foreign goods doing very little thereby to stimulate demand on the local market.³⁷⁸ This meant that the process of capital accumulation as also spread were truncated. Plantations, (much like the mines), remained enclaves of heavy capital investment within largely stagnant economies leading to what can be called ‘static expansion’. All investment of merchant capital were to remain as auxiliary to trading activities and hence “these investments rarely benefit the countries where they are made.”³⁷⁹ The plantations as a classic colonial enterprise, “were therefore more closely connected to the Western economy than to the country of their location – their investments stimulated demand in the Western economies much more than in South Asia.”³⁸⁰

The plantation economy therefore does not therefore operate on normal capitalist lines. Their profitability, much to the contrary, primarily depends on the payment of rent, on land price and through the payment of wages much below the normal market level.³⁸¹ Neither was the considerable profits made both by the European and Indian proprietors ever reinvested either for the development of the tea industry or for setting up auxiliary industries in the hinterland.

³⁷⁵ Colonial Capital and Underdevelopment, p 1659

³⁷⁶ For similar arguments regarding Assam read Suranjan Chatterjee and Ratan Das Gupta, ‘Tea-Labour in Assam: Recruitment and Government Policy, 1840-80’ Reviewed work(s), *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 16, No. 44/46, Special Number, November, 1981

³⁷⁷ Gunnar Myrdal, *Asian drama: An Enquiry into the Poverty of Nations*, Vol I, New York: Pantheon, 1968 [Henceforth Gunnar Myrdal]

³⁷⁸ Gunnar Myrdal

³⁷⁹ Asim Chaudhuri p 89

³⁸⁰ Gunnar Myrdal

³⁸¹ Asim Chaudhuri p 77

Most of the tools, implements and machinery continued to be imported either from England or from Calcutta. Plantations thereby remained, in Myrdal's words, as 'pipelines in the desert'.³⁸²

Chapter III

The Tana Bhagat Movement in Jalpaiguri:

From Oraon Raiyats in Chota Nagpur

To Oraon Garden-workers in Duars

³⁸² Asim Chaudhuri p 103

An article in the *Statesman* commenting on the Tana Bhagat movement among the Oraons in Jalpaiguri in 1916 encapsulates succinctly the different layers in an Adivasi movement transposed from Chota Nagpur onto a distant plantation regime. It starts with an interesting and apt passage on the difficulties of 'writing history'.

The remarkable conflict of opinions regarding the unrest among the Oraons and the share of the German missionaries in producing that unrest is an interesting illustration of the difficulty of writing history. If those who are eyewitnesses of a curious movement disagree as to its character and causes, the historian, writing some years hence, will have task that will strain his critical powers.³⁸³

A plethora of opinions and interpretations emerges through the archives as the colonial state, the planters and contemporary observers grappled with a movement wherein the participants were a large section of the Oraons, who, in the Duars, were also garden workers. In this chapter, we would try to unravel the complexities of studying an Adivasi movement as it emerges in its place of origin, i.e., Chota Nagpur, and particularly as it is transposed onto a plantation economy far from its place of origin, i.e. the Duars gardens.

As early as 1895, nearly twenty years since the beginning of the planting of Duars, the settlement officer had observed the following about the workers in the Duars:

In fact their earnings are so great that they often show a spirit of independence and insubordination which tries the patience and goodwill of the managers of gardens very considerably. Frequently the coolies are masters of the situation. Those among them who have the least influence instigate and combine and sometimes give great trouble by causing the labour force to remain within the lines instead of attending to work.³⁸⁴

Notwithstanding the possible exaggeration in the above statement, the workers had indeed remained restive from the very beginning in the gardens. Frequent combinations, strikes and mass abstentions

³⁸³*Statesman* dated 20.4.16., Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Oraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 66, Intelligence Branch Archive, Kolkata [IB Archive]

³⁸⁴ A. Mitra, *District Census Handbook, Darjeeling, Census 1951, West Bengal*, Alipore: Government Press 1954. Appendix IX – 'The Tea Industry in Jalpaiguri': 'The Tea Industry in 1895' (Extract from D.H.E. Sunder's Settlement Report of 1895) p ccxx

were a part of the repertoire of resistance in the workers' lines in the face of the attempts of control and discipline of the plantocracy.

But still, what gripped the Duars in 1916, or at least a considerable section of its workers, was different. Garden unrests specifically under the leadership of trade unions was something that the Duars planters had to reckon with not before as late as 1946. But much before that, in 1916, they were faced with a different kind of an unrest in the gardens. In official communication, this is referred to as the "Uraon unrest".

I got information from the Manager of a Tea Garden that the Uraons there and in other places also were very *unsettled*.

I went out there at once and had an interview with a big sardar, an Uraon, and I found out from him that *the movement is very widespread – in fact all over the Duars*. He told me several centers...

He says that these meetings are held every night in jungly places but never twice in the same place.

They are attended by 400 or 500 people, Uraons and a few Mooras, no other jats...

*Those manager of the gardens who have got to know of it are very uneasy about it. Even if nothing more happens, or it continues it will disorganize their labour force altogether and create endless trouble.*³⁸⁵

The above words are those of the Superintendent of Police, Jalpaiguri, reporting in February 1916 about the possibility of "trouble" in the gardens. The anxiety both among the state apparatus and of course the garden management is palpable. Let us begin with an exploration of this anxiety and the language in which it is articulated by the higher authorities of the state machinery.

Mr. Hughes Buller, the Inspector General of Police, opined with concern that the "situation in Jalpaiguri [was] causing [him] some anxiety".³⁸⁶ And in due appreciation of his anxiety, it was

³⁸⁵From SP Jalpaiguri's diary of 5/2/1916, Correspondence No. 2129/2130, 1916: Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Uraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 82, IB Archive

³⁸⁶Correspondence dated 4/3/16, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Uraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 7, IB Archive

suggested that “vigorous action under the Defence of India Act would be justified.”³⁸⁷ Mr. P.C. Lyon in his response says:

Yes, I fully sympathize with Mr. Hughes Buller in his anxiety. *The Oraons, like the Mundas, are extremely difficult to deal with.* The Munda troubles of some 15 years back in Chota Nagpur were due to *wholly imaginary grievances and unreasonable expectations* which it was found almost impossible to combat, the most sympathetic Indian officers and missionaries losing all their influence in this respect. I saw a recent report from B. & O. which indicated that the movement among the Oraons was assuming dangerous proportions in Chota Nagpur, an unreasoning hostility to all existing authority having arisen.

We should be glad to have full information from the I.G.P. as to *this extension of the movement to Jalpaiguri*, and possibly he can obtain the latest news of happenings in Chota Nagpur in connection with it through the B. & O. officer now attached to our I.B.

*The fact that the movement has no sort of connection with any other seditious movement does not make it much less dangerous. We are dealing with a people wholly savage and uncivilized and capable of very wild and murderous action.*³⁸⁸ [emphasis mine]

There were a range of interpretations that fills the official and unofficial discourse around this particular unrest. To some, it appeared as a socio-religious movement – “an attempt to purify the tribal religion and to cast off superstitions and get rid of corruptions of the ancient faith”³⁸⁹ – that was largely propagated by the “young” Oraons.³⁹⁰ Those who joined this new sect, or “neophytes” as they were called, “were required to refrain from using liquor and flesh, and become *bhakats* (sic.) after the *Fagua* festival”³⁹¹ (italics in original). The propagation of this new faith was through songs which were sung in secret meetings at night along the workers’ lines in the gardens. But these elusive nocturnal meetings and some of the wordings that crept into such incantations soon were to become a matter of concern for the authorities. The reference to an imminent German victory in the war (World War I), defiance to established authorities, and a belief in an imminent “Oraon Raj” were interpreted by some to indicate that the “Oraon Unrest’ was more than just a socio-religious movement. Others

³⁸⁷ Ibid p 7

³⁸⁸ Ibid p 7

³⁸⁹ ‘Oraon Unrest: Judgment in Duars Case, Story of Seditious Songs, Three accused sentenced’, *Englishman* dated 28.4.16., Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Oraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 88, IB Archive

³⁹⁰ ‘The Oraon Unrest’, Weekly Report ending 5.7.16., Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Oraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 35, IB Archive

³⁹¹ ‘The Oraon Unrest’, *The Telegraph* dated May 18, 1916, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Oraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 189, IB Archive

identified a more pronounced “political element”.³⁹² This resulted in considerable panic amongst the planters as also the local administration..

It was clearly discernible that the precepts of the movement were being carried into Duars by Oraons who would frequent their homeland in Chota Nagpur. For instance, a report on “The Oraon movement in Rangpur” states: “It appears that one Charua of Ghelloi, one of the villages where a few Oraons reside in Badarganj, went to Nagour last November, and returned in December with a man, also an Oraon, who visited all the members of that tribe in the vicinity, who preached the new religion and asked them all to become his followers.”³⁹³ The Special Commission set up for the trial of the “culprits” of the “Oraon unrest” also traces that “it was brought from Chota Nagpur by Oraons who went home to recruit new coolies” for the gardens.³⁹⁴ While we will in this chapter study and analyze the events as they unfolded in the Duars gardens more closely, it is imperative however that we begin with gathering a certain sense of the complex dimensions of this particular unrest in its place of origin, Chota Nagpur.

In its place of origin: Locating the movement in Chota Nagpur

According to the ‘official communiqué’ from Ranchi, dated 23rd March 1916, the movement had started in August 1915 in Chota Nagpur among the Oraon community. The official statement indicates ‘bad crops’ and ‘high prices’ to be the causes of this unrest, along with a messianic urge for the uplift of the social position of the Oraons. The object partly was to expel from the Oraon country the evil spirits who were believed to be responsible for their present plight. The expulsion of the evil spirits from one village is said to result in their transfer to others and the process of expulsion therefore

³⁹² ‘The Oraon movement in Rangpur: A Report’, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Oraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 113, IB Archive

³⁹³ Ibid p 114

³⁹⁴ ‘Oraon Unrest: Judgment in Duars Case, Story of Seditious Songs, Three Accused Sentenced’, *The Englishman* dated 28.4.16, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Oraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 162, IB Archive

continued “till the whole Oraon country” was “purged” of spirits.”³⁹⁵ This process also involved the possession of a number of villagers by the spirits triggering the “whole populace” to take part in witch hunting or exorcism that often resulted in deaths. The recitation of certain powerful spells was to rid them of the evil spirits, and the abandonment of “degrading practices” like keeping and eating of pigs and fowls and use of intoxicants was to enhance their social status.

While it was clear from the reportings of the missionaries and the police that such instructions for “abstention” were being delivered at “nightly meetings” near the villages, “it was very hard to obtain exact information, as those who took part in the meeting were very reticent about them”.³⁹⁶ Such prayers apparently often continued throughout the night to exorcise the evil spirits and expel them “from man beast and home”.³⁹⁷ Any attempt on the part of “outsiders” to attend such meetings, reports a correspondent from Ranchi, was checked either by threats of violence, or in the case of police emissaries, by a “rapid melting away of the assembly”. The preacher responsible for parting such instructions or mantras, it seemed, “would appear and disappear mysteriously” adding to the elusive nature of these meetings. While it was initially thought that there was a large organized body of such preachers who had divided the entire region amongst themselves, soon it was disproved. On later enquiries it was found that three or four nights of instructions were enough to make any disciple into a preacher, who then could pass on the message to another village. This method of organization accounted for the rapid spread of the movement not just across Chota Nagpur, but also amongst the Duarsgarden labourers in the Duars.³⁹⁸

This is most notably at a time when the British Empire was fighting the Germans in the First World War. This had the obvious effect of triggering a feeling of an impending fall of the Raj among the Oraons. Similar feelings, as we know, were also evoked among the Mundas at the turn of the century and also by the Gonds when the British were being targeted during at the hundredth year of rule in 1857. That “the general atmosphere of unrest was caused by the war” was acknowledged by the communiqué as contributive to “aggravating the excitement” of the Oraons. As the “younger men”

³⁹⁵ ‘The Oraon Unrest: Origins of the Movement (Associated Press of India), Ranchi, March 23’, *Bengalee* dated 24.3.16, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Uraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 93, IB Archive

³⁹⁶ ‘The Oraon Movement: Causes of Unrest, Remarkable Superstitions’, *Statesman* dated 8.4.16, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Uraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 121, IB Archive

³⁹⁷ Stephen Fuchs, ‘Messianic Movements in Primitive India’, *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol 24, No 1 (1965) pp 25 (Henceforth Fuchs)

³⁹⁸ ‘The Oraon Movement: Causes of Unrest, Remarkable Superstitions’, *Statesman* dated 8.4.16, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Uraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 121, IB Archive

began to hold secret meetings in the villages at night, the communiqué narrates that “an invocation of the German Kaiser crept into the ‘*mantras*’”.³⁹⁹ As per the correspondent from Ranchi, along with a beginning phrase of “*Tano Baba Tano*” (Pull Baba Pull), the mantras would tend to end with the couplet “*German ki jay, Angres ki kshy*” (victory to the Germans, destruction to the English).⁴⁰⁰ It was believed that the German Kaiser, as a delegate sent by God, would lead them to victory, expel all *dikus*⁴⁰¹ and “restore all their property to them.” An apocalyptic judgment day was conceived wherein there would be a darkness that would last seven days and seven nights, at the end of which a bright day would follow lasting again for seven days and seven nights ushering in the Oraon Raj. While this seemed worrisome enough for the state officials, a few acts of accompanying violence by the end of 1915 was enough to spread panic amongst the “local zamindars and non-aboriginals” about an impending outbreak.⁴⁰²

The movement is said to have been started by an Oraon youth named Jatra Oraon who proclaimed that he had received a “divine message” from Dharmesh, the “Supreme God” to work towards the restoration of the Oraon Raj.⁴⁰³ The movement called upon the Oraons to ‘pull out’ (*tana*) the evil spirits that they had always been trying to appease, but that were now being held responsible for their miseries. Abstention of meat and liquor was preached with the desire to purify and reform their bodies. Another significant divinely ordained instruction of Jatra, one that was to become one of the defining characteristics of this new sect, was to “give up ploughing their fields”. He asked them to refrain from working as labourers. Myths were built around the idea that it was the transformation of Oraons from shifting cultivators to plough agriculturists that had led to their decline.⁴⁰⁴ It took the form of non-payment of taxes too in some places. Once Jatra was arrested and as he faded out, the same precepts were picked up by a woman named Litho Oraon who declared herself to be a goddess. Though the movement largely remained amongst the Oraons, as it spread across Ranchi, Palamau and

³⁹⁹ ‘The Oraon Unrest: Origins of the Movement (Associated Press of India), Ranchi, March 23’, *Bengalee* dated 24.3.16, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Oraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 93, IB Archive

⁴⁰⁰ ‘The Oraon Movement: Causes of Unrest, Remarkable Superstitions’, *Statesman* dated 8.4.16, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Oraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 121, IB Archive

⁴⁰¹ In the tribal worldview, *dikus* were outsiders – plains-dwelling people. It included the traders, moneylenders or sahuikars, zamindars and even the British. Baring few, they were largely looked upon as shrewd and exploitative.

⁴⁰² ‘The Oraon Unrest: Origins of the Movement (Associated Press of India), Ranchi, March 23’, *Bengalee* dated 24.3.16, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Oraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 93, IB Archive

⁴⁰³ KS Singh, ‘Tribal Peasantry, Millenarianism, Anarchism and Nationalism: A Case Study of the Tanabagats in Chota Nagpur, 1914-25’, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 16, No. 11, Nov., 1988, p 37[Henceforth Singh]

⁴⁰⁴ Sangeeta Dasgupta, “Mapping histories: Many narratives of Tana pasts”, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 53, 1, 2016, p 108

Hazaribagh, Mundas and Kharias also seemed to have joined hands.⁴⁰⁵ Eventually, a number of local leaders came up amongst the Oraons “professing more or less the same current ideas”.⁴⁰⁶ Litho’s arrest, for instance, was followed by Mangor Oraon declaring himself to be the deliverer, and he was followed by Sibū & Maya Oraon by 1919. In some instances, the movement also came to be shaped by the Congress by 1921-22 with the idea being propagated by the Tana Bhagats that “the Gandhi raj would usher in the tribal millennium”.⁴⁰⁷

The underlying factors that propelled the movement:

Historians, over the years, have identified certain underlying propellers behind the Tana Bhagat movement that were manifested in the particular shape it took and its articulation. An understanding of the socio-economic conditions prevailing in the Chota Nagpur region, the location of the Oraons therein and their socio-political aspirations are imperative to read deeper both into the content and the form of the agitation. Written into the very expulsion rituals and purification drives, there were agrarian issues and longstanding grievances. This is corroborated even by contemporary observers who were keen enough to look for the truth and not find solutions of convenience for the British raj. A correspondent for *Statesman*, for instance, comments: “There is nothing unprecedented in this kind of tribal revival. But several authorities state that at bottom the movement among the Oraons was agrarian...[they] were incensed by the oppression of Hindu landowners regarding which a well-informed correspondent gave some striking facts in our columns.”⁴⁰⁸ Another correspondent from Ranchi pointed towards the “hatred” amongst the Oraons who were wronged/cheated by the *diku* landowners and were “smarting under a sense of the failure of the British raj to procure them justice.”⁴⁰⁹ Commenting on the official communique on the Tana Bhagat movement, a contemporary observer states that such reports made by the government “are usually compiled with scrupulous care and present a fair, unexaggerated statement of the facts” and are thereby “entitled to all respect.” But, the author opines that “[O]n this occasion, however, the official report is vitiated by a disquieting omission.” It is this “disquieting omission” that concerns us the most in this article. “The Oraons”, the article reads, “have been undergoing one of those periods of unrest to which all aboriginal tribes are

⁴⁰⁵KS Singh, ‘Tribal Peasantry, Millenarianism, Anarchism and Nationalism: A Case Study of the Tanabagats in Chota Nagpur, 1914-25’, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 16, No. 11, Nov., 1988, p 38

⁴⁰⁶ Fuchs p 23

⁴⁰⁷ Singh p 47

⁴⁰⁸*Statesman dated 20 4 16*, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Uraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, pp 140

⁴⁰⁹ ‘The Oraon Movement: Causes of Unrest, Remarkable Superstitions’, *Statesman dated 8.4.16*, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Uraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, pp 121

liable." It refers to the Khonds who had risen to "take united action against drink"; the Namashudras who organized in great numbers to "raise themselves in the social scale; and finally the Oraons who "alarmed by bad crops and high prices, and stirred by social ambition" wished to "conciliate the demons" and give up intoxicants, pigs, fowls, etc. And thereafter it makes a valuable contribution in an attempt (a limited one though), to bring forth what both the above narratives of the state and the nationalist press sought to hide.

There is nothing unprecedented in this kind of tribal revival. But several authorities state that at bottom the movement among the Oraons was agrarian. The Khonds imposed total abstinence on themselves because Hindu drink sellers were acquiring possession of their lands. The Nomasudras were resolved to gain a larger share of the profits of cultivation. Similarly, the Oraons were incensed by the oppression of Hindu landowners...On this point, however, the official communiqué is silent...That the German missionaries incited the trouble is not probable. It is agreed that the movement is non-Christian and even anti-Christian, and the German missionaries would naturally begin any Teutonic propaganda among their own disciples. The origin of the unrest must be sought in the oppressive practices of Hindu landlords, failure of crops, and a consequent fear that the demons were hostile.

The author hereafter does meander around the ill-advisable presence of foreign missionaries, but still he does suggest that such a movement taking roots could only be understood in the light of the material conditions being responded to by the participants.⁴¹⁰

In this piece, the author refers to another article that was published in the *Statesman* on 8 April, 1916 wherein the correspondent, while referring to the larger material context on ground that formed the foundation of the discontent. He then squarely blames it upon the malpractices, oppression and devious designs of the cunning landlords that had settled in these adivasi tracts. He talks about a landlord in a certain village where nocturnal meetings were held; he had fled to Lohardaga in panic apprehending that all landlords would be killed by the Oraons. The correspondent here mentions that this landlord had "grievously wronged his tenants." He had once given a call to all his tenants to raise a certain amount of money and buy all his land. With such a promise of becoming "their own landlords", the tenants with "tremendous efforts" raised the requisite sum of money. The landlord received this "with no witness present and deferred giving a formal receipt on some pretext or other" and thereafter "denied all knowledge of the transaction". Though the tenants filed a case in the court,

⁴¹⁰*Statesman* dated 20.4.16., Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Uraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 66, IB Archive

because they had “no evidence” whatsoever, “it was dismissed.” The correspondent correctly observes that in such circumstances, it was natural that “they returned to their village burning with hatred against the landlord and smarting under a sense of the failure of the British “raj” to procure them justice.” This hatred also found expression through the attacks upon “the pet deities of their oppressors, the landlords.” Wherever the ‘Hindu’ landlords had settled, they had set up an *Ind Kuta* or place of sacrifice. And at the great yearly sacrifices, they collected offerings from their tenants; these places of sacrifice were burnt down by the Oraons as thereby they could “bully the spirit and injure the landlord’s property at the same time.”

Added to the fraudulent and exploitative practices of the landlords, the correspondent stated, was the failure of rains, the high prices of grains and the general political atmosphere of war, all of which influenced the movement. Being a pro-British newspaper, it nearly exonerates the colonial state or its settlement policies from any role in the above process. There was most certainly an anger against both the zamindars and the sarkar. An aspiration for a just “Oraon Raj” in place of the exploitative order perpetuated by the “British Raj” came forth.⁴¹¹

The zamindars were always on a look out to extend their own lands by converting tribal raiyats' lands into personal possession or *bakasht*⁴¹². The forest rights of the Oraons were, for instance, fast depleted by the landlords' rampant settling of forest-lands with non-tribals. What added to the woes was the fact that the settlement operations had already recognized the zamindar's proprietary rights in the jungles, which curtailed the Oraons' and Mundas' customary rights to collect timber for fuel and house-building or agricultural purposes. The beginning of forest conservancy, or forest management by the colonial state to fulfill its timber requirements, added yet another dimension to this tale of curtailment of the rights of the adivasis – particularly the poorest of the lot. It unfolded a regime of control that systematically redefined human relations with forests, legitimizing the needs of industries at the expense of subsistence needs of agrarian resource users.⁴¹³ “[T]he social life of forest was

⁴¹¹“The argument seems to have been that now or never was the time, when the English raj was in difficulties, to secure independence. And it is likely that some incautious remarks of certain German missionaries in the early days of the war as to the certainty of a speedy German victory were widely repeated, and increased this feeling. But by a curious process of reasoning the interneging of the German missionaries brought matters more to a point. “The Germans are gone, the English will soon be gone too. Now is our time” seems to have been their argument.” - ‘The Oraon Movement: Causes of Unrest: Remarkable Superstitious’, *Statesman dated 8.4.16*, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Uraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 47, IB Archive

⁴¹² *Bakasht* lands were those which the occupancy tenants had lost to the zamindars in harder times.

⁴¹³ Ravi Rajan, ‘Imperial Environmentalism or Environmental Imperialism? European Forestry, Colonial Foresters and the Agendas of Forest Management in British India 1800-1900’, in Richard Grove, Vinita

circumscribed by the timber needs of the Presidency."⁴¹⁴ Most of the adivasi social practices and modes of subsistence were now considered "harmful" to the reproduction of forest and its valuable timber.⁴¹⁵

Along with timber, the control over forests also meant that an absolute notion of landed property was imposed on the forests. The attempt was to "transform the forests into managed landscape where land use would be under imperial supervision and control."⁴¹⁶ All of this, of course, came with a cost. Even as late as the famines of 1866-67 or 1873-74, the distress was alleviated to a large extent as the local people could fall upon the abundant forest produce to avert any major crisis. But the changes set in motion ensured that the famine of 1897 ravaged through the length and breadth of Chota Nagpur, causing unprecedented loss of life in these tracts. Unlike before, the adivasis, by now, had far less access to forest produce that had proved so crucial withstand such famines in earlier years.⁴¹⁷

These factors were behind the adivasi movements of the twilight years of the 19th century amongst the Mundas or the Oraons. Concerned about the disruptive potential of such uprisings, the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act was adopted purportedly to give "protection against alienation of tribal land"; in practice, it fell far short of resolving the issues at hand. It did not, for instance, prevent the sale of tribal land in case of outstanding arrears of rent. Neither did it affect the landlords' right to forfeit the lands of an heirless or absconding tribal. One of the recurrent themes that featured most prominently during the Tana Bhagat movement was the loss of lands of which they had been wrongfully dispossessed. Finally, K.S. Singh locates a significant grievance of the Oraons in the fact that all waste lands were unjustly recorded as belonging to the landlords; these lands were earlier at the disposal of the community as per the prevalent custom. The antagonism between the Oraons raiyats and the non-tribal 'Hindu'/'Muslim' zamindars ran deep and found its reflections in their recitations, preachings, aspirations as also their assaults. The idea that the Oraons were the original owners of the soil was

Damodaran & Satpal Sangwan (ed.) *Nature and the Orient: The Environmental History of South & Southeast Asia*, OUP, 1998, p 326 [Henceforth Ravi Rajan]

⁴¹⁴ Ajay Skaria, 'Timber Conservancy, Dessicationism and Scientific Forestry: The Dangs 1840s-1920s', in Richard Grove, Vinita Damodaran & Satpal Sangwan (ed.) *Nature and the Orient: The Environmental History of South & Southeast Asia*, OUP, 1998, pp 596-601 [Henceforth Skaria]

⁴¹⁵ Ibid p 603

⁴¹⁶ Sumit Sarkar, *Modern Times, India 1800s – 1950s, Environment, Economy, Culture*, Permanent Black, 2014, p 78

⁴¹⁷ Vinita Damodaran, 'Famine in a Forest Tract: Ecological Change and the Causes of the 1897 Famine in Chota Nagpur, Northern India', in Richard Grove, Vinita Damodaran & Satpal Sangwan (ed.) *Nature and the Orient: The Environmental History of South & Southeast Asia*, OUP, 1998, pp 855-880 Henceforth Damodaran

deeply rooted in their hearts and their apocalyptic conceptualization of the imminent Oraon Raj.⁴¹⁸ It is these tales of dispossession that fed the local mines and the distant plantations with unskilled and underpaid labour. In the last quarter of the 19th century, nearly 20,000 people were said to be leaving Chota Nagpur every year in search of employment. Plantations in Assam and Duars were often their destinations.⁴¹⁹

But, in identifying the factors that led to the unrest and upheavals that rocked Chota Nagpur in the late 19th and early 20th century, a tendency to look at the colonial intervention as a historical/ecological watershed is clearly discernible. Ingrained in such narratives are assumptions of a “harmonious”, “undisturbed”, “coherence and stability” in the pre-British era when there were “no interference” with the customary rights of the adivasis.⁴²⁰ What gets lost out in such narratives, are the complex and considerable history of collaboration, of adjustments, of pre-existing hierarchies within. Hence, we need to break away from such linear narratives. It is only then that we will make visible – (a) the significant levels of cooperation between state agents and political communities, especially their leaders; and (b) the different and often divergent voices from within the state apparatus.⁴²¹

Talking more specifically about the Oraons and the Tana Bhagat movement, Sangeeta Dasgupta further nuances the above arguments by pointing out that the Oraon agitation cannot simply be seen as an antagonism of “tribals” against the “non-tribals”, or of “insiders” against the “outsiders”. The underlying assumption in such an assertion, as she would suggest, is that the tribal communities were more or less homogenous, “united in their opposition to alien and unacceptable elements that had entered their land.” While such an analysis accounts for the movement’s expressions vis-à-vis the zamindars, the moneylenders as also the British, it remains inadequate in accounting for the antagonism towards their own established way of life, the rejection of their world of spirits and so on. Dasgupta, in her study establishes this link by breaking the strict ‘outsider/insider’ binary and by placing them within the context of the agrarian changes brought about under colonialism and its impact upon the Oraons. She recognizes the Tana opposition to the “outsiders”, but simultaneously suggests that the antagonism must also be located within the internal hierarchy of the community.

⁴¹⁸ KS Singh pp 36-50

⁴¹⁹ Damodaran pp 863-868

⁴²⁰ Madhav Gadgil & Ramachandra Guha, *The Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India*, OUP 2002, pp 113-116

⁴²¹ K. Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests: Statemaking and Environmental Change in Colonial Eastern India*, OUP, 1999, pp 3-23

She locates the earlier works that dealt the Oraons as a homogenous lot to be based on a faulty premise of “class struggle” between the landlords and the tenants. Though she ventures to make her more nuanced analysis in supposed opposition to the earlier ‘class analysis’, in fact she provides a more correct and grounded class analysis that identifies the sharpening of class contradictions (under colonialism) even within the supposedly homogenous Oraon society. And thereby the two seemingly disparate realms of Tana protest - an opposition to the *pahan*, *mahto*, and to the world of spirits and ritual celebrations, and a resistance to the landlords, banias and the Raj, were thus interlinked.”⁴²²

She illustrates how, within the Oraons, it was the *bhuinhars*, who based on their claim to have been the pioneer settlers, were the landed sections. Their descendants retained the privileged tenures and also possessed a superior ritual status over the later Oraon settlers. The *pahans* (village priests), *pujars* (their helpers) or *mahtos* (village headmen) were selected from amidst the *bhuinhars* themselves. It is this traditional leadership of the Oraons, both materially and spiritually dominant, who controlled over generations the Oraons’ spirit world, ritual life, and festivities. “British intervention in Chhotanagpur, their administrative arrangements and agrarian legislations, only intensified the already prevalent hierarchies within the Oraon community.”⁴²³ Administrators identified the leaders of the community and directly promoted the interests of the privileged section of the Oraons, the *bhuinhars*. It was the economically marginalized sections of the later Oraon settlers, i.e., the non-occupancy ryots and under-ryots, who filled the ranks of the Tana Bhagats. And it was the special position of the *bhuinhars*, the *pahans*, *pujars* and the *mahtos* that the Tanas also challenged through their movement. It is this underprivileged section amongst the Oraons, further pushed to the margins after colonial intervention, who became *dhangars* or agricultural labourers in others’ fields, or were forced to migrate in thousands to Calcutta or to the distant tea gardens in Jalpaiguri Duars. This explains the Tana reaction and injunction at the outset to their followers not to work as coolies and labourers anymore.⁴²⁴

The role of rumours:

⁴²² Sangeeta Dasgupta, ‘Reordering a World: The Tana Bhagat Movement, 1914-19’, *Studies in History* 15:1, 1999 p 2

⁴²³ Ibid p 2

⁴²⁴ Sangeeta Dasgupta, “Mapping histories: Many narratives of Tana pasts”, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 53, 1, 2016, pp 104-5

Before moving onto the extension of the movement onto the gardens of Duars, let us just spend a while longer to understand the phenomenon of “wild” and “fantastic” rumours that seemed to have caused so much panic amongst the planters there. How do we historically understand the role of rumours in such movements? What role do they play? Even at the place of its origin, i.e., Chota Nagpur, for instance, the very invocation of the German Kaiser as the deliverer of the promised “Oraon Raj” did add to the elusive and secret character of the movement. Particularly in times of war or great historical upheavals, rumours tend to assume a larger significance in the shaping of people’s perception and dissemination of information or even political mobilization. Sumit Sarkar, for instance, has illustrated how news and rumours has not just influenced but even considerably shaped the political direction of tribal movements in colonial India.⁴²⁵ As the limited news from the war front or its various manifestations on trade, prices and food during the First World War percolated the streets and bazaars, it provided fertile ground for such legends, myths or rumours, particularly in a context when the majority of the population were illiterate. Indivar Kamtekar has brought to the fore the same during the Second World War.⁴²⁶ As the Tana Bhagat movement spiralled in a similar war-time environ, enumerating the significance of rumours as the Oraons themselves partook in the creation of it, Heike Liebau says, rumours “could become an important element in social communication. Soaked up by the people, they could not only fill in a certain information vacuum, but being continuously reproduced, changed and adapted to particular needs and situations, they could also “create history”.”⁴²⁷ She analyzes how such rumours could become integrated into the people’s everyday life and also cast an impact upon their religious, social and political praxis. Hardiman points at the same amongst the Bhils in the Dangs who rose in revolt in December 1914 set off by rumours of imminent British defeat in the war that raged in Europe. The Bhils saw this as an opportunity to re-assert their authority.⁴²⁸ As these rumours, hopes and preachings made their way into the Duars gardens amongst the Oraon garden workers, it gave way to “secret meetings’ wherein the precepts of the movement, including the rumours about the imminent German victory, were disseminated secretly. We hear of stories like how a Oraon, who went to purchase liquor taking some cooked fish, found on returning from the liquor shop, that the fish had been transformed into live ones. From this, the spectators concluded that it was the wish of the goddess that all Oraons should give up taking fish and meat and

⁴²⁵ Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India 1885-1947*, Delhi, 2007, pp153-154

⁴²⁶ Indivar Kamtekar, ‘The Shiver of 1942’, *Studies in History*, 18:1, 2002

⁴²⁷ Heike Liebau, ‘Kaiser Ki Jay (long Live the Kaiser): Perceptions of World War I and the Socio-Religious Movement among the Oraons in Chota Nagpur 1914-1916’, in Heike Liebau, Katrin Bromber, Katharina Lange, Dyala Hamza and Ravi Ahuja (ed.) *The World in World Wars: Experiences, Perceptions & Perspectives from Africa & Asia*, Leiden, 2010, pp 251-276

⁴²⁸ Hardiman p 140

become vegetarian.⁴²⁹ Again, the Oraons, apparently, were told by some leader from Ranchi that “one of their pundits went to Germany on a bicycle and that he told the Oraons not to take flesh or fish and to pray every Thursday for his safe return. As proof of this story, marks are shown on *kachu* leaves every Thursday after the meetings, which are said to be the marks of the pandit’s bicycle wheels.”⁴³⁰ This gives us a representative account of how rumours and “miracles” played a significant role in percolating the various known precepts of the movement.

Transposed onto a garden land: Tana Bhagat movement in Jalpaiguri Duars

It is particularly this secretive and elusive nature of the Tana Bhagat movement that worried the authorities in Jalpaiguri as they grappled not just to put an end to it, but also to make sense of it. In official narratives, at times the Oraons are perceived to be “simple minded”, and at other times “cunning”. At times they are seen as engaged in a certain social uplift, and at other times they are “seditious”. A lingering paranoia is clearly discernible in the observations being made by the eyes and ears of the state—the Intelligence Branch. There was a considerable lack in the ability of the state machinery to grasp the exact scope of the movement. The clandestine organization of the movement in the labour lines effectively bypassed the network and reach of surveillance. The unpredictability and consequent frustration that this caused is obvious. It is worth looking at intelligence officer’s own admission of the same:

Meetings are still being held in places, but it is very difficult to get hold of any thing sufficient to justify taking action in the matter. All Oraons have got very cunning and in this movement, at any rate, *they are not so simple minded as they appear.*

The movement still appears to be subsiding, but it is difficult to say definitely that is the case.

*I suddenly hear of meetings being held on gardens where I had taken particular care to put a stop to them...*⁴³¹

⁴²⁹ ‘The Oraon Unrest’, Weekly Report ending 5.7.16., Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Oraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 35, IB Archive

⁴³⁰ ‘The Oraon Unrest’, Weekly Report ending 2.8.16., Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Oraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 53, IB Archive

⁴³¹ *From SP Jalpaiguri’s Diary dated 25/4/16, The Oraon Unrest*, File I, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, OraonUnrest, File No. 239 of 1916, p 74, IB Archive

Having a sense of the movement in its place of origin in the Chota Nagpur, our concern here would predominantly be with the lesser known chapter of the extension of the same into the Duars. As has already been indicated above, “the planters in the Duars were anticipating trouble with their labourers who hailed from the Chota Nagpur districts”.⁴³² In the words of Mr. R. Garlick, president of the Special Commission appointed to try the cases arising out of the unrest among the Oraon workers:

...a movement which began amongst the Oraons of Chota Nagpur has spread to the 60,000 Oraon coolies in the Tea gardens of this District, who ever since November last have been holding meetings at night and singing hymns to the “German Father”, whom they invoke as if he was God, calling on him to come and drive out the English whom they compare to devils, and give an independent Raj to the Oraons.⁴³³

In this section, we will study the scope, spread, nature, means of organization, and modes of articulation of the Tana Bhagat movement in the workers’ lines of the estates. Alongside, we would also closely observe its ramifications in terms of the planters’ response and that of the state. In this respect, it would be of great advantage to follow the assumptions, interpretations and explanations being put forward by both the management of the plantations and the state. We would, in particular, deal with the report of the Special Commission that was constituted in 1916 to implicate the ‘ring-leaders’ of the movement. It would also be equally productive to study the varying (and not so varying) reactions, interpretations, and exchanges from various sections who commented on this workers’ unrest: missionaries, planters, the nationalist press, the Bengalee intelligentsia (or the fledging civil society), and other contemporary observers.

Some of the objectives of this exercise would be to explore the constitution of “*the seditious*” and analyse the *denial of political subject-hood* to the agitators. If the various expressions of the movement in Chota Nagpur were borne out of the socio-economic conditions prevailing therein, can we find certain particularities pertaining to the movement as it emerged specifically in the Duars gardens? The participants of the same struggle over here simultaneously happened to be workers in gardens. Did

⁴³²*I.D.N.* dated 25.3.16, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Uraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 37, IB Archive

⁴³³ Copy of Judgment in the case Emperor vs BaniaOraon, LaudhaOraon&MongraOraon, Sec 124A IPC, Sec 25(1) Defence of India Consolidation Rules, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Uraon Unrest, File II, File No. 239 of 1916, p 206, IB Archive

this have any bearing on the expressions of the Oraon agitators in the plantations of Japaiguri? If so, then it would be of significance to study how the community identity, their longing for their “lost land” and the identity of simultaneously being a garden worker intersect and influence the other.

Nature, Scope & Spread of the movement and the responses from the administration:

The Oraons are by far the largest among the adivasi communities who constitute the garden labour force in the Duars of Jalpaiguri. According to the Census of 1901, there were 62,844 Oraons predominantly from the district of Ranchi, most of whom were engaged in the tea estates. In 1881, there were only 210 Oraons in the district, indicating that the bulk of them had emigrated in the following twenty years. The Mundas, too, were introduced into the district by the tea industry and by 1901 there were 11,672 Mundas in the district. The Santals also made their way into the district as tea-garden workers and in 1901 they numbered 10,857.⁴³⁴ The Census of 1961 observes that 59.69% of the total adivasi workers were engaged in plantation work. Among the Oraon workers, 62.93% were said to have been engaged in the gardens. It is this sizeable Oraon population engaged in the gardens of Duars that accounts for the anxiety of the concerned authorities during the Tana Bhagat Movement. Of course, not all Oraons working in the gardens came under the fold of the Tana Bhagat movement. Yet, the records suggest that a considerable section did. And considering it is the same lot of impoverished under-ryots who constituted the bulk of the Oraon migrants to the Duars gardens and many amongst them were Tana Bhagats, it can be conjectured that the Tana Bhagats in Jalpaiguri were a large number.

The movement in the Duars first came to the notice of the police through a mysterious “murder and suicide” reported to the Dhupguri police on 25th January 1916. Charua Oraon had cut his wife’s throat and then attempted to cut his own, but was fatally injured. (He died in the police hospital days later). On being questioned, he had revealed that the villagers had been pressurizing him to “sing the name of Germans”. They seemed to have threatened him that a devil named Logo would kill him unless he

⁴³⁴ J.F. Gruning, *Eastern Bengal and Assam District Gazetteers: Jalpaiguri*, Allahabad: The Pioneer Press, 1912, from the chapter on ‘The People’

did so.⁴³⁵ An “unknown man” was apparently constantly telling them to recite something and since he refused, “everyone abused him and his wife. So they resolved to commit suicide.” Thus began the search for these “mysterious recitations”.

Almost a month later, on 23rd February, the Superintendent of Police received a letter from the Manager of the Haihaipatha Tea Estate, which stated in an alarmist tone that “the Oraons were in a very unsettled state all over the district.” The Superintendent, thereafter, received another notification from the Manager of the Tusati Tea Estate who had listed the names of some Oraons. They reportedly had been “holding seditious meetings and calling to the German Father to come and save them.” The anxious Manager clearly cited his fears and apprehension from what seemed to him as an ominous development for the planter community in the gardens. He said that these elements were “upsetting the coolies in his garden and that it was rumoured that there would be row at the Fagua Puja⁴³⁶.” [March 18th to 21st]⁴³⁷

The apprehension received a more concrete corroboration in a couple of days. On the 27th, the Manager of Sarugaon Tea Estate wrote to the Sub-Inspector of Falakata that “a man named Landroo had come from Chota Nagpur and was preaching the new movement.” Again, the Sarugaon Manager reported that Landroo’s brother, Hasru, was also implicated in the movement and “was adopting a threatening attitude towards the garden staff and that serious trouble was brewing.”⁴³⁸

At the end of prompt enquiries made in various localities, the district authorities came to the conclusion that “there was a widespread movement amongst the Oraons of this district.” A final recognition of the still uncertain but impending “troubles” from the state authorities came with the circular letter being issued on 28th February by the Deputy Commissioner. In this, he urged the Chairman of the Duars Planters’ Association for “assistance in finding out about the nature and objects

⁴³⁵ ‘Oraon Unrest: More evidence of sedition, Remarkable Story in Second Judgment’, *Statesman* dated 29.4.16., Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Oraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 87, IB Archive

⁴³⁶Fagua Puja or Festival is a major festival of the Oraons [in the Bengali month of Falgun, i.e.,February-March, which is the first month of the Oraon calendar. Summer starts on from this month. Fagua festival is celebrated on the last day of the Falgun month. The Oraons consider that this festival symbolizes the death of mother earth.

⁴³⁷ ‘Oraon Unrest: judgment in Duars Case: Story of seditious Songs: Three Accused Sentenced’, *Englishman* dated 28.4.16., Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Oraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 88, IB Archives

⁴³⁸ Ibid p 88

and method of movement". He also asked if he had any suggestion to make "as to the manner of dealing with it." He tried to impress upon the Chairman that "a 'revival' of this sort, even if confined to social and religious matters, is likely to cause much excitement and unrest, and to lead to labour troubles."⁴³⁹ The seriousness with which the district administration was following the movement is visible in yet another letter issued by the Deputy Commissioner on the same date that was addressed to all the garden managers. He referred to the meetings in the workers' lines, the vows for abstinence, the instruction to "get rid of red things", the invocation of Germany, etc. and made an appeal to "make enquiries confidentially if any thing of this sort was going on" in their gardens. Apart from the possible "seditious" nature of it, the movement, he implored, could affect the labour conditions with workers "being terrorized" to join the movement.⁴⁴⁰

Considering the seriousness of the matter, an emergency committee meeting was convened. The Deputy Commissioner and the Police Superintendent were asked to be present.⁴⁴¹ In this meeting, the Superintendent of Police, Mr. Monckton, reported that he had gone to Calcutta to gather more information about the movement. The movement, he found out, was under observation for a long time in Chota Nagpur, though the facts he had gathered were still very general.⁴⁴² Mr. Stoddart, one of the managers present at the meeting, also corroborated the same. He had heard from one Mr. Leslie, who was familiar with the situation in Chota Nagpur, that there was a "widespread state of unrest" amongst the Oraons there.⁴⁴³ In Jalpaiguri, the Police Superintendent informed, in certain gardens the movement "had gone very far". Some workers had refused to work "saying that they owed no allegiance to the British Raj." He added that the "coolies were almost in mutiny saying that the German Raj was coming to govern the country."⁴⁴⁴ The longing of the Oraon workers for their land, of which they had been dispossessed in Chota Nagpur, is stark. They seemed to believe "that the Germans would take possession of the Raj, and those who helped the Germans would be rewarded

⁴³⁹ Letter from AG Hallifax, Deputy Commissioner, Jalpaiguri to The Chairman, Duars Planters Association, dated 28th February 1916, *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1916*, p 281, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

⁴⁴⁰ Letter from AG Hallifax, Deputy Commissioner, Jalpaiguri to All Managers of Tea Gardens in the Duars, dated 28th February 1916, *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1916*, p 281-82 DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

⁴⁴¹ Letter from the Chairman, Duars Planters Association to the Deputy Commissioner, Jalpaiguri & the Superintendent of Police Jalpaiguri, dated Baradighi, 1st March 1916, *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1916*, p 282, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

⁴⁴² Unrest among Oraons, Proceedings of an Informal Committee Meeting which was held at the Mal Club on Saturday, the 4th March 1916, to consider what precautions should be taken in regard to the unrest which is prevalent among the Oraon people, *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1916*, p 285, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

⁴⁴³ Ibid p 286

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid pp 285-86

by gifts of land in Nagpur, their ancient country.”⁴⁴⁵ Such rumours were of course an important aspect of the modes of mobilization and organization of the movement. The news of the war must have been received and interpreted by them varyingly. But, what one can gauge from such rumours is that there was a sense of disaffection, and an aspiration for transcending it, at least amongst a certain section of the Oraons.

Along with such rumours what is also worthy of note are the secretive methods or codes employed to relay information and communicate. Mr. Child, one of the managers present in the meeting, for instance, reported that six weeks ago a message – a letter with a few rupees and some rice had come from Manabari. They were passed from hand to hand among his sardars and then sent on to Hope and other gardens. The meaning of the message was unknown to him.⁴⁴⁶

One of the managers, Mr. Davidson reported that he initially took it as related to religious revival. But he was subsequently informed by a Paharia sardar that “there was a secret movement with a vow to exterminate the Sahibs”. This, it seems, was a vow sworn to by “God, Germany and blood”.⁴⁴⁷ There were rumours, based on the information received from the Oraons, that “the Oraons were going to rise in the Fagua Puja and kill the Zamindars and seize their land.”⁴⁴⁸ Alongside, there were apparently rumours afloat that there would also be an “extensive slaughter of the English” during the Fagua Pujas. It was being said that:

...the sun would not rise for seven days in the Fagua Pujas, and that there would be fighting for six days and six nights during which *all the English would be killed and an Oraon Raj would be established.*⁴⁴⁹ [emphasis mine]

⁴⁴⁵ A garden manager Mr. Daunt’s account, Ibid p 286

⁴⁴⁶ A garden manager Mr. Child’s account, Ibid p 286

⁴⁴⁷ A garden manager Mr. Davidson’s account, Ibid p 286

⁴⁴⁸ Copy of Judgment in the case Emperor vs GuhyaOraon, Soma OraonBirsraOraon&RatiaOraon, Sec 124A IPC, Sec 25(1) Defence of India Consolidation Rules, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Uraon Unrest, File II, File No. 239 of 1916, p 229, IB Archive

⁴⁴⁹ Copy of Judgment in the case Emperor vs BaniaOraon, LaudhaOraon&MongraOraon, Sec 124A IPC, Sec 25(1) Defence of India Consolidation Rules, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Uraon Unrest, File II, File No. 239 of 1916, p 205, IB Archive

A “lengthy discussion” followed contemplating the possible cautionary measures that could be taken. One of the suggestions was to shut down all liquor shops in the area. But it was felt that this could actually further excite the workers, particularly those from the other communities. It was felt that the leaders should be rounded up. The Police Superintendent however suggested that all the suspects should be turned into Special Constables appointed to check the movement. It was decided that the Deputy Commissioner and the Superintendent of Police, along with a police force, should tour the district garden to warn the leaders of the consequences of any “disturbances”. It was also felt that the volunteers should be kept in the background and not paraded until an “actual emergency”. It was feared that the arousal of any “bad feeling among the Oraons for the tea garden sahibs” could lead to serious consequences in the future amidst such an atmosphere of unrest and animosity.⁴⁵⁰

Expectedly, arrests followed soon after. The Superintendent of Police visited the Tasati Tea Estate on the 1st of March and “examined some Oraon coolies”.⁴⁵¹ He extracted the wordings of two of the songs that were supposedly sung in the ‘mysterious’ nocturnal meetings at the labour lines from two Oraon Sardars, Dukhai and Letho.⁴⁵² On the basis of the information thus obtained, ten Oraon workers of the garden, including Letho (who was allegedly being assisting these meetings), were arrested the very next day.

It was understood that it was supposedly the Germans, and not the Oraons, who were going to carry out the slaughter. Nevertheless, “precautions” were taken after considering “the excitement of such expectations even if no disturbances had been planned.” An order under Section 144 G.P.C. was issued on March 6th to every tea garden, forbidding the Oraons from taking part in any meeting for two months. The Sardars of the respective gardens were made Special Constables and were thereby “held responsible for the peace of their gardens.” Armed police was deployed in numerous “dangerous places.”⁴⁵³

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid pp 287-288

⁴⁵¹ Copy of Judgment in the case Emperor vs BaniaOraon, LaudhaOraon&MongraOraon, Sec 124A IPC, Sec 25(1) Defence of India Consolidation Rules, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Uraon Unrest, File II, File No. 239 of 1916, p 205, IB Archive

⁴⁵² The wordings of the songs will follow in a different section.

⁴⁵³ Copy of Judgment in the case Emperor vs BaniaOraon, LaudhaOraon&MongraOraon, Sec 124A IPC, Sec 25(1) Defence of India Consolidation Rules, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Uraon Unrest, File II, File No. 239 of 1916, p 205, IB Archive

Following the evidence gathered by the authorities, the “new movement” was introduced into Sarugaon Tea Estate by the man named Landroo who had apparently “disappeared” thereafter. He, it appears, was the brother of Haora, a Sardar in that garden, and used to “recruit coolies for him in Chota Nagpur”.⁴⁵⁴ Meetings were supposedly held in Haora’s courtyard in as early as November 1915, during which elaborate rituals were practiced:

..Haora and Kanda poured libations, first to the sun in the East, and then to the German Baba in the West, and then at once sang songs about the sun coming and casting out the devils and drowning them in the sea. They also taught that the Germans would come and kill off all the English and establish the Oraon Raj within three years.⁴⁵⁵

Three of the accused - Bania, Landha and Mongra Oraon – who were tried by the Special Commission were said to be present at these meetings; they belonged to the neighbouring Tasati Tea Estate. They are said to have learnt the songs there and to have taught them in their own garden at Tasati.⁴⁵⁶ This explains the process of dissemination of the preachings.

Following this, we are told that Haora and Kanda “refused to work” in the garden. And when the manager spoke to them in person enquiring if they were taking part in the new movement, Haora seems to have shouted in a loud voice “who said so?” And when the manager ordered him to put down his hoe and report himself at the office, he, Kanda and another man reportedly threw down their hoes and ran away and were never to be seen since.⁴⁵⁷

Meanwhile, reports of the movement spreading to other districts adjoining Jalpaiguri started pouring in. The Rajshahi Police Superintendent reports meetings held by the Oraons where several resolutions were passed: the Oraons were asked to give up the consumption of meat, fish and liquor, bathe before eating, reduce marriage expenses, and not work for other castes.. They reportedly took the names of their goddess and that of the German Emperor. Many a time, the more controversial (overtly political) aspects of the movement which might have invited the ire of the authorities were avoided, and discussed only “when the members of other castes are not present”. On such occasions, it

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid p 204

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid p 204

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid p 204

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid p 203

was reported that sometimes they would shout out at night the following mantra – *“Tan Baba, tan; jhum baba, jhum; dakiniko mar; Ingrejko fit; Jarmenikojit,”*. However, in larger groups they seemed to refrain from saying the same.⁴⁵⁸ They seemed to have sense of what could invite more trouble, or what was tolerable for the authorities..

The much dreaded Fagua Pujas went by “without disturbances of any kind”.. The manager of the Gurjanjhora Tea Estate had received the orders under Section 144 G.P.C., but it was five to six days later that he first encountered the possibility of the movement spreading among the workers of the garden. He heard from one of the garden chowkidars that the Oraon workers intended to become Bhagats after the Fagua Pujas. They wished to abstain from flesh, food and liquor and devote themselves to a religious life.⁴⁵⁹ The manager immediately gave orders to the workers “not to take part in any general movement of any kind.” But then, a couple of days after the Pujas, Bhagobotichowkidar of the garden informed the manager that the Oraon coolies had held a meeting the previous night in a “deserted hollow, called Sukanjhora.” This was followed with another “similar meeting at the same place” the next morning where songs were sung. This time, the manager “warned the coolies” through their Sardars not to take part in such meetings as they had been clearly forbidden by the orders from the Deputy Commissioner. The Oraon workers, however, refused to heed to such warnings. The manger, out of desperation, informed the Secretary of the company about the workers who had been “assembling by night and refused to desist from doing so.”⁴⁶⁰

The manager ventured “as near as he dared” to the nocturnal gathering. All he could observe was a large mob “singing songs and shouting in between”. The only distinguishable word, “Baba”, was repeated at intervals. In order to prevent gatherings, the manager deemed it best to transfer two of the alleged leaders Soma and Guiya from their present labour lines at Jangaldharato another workers’ line at Gudandhora that was closer to the manger’s bungalow. But then, the following morning when he sent for the two workers so as to issue this order to them, “[T]hey came to him with a following of nearly 40 other Oraons being the whole of the gang with which they were working.” When asked why they had all assembled,, Ratia and Birsa replied that “wherever any of them went they would all go

⁴⁵⁸ ‘The Uraon Unrest’, Weekly Report ending 5.7.16., Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Uraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 35, IB Archive

⁴⁵⁹ Copy of Judgment in the case Emperor vs GuiyaOraon, Soma OraonBirsaOraon&RatiaOraon, Sec 124A IPC, Sec 25(1) Defence of India Consolidation Rules, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Uraon Unrest, File II, File No. 239 of 1916, pp 229-230, IB Archive

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid p 232

and they would live and die together.” And subsequently, when the manager issued his orders asking Soma and Guiya to shift onto Gudandhora, “all the Oraons flatly refused to be separated on the ground that it would interfere with their prayers.” The manager was finally forced to take down all of their names, after which he ordered all of them to get back to their work. To this, again Ratia said that “it was too late to go back to work, and that they were going back to their lines.” Such bold refusal on the part of the Oraons to follow orders or even work is a reflection of their collective assertion as participants of the Tana Bhagat movement. It was 11 am when the forty workers left for their lines. But en-route they were heard to be muttering something which the manager’s servant interpreted as “If we beat him (manager), what will happen?”⁴⁶¹

The manager instantly wrote another letter to the Company Secretary informing him that the trouble was serious, and that the lives of the officers were not safe. A great loss in the garden was anticipated. The latter consequently took up the matter with the Deputy Commissioner who, in his turn, took the following measure. He instructed the Sub-Inspector of Mal to immediately visit Gurjanjhora, along with ten armed constables and the Head constable. On the morning of March 26th, the Deputy Commissioner, along with the Sub-Inspector, interrogated a group of 30-40 Oraons and extracted the following song from those who had attended the meetings:

Munda kogundakaro, Baba,
Chhatrikochhtrischeo, Baba,
Musalmankokato, Baba,
Angrezki choy, germanki joy.”

Translated as:-

“Pulverize the mundas, father
Cut the kshatriyas into 36 pieces, father,
Kill the musalman, father
Destruction to the English, victory to the Germans.”⁴⁶²

⁴⁶¹ Copy of Judgment in the case Emperor vs GuiyaOraon, Soma OraonBirsaraOraon&RatiaOraon, Sec 124A IPC, Sec 25(1) Defence of India Consolidation Rules, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Uraon Unrest, File II, File No. 239 of 1916, p 228, IB Archive

⁴⁶² Ibid p 227

Before proceeding further, it is important to see how the colonial state interpreted these songs and messages. While multiple interpretations are possible, the one that is relevant here is the interpretation offered by the Special Tribunal on the Oraon Unrest in Jalpaiguri. Going by the fact that there were hardly any Mundas, Kshatriyas or Muslims around in the vicinity, the commission in its judgment interpreted the song as not one that was composed to suit local conditions. The judgment conjectured that the animosity vis-à-vis the Mundas could be related to the question of land-ownership back home in Chota Nagpur, wherein the Mundas were better placed than the Oraons. Even if there was some truth in it, it cannot be said to be correct for all Oraons involved in the movement.. For instance, in the Duars, we get references of the Tana Bhagats trying to seek followers from amongst the Mundas.

The clearest evidence of participation of non-Oraons is an incomplete list of convicted workers: along with twenty three Oraons, there were two Mundas, all of whom were sentenced to rigorous imprisonment.⁴⁶³ In the given context, an incident is worth mentioning, which, at the risk of reading too much into it, could have been an abortive attempt to draw the Mundas into the fold of the Tana Bhagat movement. In May, there was reportedly a murder of an Oraon woman by three Mundas in the Birpara tea garden under the jurisdiction of Madarihahat P.S. It appears that “this woman had for some time past been moving about the Munda lines, speaking or chanting the name of the German Baba and urging the Mundas to do the same.” During this time, there were supposedly “numerous deaths amongst the children in these lines” from unknown causes. Following this, apparently this woman “then appeared on the scene and told the Mundas that the cause of these deaths was their omission to sing to the German Baba, and again exhorted them to do so.” This seems to have provoked the Mundas to kill her; for this, the prime accused, Mauga Munda, “was sentenced to penal servitude for life”.⁴⁶⁴

The said animosity towards the Mundas as was suggested by the Special Commission therefore cannot be taken as a general phenomenon. Some joined. Some stayed away. At times, the Oraons reached out to the Mundas, while on other occasions, they seemed to despise them. No singular narrative that the colonial administration sought to construct in order to suit its anxieties could encapsulate the

⁴⁶³Oraon Labour Agitation, pp 2200, Intelligence Branch, Oraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, IB Archive

⁴⁶⁴ Weekly Report for week ending 26/7/16, The Oraon Unrest, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Oraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 52 IB Archive

variegated nature of the Tana Bhagat movement. And this made it furthermore difficult for contemporaries to gauge the movement in all its complexities.

To move on with the events as they unfolded, the Deputy Commissioner considered the attendance of the Oraons to be threatening. He thus ordered the arrest of the four supposed 'ringleaders': Guiya Oraon, Soma Oraon, Birsa Oraon and Ratia Oraon. Considering the gatherings to be a grave threat to 'industrial peace', he reported it to the Government. It then sanctioned their prosecution under Section 124(A)I.P.C. and 25(1) Defence of India Consolidation Rules by the Special Commission.⁴⁶⁵

Despite exemplary punishments, several arrests, the declaration of Section 144 in the gardens, and the demonstrative deployments of armed police at 'disturbed' nodes, the movement refused to die down. Rather, it surfaced in newer estates causing considerable worry to the planter class. Soon, two miles from the Gurjanjhora Tea Estate in Mal – "one of the centres of the movement" – there was unrest reported among the workers of Baintguri Tea Estate. According to its manager, "the movement is widespread on his garden and that meetings are held frequently on the garden itself and in the bustis adjoining the garden."⁴⁶⁶ In the Kilkot Garden of Chalsa sub-District, where such meetings were reported in the first week of May 1916, the Oraon workers held such meetings. This is even after admittedly knowing of the convictions that followed the 'troubles' in Tasati and Gurjanjhora.⁴⁶⁷ The organization of the movement, if we are to believe the manager, was methodically suited to the pattern of settlement of the workers in a plantation economy. Each preacher, it seemed, took the responsibility of mobilizing the workers in each of the labour lines. In the Kilkot Garden, it was found that "in one set of Lines all the Oraons had joined the new movement". The strength of the movement in terms of its organization and reach is also apparent from the fact that it had, to a large extent, neutralized the apparatus of surveillance. The manager observed that "all in the garden including the Special Constables⁴⁶⁸ know what is going on but are afraid to give information. It seemed they have been told that they will die if they do so and they firmly believe this. Even the bungalow water-carrier, a Christian Oraon, attends these meetings but will give no information."⁴⁶⁹ In fact, one meeting was

⁴⁶⁵ An account of the prosecution and arrests will follow in the subsequent section.

⁴⁶⁶ Report of the Superintendent of Police, Jalpaiguri, 8.4.16., Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Oraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, pp 49-50, IB Archive

⁴⁶⁷ From SP Jalpaiguri's Diary of 8/5/16, Oraon Unrest, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Oraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 108, IB Archive

⁴⁶⁸ The Special Constables, very much like today's SPOs in Chattisgarh, are recruited from the same community in the form of a vigilante group to 'supervise' and 'discipline' the other workers.

⁴⁶⁹ Report of the Superintendent of Police, Jalpaiguri, 8.4.16., Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Oraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 49, IB Archive

apparently held quite close to the manager's bungalow. The Superintendent of Police, Jalpaiguri, thereby proclaimed:

Two bad features about this are:-

1. The boldness of these coolies still carrying on these meetings more or less openly under the nose of the Manager and against his orders and the orders of the Government.
2. Frightening the Special Constables to such an extent that they refuse to give any information.

If this sort of thing spreads there will doubtless be trouble.

I am of course taking action in the matter.⁴⁷⁰

A meeting held on 1st June near Meenglass Tea Estate gives us an opportunity to perceive the scope and organization of the movement. It also shows the seriousness with which the state tried to restrain it. The Superintendent of Police, Jalpaiguri, had "previous intimation" of the above. He was, however, "unable" to figure out the venue "in spite of all efforts." According to the Weekly Confidential Report of the Intelligence Bureau for the first week of June, "[M]en were posted at all junctions of roads, and they succeeded in catching a party of about 40 Oraons on their way from the meeting, from whom details of the meeting were obtained." Another group of three or four Oraons on their way back, was arrested at Mal Bazar. Many of those detained were carrying slates with *bhajans* or *mantras* written on some for them (presumably those who were literate in their own script) to memorize and thereafter transmit orally to the others. The *mantras* apparently exhorted the Oraons "to worship the sun, moon, the universe, the Germans and Hindus day and night." The secret arrangement-cum-mobilization for such a large meeting along with the strategic choice of the location, highlight meticulous planning more than spontaneity. Quoting from the Report,

coolies from distant gardens attended this meeting, intimation having been sent previously by messengers...The officer of the Gorubathan thana describes the place where the meeting was held as a very secluded spot, with jungle all round. It is quite out of the way, but convenient for men coming from Juranti, Nageswari and other tea estates...Two other similar meetings were held in secluded places; one was dispersed by a forest guard, who suddenly came upon them, and the other by the police.⁴⁷¹

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid p 50

⁴⁷¹ Weekly Report for Week ending 5.7.16., The Oraon Unrest, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Oraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 35, IB Archive

The constitution of “the seditious”: the search for the ‘alien hand’:

A close reading of the reports of the two judgments by the Special Commission to incarcerate the ‘ring-leaders’ in Tasati and Gurjanjhora gardens respectively gives us a clear understanding as to how the idea of “the seditious” was constructed. The interpretations of the movement, as was forwarded in the course of the judgments, reveal the intent of the state to search for a ‘foreign hand’. In this case, it was the Germans who were seen to have “incited” the Oraons to act in the way they did. One of the notions that is projected through the process of justification is that the Oraons were acting against the established authorities, the government, and thereby the ‘interests of the British crown’ since they openly propagated the impending demise of the British and invoked their deliverance by the enemy (Germans) in times of war. It reads, “[T]o incite the King’s subjects to transfer their allegiance to the King’s enemies in anticipation of their victory is to excite disaffection to the Government established by law.”⁴⁷² The other intertwined argument that was advanced was that there were no specific grievances in reality to which the Oraons were responding; hence they were acting solely under the influence of an “alien hand”.

At one level, there is a constant emphasis to validate the fact that the movement was not ‘purely religious’ but political and therefore “seditious”. But at the same time, the judgment denies any political subjecthood to the Oraons. Rather what is emphasized is that this ‘political’ is nothing more than being an ‘imported’ or a ‘planted’ notion, a notion that by no means was grounded on their lived experience or aspirations.

Such conclusions and interpretations of convenience did not go unchallenged by contemporary observers who differed in their interpretations. An article in the *Statesman* of 29th April 1916, targets the report of Mr. R. Garlick, the president of the Special Commission appointed to try the cases arising out of the unrest among the Oraon workers in Jalpaiguri. Drawing a comparison with the Santhal rebellion, the author raises certain serious questions pertaining to the conclusions arrived at by Mr. Garlick in his judgment regarding the two cases in Tasati and Gurjanjhora tea gardens and the unrest

⁴⁷² *Copy of Judgment in the case Emperor vs Bania Oraon, Laudha Oraon & Mongra Oraon, Sec 124A IPC, Sec 25(1) Defence of India Consolidation Rules, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Uraon Unrest, File II, File No. 239 of 1916, p 193, IB Archive*

in Duars at large. Commenting on the Santhal uprising, he opined that “while the Santal movement was given an impetus by fraudulent visions, it really rested upon the wrongs endured by the Santal people at the hands of Bengali money-lenders and land-grabbers.” In a provocative exposition of Mr. Garlick’s conjectures, the author wrote:

Alleged appearances of a white man with twenty fingers would not in themselves have produced a rising. The people were roused to a savage warfare by real and substantial grievances over which they had been brooding for some years before. The supernatural machinery was merely the means of starting an insurrection for which the tribe was already mentally prepared. When, therefore, Mr. Garlick ascribes the Oraon rising to the influence of a German agent or an imposter of some kind it is reasonable to ask whether the Oraons had not grievances which had weighed upon them and which must be removed before the tribe can be expected to settle down in peace.⁴⁷³

But, nonetheless, as far as the judgment of the Special Commission was concerned, the narrative was to be woven in only one way. For this purpose, the Commission took up the translated version of the song in the Tasati Tea Garden case which was as follows:

German Baba is coming,
Is slowly slowly coming,
Drive out the devils Manaldanal
Cast them adrift in the Sea.
Suraj baba (the Sun) is coming;
The devils of the Oven will be driven away
And cast adrift in the sea.
Tarigan baba (the stars) is coming,
Is slowly slowly coming
Is coming to our very courtyard,
The chigri devils will be driven away
And cast adrift in the Sea.⁴⁷⁴

⁴⁷³ ‘The Oraon rising and Bengalee money-lenders’, *Bengalee* dated 30.4.16., Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Oraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 89, IB Archive

⁴⁷⁴ ‘Oraon Unrest: judgment in Duars Case: Story of seditious Songs: Three Accused Sentenced’, *Englishman* dated 28.4.16., Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Oraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 88, IB Archive

The judgment offered one interpretation, the one most suitable or convenient to the needs of the British. While the German Baba did feature recurrently in the hymns and preachings, invoking the latent aspirations for an imminent defeat of the British, in the judgment it found a certain centrality as it was required to bring into prominence the idea of the “seditious”. The Special Commission built its narrative accordingly. The very fact that the ‘German Baba’ was given precedence over the Sun, or the “Supreme Deity” of the Oraons, in such a hymn was found to be “almost incredible”. And thereby, “it is very doubtful indeed whether this can be a purely religious hymn.” About the invocation of the stars, it was argued that the stars were “not the objects of worship of the Oraons at all”. And the reference to the Sea was found to be “highly unnatural” for an “inland tribe like the Oraons”. And hence, the hymn was interpreted in a curious and arbitrary way to substantiate the fact that the Tana Bhagat movement was the handiwork of mischief-mongers – outsiders who wish to discredit the government.

The judgment also weaves a certain narrative wherein it suggests that the devils being mentioned are also argued to be “not the devils of scarcity and high prices or any recent grievances”. Hence, followed the conclusion that the movement could not have been connected to the prevailing economic circumstances in the gardens.⁴⁷⁵ At the same time, it was argued that the Oraon workers had a clear knowledge as to why “the export of tea from the gardens was stopped for a time in December” as they had heard from the manager that “it was because there was war between the English and Germans.” This denial is irrespective of the fact that wartime high prices itself gave grounds for the possibility of such grievances. And this denial was made despite the fact that the planters had been monitoring and raising an alarm about this possibility from the beginning of the war itself.

As early as August 1914, with the beginning of the war, the planting community seemed worried about the possibility of rise in the prices of foodstuff in view of the developments in Europe. Such an increase in the price of foodstuff was considered to be of serious consequence to the tea industry. It was felt that the help of the government might be enlisted to check it if necessary.⁴⁷⁶ The Chairman of the

⁴⁷⁵ Copy of Judgment in the case Emperor vs Bania Oraon, Laudha Oraon & Mongra Oraon, Sec 124A IPC, Sec 25(1) Defence of India Consolidation Rules, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Uraon Unrest, File II, File No. 239 of 1916, p 199, IB Archive

⁴⁷⁶ Letter from AC Daniel, Acting Asst Secretary, Indian Tea Association to the Chairman, Duars Planters Association, dated Calcutta 6th August 1914, ‘War in Europe Food Prices in the Duars’, *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1916*, p 242, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

Duars Planters Association, for instance, writes with alarm to the Deputy Commissioner about the possibility of black-marketing and hoarding by the Marwaris, which would lead to a further rise in prices. This, in turn, would severely affect the conditions in the gardens. He wrote, "Now the price of *dhan* and rice is at a level that has never been reached before. Great apprehension is felt by garden managers lest the Marwari merchants should further increase the rates payable for necessities." He recalled that in a period of scarcity, the Marwari shop-owners had pushed up the price of *dhan*, and consequently rioting had taken place in the bazaars. He thereby appealed to the government, on behalf of the industry, to take immediate steps to prevent any increase in the price of food. He reported that large stocks of *dhan* were in the hands of Marwari merchants and that these stocks should be made available till the situation came under control. He also suggested a ban on the exports of paddy and rice. He ended by seeking "immediate attention", and warning "that an increase in the price of food-stuffs now would have grave consequences for this industry."⁴⁷⁷ There is an appeal to all managers from the Association to report any unusual rise in prices. An attempt was also made by the district authorities to regulate prices, in order to prevent merchants, shop-keepers from making unfair profits through an unjustifiable rise in prices; this would increase the difficulties already experienced by tea estates owing to the war. The Superintendent of Police was instructed to tour the main bazaars warning the Marwari shopkeepers from creating artificial scarcity in the gardens.⁴⁷⁸

While all of this was also being experienced or witnessed by the Oraons working in the gardens, the *Mudis* and Mahajans (Marwari shop owners/money lenders in the gardens)⁴⁷⁹ also seemed to have told the Oraons that the rise in the price of salt and food grains "was due to the war with the Germans". The Special Commission, however, did not wish to give due credence to these developments which could have provided the necessary context for certain ideas (about the war, the Germans, etc) and consequent disaffection/aspirations to take root. Instead, it preferred a narrative wherein "seditious" thoughts were planted by those with vested interests - the German missionaries. This was despite the fact that, even as per the findings of the investigation, most of the Christian

⁴⁷⁷ Letter from WL Travers, Chairman, Duars Planters Association to the Deputy Commissioner, Jalpaiguri, dated Baradighi, 9th August 1914, Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1916, p 243, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

⁴⁷⁸ Letter from WL Travers, Chairman, Duars Planters Association to All Members of the Duars Planters Association, dated Baradighi, 12th August 1914, Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1916, p 245, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

⁴⁷⁹ Most of the shops within the tea estates were owned by "Hindus and Marwaris" and many of them were notorious for their "usurious practices" or taking "exorbitant prices" - from The case of the Dalsingpara T.E. SI No. 14, *List of cases arising out of labour unrest in Duars Tea Gardens in 1946, Appendix to review on labour unrest in the Duars, 1946*, File No. 662/46, p 54 West Bengal State Archives (Henceforth WBSA)

Oraons under missionary influence seemed to stay away from the influence of the Bhagats (exceptions notwithstanding).

The judgment concluded: "So it appears that the new Oraons are deliberately invoking the head of the King's enemies as if he were a God". Thereafter, again came a series of conjectures. "The devils", it read, "cannot be spiritual devils, and it is highly probable that they represent the English". The Manal-danal "a particularly exacting devil...might well be chosen to represent the Government". The devils of the Oven "may well mean the loyal Oraons". The Chigri devils "may very well be Indians of other races, that is, ancient foes". And lastly, the Tarigan Baba "is more likely to mean the Turks than the Germans, both from the resemblance of sound and from a possible reference to the Turkish flag, and also because Tarigan Baba is spoken of as being at the very door. Witnesses [however even] differ as to whether Tarigan means the moon or the Stars." The conclusion or "meaning" drawn from the above conjectures is however surprisingly definitive:

This interpretation of the song gives it a meaning, and explains the inclusion of German Baba, the moon, and the sea, all of which are incompatible with its being a religious song. We are all of opinion that the song has a seditious meaning...[and] religion seems to be merely a cloak for sedition. If there is any religion in the movement at all it is a deification of the King's enemies and a relegation of the English to the position of tribal Devils who are to be cast out. There is no scheme of social reform apart from their hopes of the coming of the Germans and the expulsion of the English. The whole enthusiasm is seditious.⁴⁸⁰

In the Gurjanjhora Tea Garden case too, the Special Commission in its judgment opined that the "social reform" that the Oraons intended was "not due to any spiritual aspirations but was closely connected with the "expectation of the Uraon Raj to come." And considering it was linked to the coming of the Germans, it was similarly argued that "[I]t is seditious to pray for the victory of the King's enemies over him. Such a prayer excites disaffection towards the established Government and if it is made in public, it must be intended to have that effect."

The Tasati judgment did not directly implicate the German missionaries in having "deliberately organized" the movement since "all Christian Oraons were excluded from the meetings."⁴⁸¹ But it

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid pp 198-199

⁴⁸¹ Such clear compartmentalization however didn't exist on ground as we already have seen instances to the contrary wherein they did come under the fold of the Bhagats at places.

nonetheless proclaimed with a strong sense of certainty that “it seems clear that it must have been started either by some German agent or by some agitator or by some imposter. For the Oraons can not have conceived the idea that the Germans would give them an independent Raj.”⁴⁸² All agency was thus denied to the Oraon workers at the concluding section of the report on the Tasati Tea Garden case: they were referred to as “mere coolies, and of a race prone to superstitions and credulous of the wildest stories”. But nevertheless, the fact that “the movement was full of dangers” was highlighted as the Oraons were again projected as “a race prone to become mad with excitement at the most absurd rumours.”

From “credulous” to “cunning”, from “socio-religious” to “seditious” – the colonial administration itself had multiple narratives for the same event. The attempt to grapple with its complexities, and yet simultaneously reduce the several imperatives to a single and conducive narrative of sedition, is stark. Thus, we have contradictions galore even within the officialdom. The movement itself, with its elusive and secretive nature, is difficult to understand. The fact that even in its place of origin, the Tana Bhagat agitation was as much against hierarchies within the community as it was against outsiders meant that it could have different meanings for different sections within the community. Christian Oraons seemed to stay away, while some others, at the same time, seemed to adhere to the fold; Mundas joined at times, and stayed away as well. These contradictory trends seem to suggest that the appeal of the Tana Bhagat movement was variegated. It galvanized some, and excluded others. And hence the difficulty of writing history as the author of the article in *Statesman* suggested, and which I have quoted at the outset of the chapter. The challenge is to understand the complexity of the multiple (even contradictory) factors that shape such a movement like that of the Tana Bhagats. However, those that the movement could bring together were imbued with a certain notion of collective assertion which they flaunted in several of the instances that we have witnessed so far. We will look into more of such instances of solidarity vis-à-vis the garden administration in the next section.

The Oraons also as garden workers: Tana Bhagat movement and the plantation labour regime:

⁴⁸² Ibid p 195

The articulation of the Oraons in the Tana Bhagat movement in Chota Nagpur was grounded on the material conditions and socio-economic situation they were faced with in the districts of Ranchi, Palamau and Hazaribagh. In Jalpaiguri, however, one needs to reckon with the fact that here the Oraons also happened to be garden workers in tea plantations having a material reality different from that what existed in Chota Nagpur. The question then arises: does the specificity of the plantation regime find any expression in the articulation, demands and action of those Oraons who came under the fold of the movement as it travelled to the Duars? Did their identity as plantation workers find expression in the course of the movement as it spread in the workers' lines of the tea gardens? The case of Gondrapara Tea Estate may help in answering some of these questions.

We have already discussed how the organization of the movement, as it traveled from Chota Nagpur to the Duars, had transformed itself to the requirements of a plantation economy. The mobilization and spread of the movement suited the pattern of settlement of the workers in the gardens; any one preacher took the responsibility of mobilizing the workers in a particular labour line. And equally meticulous was the holding of the big meetings on Thursdays where workers from several gardens would meet and thereafter disperse, carrying with them the *mantras* or songs to be disseminated through slates to their respective labour lines. The weekly *hats*, for instance, were important spaces for mass contact and dissemination of ideas. But the case of Gondrapara is revealing in more ways than one and hence requires a thorough study since it provides further insights into the nature of the movement in the Duars.

The manager of the Gondrapara Tea Estate informed the Superintendent of Police, Jalpaiguri, on the 12th of July 1916 that "all his Uraon coolies had struck work" in this garden. As the Superintendent ventured into the garden, he discovered that "the strike had started by a few men who were hoeing, saying their task was too big so they returned to the Lines leaving their work unfinished." The Oraon workers, it appeared, were resisting the immense workload in the gardens and protesting against their working conditions.⁴⁸³

In evident shock and dismay at this sudden strike, the manager enquired into this and spoke to his headmen. They all reported that "there was no cause whatever for complaint – the tasks were in fact

⁴⁸³ From SP Jalpaiguri's Diary dated 15.7.16., Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Uraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 194, IB Archive

the same as they had always been.” The headmen also agreed to “get the coolies out to work as usual next morning”. Yet, the manager encountered next morning not just a strike, but an enforcement of the same by larger numbers. He found that “the men who had gone out to work had returned to their lines and that others in other lines with all the women workers who had started to go to work had been stopped and turned back by a number of Uraons and told that if they went to work they would be punished.”

The Superintendent thereafter reported that on enquiry he had found that “meetings of Uraons had been held regularly in the lines”. But in a show of considerable discipline, “none that had not joined the new movement were allowed near.” It was the same discipline that had (as has been observed earlier) severely restricted, if not broken the scope of surveillance, through a tight network of secrecy that was imposed by the participants. The manager had given him a list of nine or ten men who were supposedly the “leaders in this strike movement”. Yet, , the Superintendent “found the very greatest difficulty in getting any first hand information.” To quote him:

Everyone including Nepalese, Upcountry, Mahomedan and Santals being far too frightened of the consequences if they told what they knew...It is dead against the interest of the Sirdars for their coolies to strike work but they are frightened into inaction and silence and they will not even say what in their opinion is the reason of the strike. One is met everywhere by silence and lies.⁴⁸⁴

The Superintendent attempted to wish away “the complaint of the tasks being too big” as an “excuse to start lawlessness”. But the evidence of the events on the ground strongly suggested the contrary. As he reported, “a committee had been formed [by the striking workers] who would have a say in the working of the garden and they threatened anyone who interfered with them.” The very formation of such a committee in the midst of a strike consciously organized on the issue of “inordinate amount of work” in the gardens is indeed remarkable. The plantation workers, now onwards, wished to have a say in the working of the garden. They articulated the same by floating a body that could ensure democratic functioning, a decision-making system that could take care of the interest of the workers vis-à-vis the managerial hierarchy. As the Superintendent commented, “[I]t is a fact that this

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid p 193

committee was formed and the leading idea seems to be that if they unite in this way they can make the Manager do anything they like."⁴⁸⁵

The aspirations for a different order of things was clearly discernible. As the Superintendent reported, "one of them when drunk pointed to a passing train and told a passerby that train would soon belong to the Uraons and the Railway lines and gardens too." This was the expression of a vision for an "Oraon Raj" that seemed on the offing to many of the participants. The conclusions of the Superintendent can be anticipated:

That the German idea is still with them I think there can be no doubt...The strike is certainly not an ordinary garden dispute, but is in my opinion all part and parcel of the Uraon movement with the German idea at the back.⁴⁸⁶

The steps taken by the authorities were also predictable. In a report dated 2nd of August 1916, we are informed that "there has been no further trouble" in the garden. Yet, "secret meetings" continued to be held "both on the tea gardens and in the villages." The Deputy Commissioner of course declared Section 144 C.P.C. and "special constables" were appointed to check the unrest. But by the latter half of August, certain new developments in Gondrapara garden completely upset the security measures that had so carefully been chalked out by the management.

On 21st of August 1916, the manager of Gondrapara Tea Garden again wrote to the Superintendent of Police stating that "since the 9 Uraons had been made Special Constables things had been quieter till the past week but that he now had good reasons to believe that these special Constables along with others had been holding meetings which they had not reported." On 16th, a Wednesday, the 9 Special Constables apparently asked for leave on the following day, i.e. Thursday. This "is the day set aside by those Uraons in the new movement for holding meetings &c: and on which they won't work if possible". When refused permission, they did turn out for work the next day, "but said they will not accept pay for it." In the evening, the Doctor Babu and the Havildar spotted these Special Constables holding a meeting with the other Oraons of the garden. At the sight of the security arrangement itself

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid p 192

⁴⁸⁶ Weekly Report for week ending 26.7.16., 'The Uraon Unrest', Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Uraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 207, IB Archive

being co-opted into the movement, the manager, evidently panic-stricken, “went on to say that the movement was very strong and he feared serious trouble.” The Special Constables, whom he had identified as the “ring-leaders”, “all stated that they intend to hold another meeting next Thursday.” The next day, the Superintendent hastened to the spot along with 20 armed Police:

I interviewed these 9 Special Constables. Their attitude was most defying (I had left my armed men outside the garden). They owned up to knowing the Deputy Commissioner’s orders prohibiting meetings and my orders to them as Special Constables about reporting them but they were not going to carry them out. Their behaviour was most impertinent and when I was asking them about the song they sang, they, without any request on my part all started off singing it.⁴⁸⁷

While they were “busily engaged in singing”, the armed men under the command of the Superintendent “quietly surrounded” them. Thereafter, they were promptly arrested and taken off the garden. What is remarkable is the fact that some of the other Oraon workers of the garden did not accept the above action lying low. The very next morning, under the leadership of a “big Oraon Sirdar” (who was subsequently arrested), the workers went up to the railway station where the arrested ones had been kept in order to protest against the arrests. Many others were also mobilized “to make a *golmal*.” They also made an attempt “to stop the Assistant Manager” who, however, somehow “drove through them in his buggy”. An armed guard was stationed at the garden thereafter.

It is these multi-layered identities of the garden workers that make this study so perplexing, and yet so fascinating. This co-existence of a community identity and that of a worker’s could, at times, fracture, and at other times, forge unities. An understanding and recognition of these foliated identities is essential to understand the working class of the plantations, their struggles and their despair. And even as the trade union phase of workers organization came into being, as we would study in the following chapter, community identities, their idioms and customs, continue to be invoked by the workers in very many ways. As Habsbawm puts it, “...historically speaking, the process of building new institutions, new ideas, new theories and tactics rarely start as a deliberate job of social engineering. Men live surrounded by a vast accumulation of past devices, and it is natural to pick the most suitable of these, and to adapt them for their own (and novel) purposes.”

⁴⁸⁷ From the SP Jalpaiguri’s Diary on 24.8.16, Oraon Unrest, Continuous Note Sheet, CID, Intelligence Branch, Oraon Unrest, File I, File No. 239 of 1916, p 212, IB Archive

Here, we move into a historiographical debate wherein we define the working class in India (owing to the prevailing specific socio-economic and historic forces at work) as one that continues to be characterized by multiple, layered, or foliated identities whereby the working class identity contends continually with communitarian, caste, regional, ethnic, religious (cultural) identities and so on. At specific junctures, either one of these projects itself to the fore, at the cost of the other, depending upon concomitant factors. Thus, there cannot be any essentialized notion of the Indian working class as being inherently divisive or necessarily incapable of forging class solidarities as Dipesh Chakrabarty would tend to suggest.⁴⁸⁸ Instead of such 'cultural pre-determinism' that views the workers in 'determinate', 'pure', 'unaffected' compartments that deny any scope for processes of historical mediation,⁴⁸⁹ the effort in this chapter is to look through the conception of multiple (conflicting) identities of the workers. When one gains greater prominence, the other identities do not cease to exist. The Oraon workers in the Jalpaiguri Duars cannot be seen from the prism of a linear transition from the pre-capitalist community solidarity to a class solidarity. Rather, their longing for the "lost land" and their Oraon identity continue to be reproduced. But at the same time, such a recognition of their cultural differences should not make us blind to the possibilities of class solidarity. With a "presumed separation between class and cultural identities",⁴⁹⁰ we would fail to recognize how the two shape each other. This was evident even during the Tana Bhagat movement in the gardens. This understanding is crucial for the study of the plantation workers in the Duars in the years that follow, or even of the Indian working class in general. Given the prevailing socio-economic reality, a search for an Euro-centric idealized pristine 19th century variant of working class is to search in vain. If the 'pre-bourgeois' characteristics constitute one facet of the consciousness of the worker, it exists within a dynamic context of struggle, constant tension and contestation with working class consciousness. The presence of pre-bourgeois characteristics do not necessarily lock them up into determinate compartments or turn them into an unresponsive, apolitical subject. There is a constant movement, wherein at various moments, either the communal or the class identity gains predominance while they still co-exist with the other. The dynamism ingrained in this very process cannot be ossified into impervious, frozen, or static identities.

⁴⁸⁸ Chakravarty, *Rethinking Working Class History*

⁴⁸⁹ Joshi, *Lost Worlds*, pp.6-12; Ranajit Dasgupta, 'Indain Working Class and some recent Historiographical Issues', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 31, No. 8, Feb. 24, 1996, pp. L27-L31

⁴⁹⁰ Leela Fernandes, 'Culture, Structure and Working Class Politics', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 33, No. 52, Dec. 26, 1998 - Jan. 1, 1999, pp. L53-L60

Chapter IV

Exploring the Contours of Trade Union Movement

Among the Garden-workers in Duars:

Situating Workers' Movements in Plantations

Subordinated to foreign needs and often financed from abroad, the colonial plantation evolved directly into the present-day latifundio, one of the bottlenecks that choke economic development and condemn the masses to poverty and a marginal existence in Latin America today. ...It no longer depends on the importation of African slaves or on the *encomienda* of Indians; it merely needs to pay ridiculously low or in-kind wages, or to obtain labour for nothing in return for the labourer's use of a minute piece of land. It feeds upon the proliferation of minifundios – pocket-sized farms – resulting from its own expansion, and upon the constant internal migration of a legion of workers who, driven by hunger, move around to the rhythm of successive harvests.⁴⁹¹

But over the centuries, as the plantation economy evolved, proliferated and entered different phases, the “legion of workers” has always remained restive, volatile and rebellious. With time, the struggles evolved into various phases and took different forms. In this chapter our focus would be on what is called the ‘organized’ phase of the plantation workers’ struggle in the gardens of Duars. By ‘organized phase’, I refer to the workers’ movements, led and expressed through the trade union leadership – a phase that unfolded in the Duars only from 1946.

Looking more specifically into the Jalpaiguri district, I would begin from the inception of the trade union movement in the gardens, along with the various contributive forces that gave shape to it. These would include the specificities of the Duars region as a geographical and historical entity; the particular context of the war-years and also the immediate post-war years; the communitarian links within and outside the gardens; and the larger historical context that shaped the struggles. Here we would discuss the quick spurt of labour militancy that spread across the Duars gardens in the initial (roughly six) months of trade union activity in 1946, primarily protesting discrepancies in rations in the midst of an overall ‘food-scarcity’, low wages and ill-treatment at the hands of garden authorities. It is this labour militancy that would subsequently (or rather immediately) reach remarkable heights during the Tebhaga period in the Duars, marking an important qualitative change in the strengthening of the labour movement.

⁴⁹¹ Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: five centuries of the pillage of a continent*, New Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2008, p 60

So, the primary focus would first be on the beginnings of an organized labour militancy in the gardens in the midst of the post war ‘food-crisis’ and ‘ration-cuts’. Here we would look into factors leading to and leading outwards from this ‘food-crisis’, the lightning strikes, particularly the so called ‘November disturbances’, and the palpable anxiety of an alarmed administration. Subsequently, I will look at the various interest groups among workers, planers and the state and at the ideologies that drove them. A simultaneous attempt would be made to perceive in all their complexities the community-assertions and the consequent inter-communal tensions/suspensions provoked by the multiple, conflicting identities of the workers [Gurkha/Paharia/hill men vs Madhesia/Bengalee/plainsmen/adivasi] that played themselves out intermittently in the labour-lines since the incipient labour organisations and struggles began. Thereafter we would focus upon the ways in which the Bengali Garden Babus, the Management and the state perceived and interpreted the prevailing scenario by using the communitarian ‘fissures’ to their own advantage. Finally, we would try to understand the genesis of the trade union movement in the gardens by placing it within the broad historical context of the Tebhaga uprising in Duars. The Tebhaga movement of the share-croppers in this region is still remembered as a period when unionization spread across the gardens with great rapidity. It was also a phase marked by a unity that was achieved among the workers within and the militant peasants outside the gardens. In this chapter, I would limit myself strictly to these formative years of trade union movement in the Duars stretching roughly from 1946 to 1948.

The war and post-war years in the gardens: food crisis & a restive work-force:

Planters’ narratives were self-congratulatory regarding the part they claimed to have played in terms of “assisting the authorities, by the provision of labour, to build essential communications” etc, through labour drafts from the gardens for the eastern war-front. But these were immediately followed or rather overshadowed by grumblings regarding the constant drain on their labour reserves by the government’s war-time recruitments. Along with dissatisfaction of the Managers regarding “mis-management” of claims of compensation for the death or injury of workers in the Frontier Projects, they also complained about the loss of labour for the industry.⁴⁹² For labourers, working amidst risks and harsh conditions in these war-fronts, these were also times that, for at least some of them, broke the relative insulation of the garden-workforce. The war-time projects paid considerably higher wages than was ever fathomable in the gardens. Post-war government schemes to mitigate

⁴⁹² DPA Chairman’s review of the year’s working, *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1945*, pp vii, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

unemployment also irked the planters as these were offering wage levels that far exceeded those that the planters were ever willing to offer. What these developments entailed is that a sizeable section the work-force that had left the gardens was no longer eager to return. Duars, it seems, remained 25,000-30,000 short in labour requirement in 1945.⁴⁹³ Many workers found the post-war employment schemes more lucrative, now that they were aware of such opportunities. So, the planters grumbled, saying that production had fallen in the war-years leading to shortage in supply for the domestic market, and thereby pushing up prices. The industry, in order to match up to international demand, needed to raise production which was not feasible with such loss of labour .

That there will be unemployment in certain areas no sensible person would dispute, nor the need for Government to take measures to safeguard the full employment and earning capacity of the people, but we trust that the labour required for schemes which Government contemplates will not be organized at the expense of, or in opposition to, established industries like our own. We felt no hesitation in making our best labour available to Government at a time of national danger. It was paid at a rate far exceeding the level at which the tea industry could be expected to compete, and we trust that Government will not now seek to deprive us of this labour by maintaining wage rates at an unnecessarily high figure. We realise that these high rates were paid because of the vital need to complete strategic roads and airdromes, but now that vital need has past, it behoves Government, when initiating schemes to guard against unemployment, to pay due regard to the standards of wages ruling in the industry.⁴⁹⁴

The acute “food shortage” and near-famine conditions, as we know, were in part owing to the “needs of the services” during the war and partly owing to hoarding and war-profiteering by the jotedars as we would study eventually. The result was that food practically vanished from the reach of the toilers. This was coupled with a severe cloth crisis, coal crisis and oil-crisis which meant a further diversion of labour power to fetch fuel.⁴⁹⁵

It is imperative that we fathom what exactly we mean by “food shortage”, what exactly transpired in the “war years”, or how exactly did the “post-war crisis” affect the region and the gardens in particular. Abani Lahiri, one of the foremost communist leaders of the Tebhaga uprising, in his memoir, states that “an intimate relationship had developed among the jotedars, moneylenders and hoarders during the famine. In most cases the three faces of the jotedar, moneylender and hoarder had merged into

⁴⁹³ Ibid p xi

⁴⁹⁴ DPA Chairman’s review of the year’s working, *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1945*, pp vi-ix, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid p x

one."⁴⁹⁶ What unfolded in the name of "war efforts" was a systematic drain of rice from eastern India, particularly Bengal, exasperating the already existent disruption in food supply that war had entailed. The export of rice from Bengal to various fronts stood at a staggering 45,000 tonnes which was four times the amount in the previous year. It rose to 66,000 tonnes by April same year. The scarcity this induced pushed the price of rice at local markets to unprecedented levels causing havoc for the rural poor. "What was manifest was that food grains were, in fact, moving out of the hands of those who needed them most – the rural poor – and into the warehouses of large capitalists, the military, government, and also unspecified points outside Bengal."⁴⁹⁷

Thousands of peasants are said to have had to part with their land in the war years and the famine owing to acute indebtedness. The beneficiaries were these jotedars/moneylenders/hoarders. What unfolded in these "war years" in particularly the Duars had their roots in history and would take us back several decades into the past, into the very constitution of the jotedari system itself in Duars that we dealt with in the first chapter.

"Objectionable" as it was described by the British considering "it deprives the farmer (read the real tiller) of one-half of the usual motive for industry", it was nonetheless formalized as the dominant structure of rent-payment in the Duars. This arrangement, in conjunction with the coming of tea, as we have seen, had far reaching repercussions on the region.

The spread of tea, and the transformation of the region into a district obviously led to a strain on the region's crop-outturn. Coupled with the unprecedented influx of thousands of workers to be fed and the particularity of the tenural arrangements under jotedari meant that the slightest shortage could be capitalized by the grain-dealers or such a crisis could also be manufactured (or precipitated) by the jotedars themselves. With the increase in demand, they could push up the prices to any point through hoarding, since they cornered the bulk of the harvest in their own grain stores. The adhiars (or share-croppers) and the garden workers were in a most disadvantageous position vis-à-vis the jotedars' super-profits out of an artificial scarcity. The war years seem to have been one such opportune moment. We have already seen glimpses of it during the World War I. The planter community even

⁴⁹⁶ Abani Lahiri, *Postwar Revolt of the Rural Poor in Bengal: Memoirs of a Communist activist*, Interviewed by Ranajit Dasgupta, Introduced by Sumit Sarkar, Translated by Subrata Banerjee, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2001 p 74

⁴⁹⁷ Janam Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal: War Famine and the End of Empire*, Noida, UP: Harper Collins, 2015

then had panicked as “an increase in the price of food stuffs would be a most serious thing for the tea industry.”⁴⁹⁸

At the peak of the Second World War, amidst a general sense of panic and scarcity, the jotedars created havoc with an artificial scarcity which further pushed up prices. Stocking up and impeding procurements were all directed towards creating a shortage and price rise of which the garden labourers were the worst sufferers. When McIntosh, the Chairman of Duars Planters Association, complained about the delay in procurement from jotadars which added to the shortage, he was informed, for instance, by the Governemnt Civil Supply Officers that, “Procurement was not being pursued in Jalpaiguri with any vigour early in the year as Jotedars were not willing to sell at Government controlled price.” McIntosh also expressed his dissatisfaction regarding the inability of the Procurement Agents in publicizing the government’s price control policies to the extent which would impress upon the jotedars “the futility of holding out for higher prices under present circumstances.”⁴⁹⁹

The extent of the ensuing crisis resulted in panic amongst the planters and there were strong apprehensions about the situation turning volatile. Mr. Wallace of the Duncan Brothers, representing the Indian Tea Association in a meeting with the Director General of Food on the “Food situation in the Duars Tea Gardens”, stated that the decision of the Government to stop all rice supplies in the coming months was to cause great alarm in the gardens which required urgent attention. He pleaded that the position of the Duars needed special consideration owing to the present attitude of the garden labour as a result of the “activities of the agitators.” He maintained that, against this background of agitations, “fullest steps possible should be taken to see that all Duars gardens held sufficient stocks of foodstuff, which were suitable for and acceptable to their labour so that there would be no general deterioration resulting from the inadequacy of food supplies.”⁵⁰⁰

⁴⁹⁸ Letter dated 6th August 1914 from AC Daniel, Acting Assistant Secretary, Indian Tea Association to the Chaiman Duars Planters Assocation; War in Europe and Food Prices in the Duars. *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1914.*, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

⁴⁹⁹ Suggestions for Improvement in Procurement from the Chairman, Duars Planters Association dated 26.8.1944, *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1944*, p 20, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

⁵⁰⁰ Minutes of a Meeting held on 8th October 1946 in the office of the Director General of Food, Civil Supplies Dept., Bengal, *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1946*, p 86, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

The Government, however, washed its hands off, saying that the resumption of rice supplies for the time being was “out of question. The shipping strike in America, the breakdown of negotiations with Argentina and the non-arrival of foodstuff from Indonesia – all were cited as reasons why both rice and atta (wheat) were out of supply. Though maize was still available on the supply side, yet on the demand side of it, the madhesias (or the adivasis from Chota Nagpur) would not take maize in their ration even if they took atta as a replacement for rice. In yet another meeting where the planters once again placed the concern of madhesia workers protesting against the offer of maize, the government maintained that “Government stocks of rice were never so low as at present.” So much so that, in East Bengal, the Director General of Food reported that the shortage was approaching famine proportions. Even the limited amount that the government was able to procure at times – like Burma rice – was “frankly unfit for human consumption.”⁵⁰¹ It might somehow be passed off as palatable in a famine area, said the garden authorities, but not in a rice producing area like the Duars “where supplies of fresh paddy and rice can be bought albeit at a price.”⁵⁰²

Throughout the war years there was a prohibition on the garden authorities as per government orders not to procure rice or paddy privately from local markets so as to not allow local prices to shoot up owing to the scramble by the garden managements and competitive buying. Owing to mounting scarcity and repeated and desperate appeals by the garden authorities to allow local purchases to tide over the ration-crisis in the gardens, finally, the government agreed with certain conditions. Purchases were to be made only by the managers themselves or by licensed dealers, but not by any contractor. Control over purchases would be in the hands of two DPA members appointed in each Sub-District whose duty would be to check the purchase of paddy and also check the stocks in the gardens if they found it necessary.⁵⁰³

But even these did not adequately remove apprehensions. Unauthorized purchases by unlicensed dealers continued. The government tried to rein it in by making it mandatory to show identification

⁵⁰¹ Local Purchases of rice and paddy. Letter dated 8th April 1947 from Chairman Duars Planter’s Association to the Assistant Secretary, Indian Tea Association, D & D Sub-Committee, Calcutta, *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1947-48*. Pp 273-74, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

⁵⁰² *ibid*

⁵⁰³ Purchase of Rice in Open Market. Letter dated 13th Novemner 1946 from Chaiman, Duars Planters Association to the Divisional Enforcement Officer, Northern Range, Jalpaiguri. *Detailed Report of the General Committeee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1946*, Pp 82-83, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

while directly purchasing from the jotedar. But it had limited effect.⁵⁰⁴ The Director General of Food soon reported, “that the knowledge that purchases were authorized had greatly forced up prices not only in the vicinity of the Tea Gardens, but throughout the district, and this would have repercussion on the price and release of the new season’s crops.” Hence a deadline was set for all purchases that were to be made.⁵⁰⁵

The problem of “unhealthy competition arising by individual districts and individual Managers going into open competition and paying panic prices for grain when their stocks run low” however, continued.⁵⁰⁶ As late as 26th March 1947, the DPA acknowledges that “Complaints continue to come in about individual Managers buying paddy on the open market. Apart from the illegality of such buying it is forcing price up unnecessarily.”⁵⁰⁷ There was suspicion as to whether the gardens were showing accurate figures of their real stocks, or were hoarding food.⁵⁰⁸ The planters on the other hand were also similarly miffed with the authorities for what they considered to be unreasonable restrictions on procurement. There were times when despite cheaper sources available locally, they were forced to import rice from Nepal so as to keep local prices at bay. So much so that some retorted, “are we to continue to boost up our own food supplies at our own expense to conserve government supplies?”⁵⁰⁹ The Chairman of DPA even retorts that “the industry is being encouraged to subsidise Government stocks at the industry’s expense.”⁵¹⁰ The tension is palpable in the following retort: “It should be kindly remembered that no member of this Association is buying for amusement but only in case of serious necessity, owing to the non arrival of Government Stocks. Nothing would please us

⁵⁰⁴ Purchase of paddy by unlicensed dealers. Letter dated 2nd December, 1946 from the District Controller, Civil Supplies, Jalpaiguri to the Chairman, DPA. *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1946*, Pp 83-84, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

⁵⁰⁵ Rice and Dhan Procurement. Letter dated 26th November 1946 from Chairman DPA to all Members of the Association. *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1946*, p 84, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

⁵⁰⁶ Rice Supplies in the Duars. Letter dated 1st April, 1947 from The Chairman, DPA to the Asst. Secy, D & D Sub Committees, ITA, Calcutta. *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1947-48*, p 64, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

⁵⁰⁷ Rice Supplies in the Duars. Letter dated 10th March, 1947 from The Vice-Chairman, DPA to the Asst. Regional Controller of Procurement, Jalpaiguri. *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1947-48*, p 65, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid

⁵⁰⁹ Rice Supplies in the Duars. Letter dated 25th April 1947 from the Chairman, DPA to the Asst. Secy., ITA, D&D Subcommittee, Calcutta. *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1947-48*, pp 71-72, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

⁵¹⁰ Rice Supplies in the Duars. Letter dated 8th April, 1947 from the Chairman, DPA to the Asst. Regional Controller of Procurement, Jalpaiguri. *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1947-48*, Pp 73, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

better than to be free of the necessity of having to buy on the open market, but we cannot hope to keep the district quiet and orderly without ample and visible stocks of food.”⁵¹¹

The peculiarity of the plantation regime and the character of its working class once again come to the fore in these crisis-ridden years. In no other industry – whether Jute or cotton mills - does the question of workers generating their own wages in kind (or rations) arise as it tends to do in the gardens. Officially it was maintained by the planters that the provision of plots of land to the garden workers “was to provide for the outside interest which was part of his normal life in his own country.”⁵¹² The crucial significance of such an arrangement in meeting the cost of reproduction of the labour becomes most pronounced during times of crisis like the war-years. In a discussion to overcome the shortage, the issue of buying garden grown paddy (that is, paddy grown by the workers themselves in small plots of land) came up. In the early years of the war, the rice that was grown by the labourers in their plots was purchased by the garden authorities at market rates and sold back to them at concession rates.⁵¹³ By 1946, however, the Director General of Food was of the opinion that such purchases would be tantamount to buying in the open market and, therefore, a violation of the government orders that restrain all such private purchases. A suggestion meanwhile came that “labourers could keep and consume his own produce for a specified time, and draw no rations during that period.” Not only was the Director General of Food mightily pleased by this plan of making the workers grow their own wages, but he also opined that the “Government would have no objection to this, and in fact might welcome it.”⁵¹⁴ So much so that when stocks dwindled to a bare minimum, the planters strongly recommended that “all available labour which could be spared for such work, should be employed on a vigorous campaign of growing vegetables during the coming cold weather” as per the Grow more Food campaign in the gardens.⁵¹⁵

⁵¹¹ Rice Supplies in the Duars. Letter dated 10th March, 1947 from The Vice-Chairman, DPA to the Asst. Regional Controller of Procurement, Jalpaiguri. *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1947-48*, Pp 65, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

⁵¹² Minutes of the Meeting of the Industrial Health Advisory Committee held at District Board Hall, Jalpaiguri, *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1944*, Pp 43, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

⁵¹³ Minutes of the Meeting of the Industrial Health Advisory Committee held at District Board Hall, Jalpaiguri, *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1944*, p 37, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

⁵¹⁴ Resume of a Meeting held at Jalpaiguri Club on the 7th November 1946 at 11am in connection with Foodstuffs. *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1946*, p 89, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

⁵¹⁵ Duars Food Supplies. Letter dated 29th September, 1946 from the Chairman, DPA to All Members. *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1946*, p 70, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

In the midst of the crisis, the government's decision to reduce the workers' ration from 4 seers of rice at the concession rate of Rs.5/- per maund, to 3.5 seers per week, only added to the workers' woes. Clauses in the government circular pertaining to "Alteration in the Scale of Rationing" specified that the supply of food on concession would be limited only to those workers who "qualify for it by attendance". So, at times of such acute shortage, the weak and the sick (the ones most needy) – were to be considered "unqualified" for food at concession rates.⁵¹⁶ Shortages (both war-induced and hoarding-induced by the jotadars), wild profiteering and ration cuts ultimately resulted in acute malnutrition across the gardens. There has been no work that has dealt with the conditions in the gardens in Duars during the famine years. The "Report on Malnutrition among Tea Garden Labourers in the Duars", however, provides significant and rare insights into the condition of workers in these war-years.

By September 1944, the planters acknowledged the presence of a large scale concern regarding the possibility of malnutrition in the Duars gardens. Reports hinted that non-working dependents were worst affected and a plausible reason that was cited was the fact that they were not supplied with the rice at concession rate. The concrete findings of Dr. Lapping of the Panitola Circle confirmed the extent of the crisis. He stated that "the total cost to the labour force feeding itself and its dependents adequately would amount to Rs. 22,849/- a month, whereas the total wages earned on the garden during the month in question (September 1943) were only Rs. 16,000 and odd."⁵¹⁷ Despite the crisis, the ITA ordered a half hearted probe to ascertain if health problems were due to malnutrition or to some other reason. Even this came with the caveat that "under these circumstances," the Committee however, is "most reluctant to ask you to take fresh burdens."⁵¹⁸ For the garden authorities the most prominent as also most convenient remedy to "guard against malnutrition creeping in amongst our labour forces" was to yet again pass the burden onto the workers to find their way out of malnutrition – i.e., grow more food and raise more animals (for milk).⁵¹⁹

⁵¹⁶ Alteration in the Scale of Rationing. Letter dated 29th March 1946 from the Asst Secy, ITA, D & D Sub-Committee to the Chairman, DPA, *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1946*. Pp 98-99, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

⁵¹⁷ General Health. Letter dated 9th September 1944 from Asst Secy ITA to Chairman, DPA. *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1944*, p 23, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

⁵¹⁸ *ibid*

⁵¹⁹ Malnutrition in Tea Garden Labour. Letter dated 8th June 1944 from RC Davis, Esq., Dam Dim T.E. to the Asst Secy, ITA, Calcutta. *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1944*, Pp 25, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

The findings of the enquiry were of acute significance. There was a rise in death rate in most of the gardens. At times it exceeded the birth-rate. Average rates of daily sickness were on the rise. And there were definite signs of avitaminosis. In one of the practices under observation, this lack of crucial vitamins in diet was found identified as the prime cause behind 19% of the deaths in the gardens. In conclusion it stated that “the enquiry has provided indisputable evidence of the presence of malnutrition among the working population of Duars Tea Estates, to a degree varying from 0.8 to 12.25% of the people. In three practices the normal birth-death rate ratio of more than 2/1 has been changed to a preponderance of death. This is a serious position.” It also stated:

In 1943 most Duars coolies subsisted on little more than their issue of 4 seers of rice weekly, as owing to the famine very little else was available at any price. This gave a man a daily amount of about 1,800 calories, which is not enough to maintain health, let alone provide fuel to do any work. The daily requirement of an adult man on average work are 3,000 calories.⁵²⁰

While faced with such alarming findings in front of the Industrial Health Advisory Committee, the planters’ response was that malnutrition was “little in evidence”. Even if it did exist, that did not merit a rise in real wages as it was the result of the workers’ indifference to a balanced diet and their laziness!⁵²¹ Nonetheless, they could not side step the unrest amongst workers which grew and spread.

As the crisis deepened, the “happy family”⁵²² image that planters projected about relationships in the gardens proved less and less tenable. It was absolutely clear by 1946 that the supply of rice or paddy was not going to improve. With the government’s decision to completely suspend the supply of rice to the Duars, by October 1946, the gardens had only about a week’s supplies left.

⁵²⁰ Report on Malnutrition among Tea Garden Labourers in the Duars. *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1944*, pp 25-26, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

⁵²¹ Industrial Health Advisory Committee. Questioner and answer of meeting held at 22nd of September 1944 at District Board Hall, Jalpaiguri. *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1944*, p 36, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

⁵²² Notes of the Industrial Health Advisory Committee Meeting at Jalpaiguri, 22nd September 1944. *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Duars Planters Association for the year 1944*, Pp 45, DPA Archives, Haldibari TE

In September, the Chairman of the DPA reported that even if planters got some maize as an alternative to rice, “ unless the gardens can also give rice/paddy with this alternative foodstuff, very serious trouble is likely to arise in all districts.” Unlike in towns where people are spread over a large area, ration cuts, as he goes on to say, are far more troublesome in gardens where “masses of people are congregated in one place”.

...unrest amongst the labour is prevalent from various causes, and if further aggravation is given to labour due to shortage of food, especially their staple diet rice, I cannot contemplate what the reaction will be. With the police force at the disposal of the district, it will be absolutely impossible to quell disturbances (and they will break out) unless stocks of rice or paddy are put at our disposal. ...I cannot stress too strongly the seriousness of the position.

Some contradictions emerged between the state and the planters' explanations of the unrest. Planters blamed the crisis on that the non-availability of government supplies and restrictions on local purchases. They turned a blind eye upon the apathy of the management, mal-practices in accounting and distribution of ration, and profiteering at the expense of the workers in the gardens. Sections within the state administration on the other hand suspected managers of fudging the data about their stocks so as to hoard food. According to the Superintendent of Police (DIB, Japaiguri):

As regards distribution, variations have been observed in different areas of the Duars and it may be said that in places practices have been indulged in which seem to bring the authors within the power of the law. It is desirable that a general warning reach Managers to the effect that any illegal practices coming to notice in future will necessitate investigations being initiated by the District Enforcement Branch. It is also evident that although a definite policy in respect of ration-issue and other Garden Administrative matters appears to be laid down, this policy has existed rather in theory than in practice.

Beginnings of Organized Trade Union Movement :

In the Duars plantation region, trade unions had a relatively late entry, as compared, for instance, to the adjacent Assam Valley plantations. In Assam, after numerous episodes of sporadic restlessness among the plantation workers, organized resistance developed as early as 1939,

triggered by the Railway Workers' strike.⁵²³ The Digboi oil workers' strike and the railway strikes that occurred more or less simultaneously seems to have inspired the garden workers in Assam.⁵²⁴ Taking advantage of the isolation and relative inaccessibility of the Duars gardens, garden authorities were quite successful in staving off organized labour associations till as late as 1946⁵²⁵ : an absence that was pointed out with great concern even by the Rege Committee.⁵²⁶ Mr. Rege expressed his concern over the fact that the standard of living of the tea workers was quite abysmal and it had deteriorated considerably over the war years when real income of the workers plummeted drastically.⁵²⁷ This was also the time when the tea industry earned great profits, many owners earning more than double their total capital outlay during the six years of war.⁵²⁸ However, once labour organisation began, there was a series 'lightning strikes' across the gardens. As in Assam, the railway workers' union of the Communist Party of India (CPI) played a pivotal role in unionizing; to start with, in the ones adjacent to the railway tracks.

Owing to the massive inflation in the post-war years, workers' purchasing power for essential commodities received a severe blow. But at the same time, the tripartite conferences (where the representatives of the workers, the planters as well as the state would be present) like the Industrial Committee on Plantations, could only suggest further enquiries, thereby delaying the much required wage-increase that could have helped to cope with the inflation.⁵²⁹ In October 1946, the Indian Tea Association had made a 25% increase in the basic wages and according to the wage census, the monthly earnings in 1946 per worker on the pay rolls were⁵³⁰:

⁵²³ Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947*, Delhi: Tulika Books, 2006 p 110 [henceforth Guha]

⁵²⁴ Rana P. Behal, *One Hundred Years of Servitude: Political Economy of Tea Plantations in Colonial Assam*, Delhi: Tulika Books, 2014, p 301

⁵²⁵ As Manas Das Gupta points out, it was due to the extreme inaccessibility of the Duars gardens as well as the influence of the Indian planting class (with links in Congress), that trade union movements or the nationalist movement did not penetrate them, unlike in Assam where the plantation workers were participating in both since the 1920s. But other than various spontaneous acts by the 'not so passive' workers and the Tana Bhagat movement, it was the influence of the collective actions of the Bengal-Assam Railroad Workers Union and the *en masse* participation of the garden-workers in the *Tebhaga* Movement that marked the initiation of trade union activities among the Duars plantation workers which only took more concrete shape by 1952. See Manas Das Gupta, *Labour in Tea Gardens*, Kolkata: Gyan Sagar Publications, 1999 p 75 [henceforth Das Gupta]

⁵²⁶ D.V. Rege, 'Report on an enquiry into conditions of labour in plantations in India', Labour Investigation Committee, Government of India, 1946 p 5

⁵²⁷ 'Chai Bagan Majduron Ki Ladai' [booklet] by Ratanlal Brahman, President, Zilla Cha Bagan Majdur Union-Jalpaiguri (Pub: Darjeeling Zilla Chai Bagan Majdur Union, 1947), NMML [henceforth 'Chai Bagan Majduron Ki Ladai', by Ratanlal Brahman, NMML] p 3

⁵²⁸ *ibid* p 21

⁵²⁹ *ibid* p 2

⁵³⁰ S.R. Deshpande, 'Report on an Enquiry into the Cost and Standard of Living of Plantation Workers in Assam and Bengal', Labour Bureau, Ministry of Labour, Govt. of India, Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1948, p 63

	Rs	As.	P
Adult man	16	14	8
Adult woman	13	8	5
Child	8	15	8

The monthly income per family unit would be⁵³¹:

	Rs	As.	P
Adult man	17	15	0
Adult woman	12	9	3
Child	4	12	1
Total.....	35	4	1

Deshpande's Report (1948) provides the following statistics with regard to Bengal⁵³²:

Average No. of persons/family.....	4.16
Average No. of consumption units/family.....	3.54
Average weekly family income.....	13 5 2
Average weekly family expenditure.....	12 4 9

Only a Dearness Allowance was granted to the garden workers as the Second World War affected prices adversely. A meager allowance was started in 1941 which was doubled by 1944. The rate was

[Henceforth *Report on an Enquiry into the Cost and Standard of Living of Plantation Workers in Assam and Bengal*]

⁵³¹ *Report on an Enquiry into the Cost and Standard of Living of Plantation Workers in Assam and Bengal* p 43

⁵³² *Report on an Enquiry into the Cost and Standard of Living of Plantation Workers in Assam and Bengal* p 64

further revised “in the year 1947 when in the view of the high rise in the Cost of Living Index it was decided in the first session of the Industrial Committee on Plantation to give an allowance of annas 2 to adult men and women anna 1 for children”.⁵³³ The dearness allowance, in 1947, accounted for 11% of the family income.⁵³⁴ This came as an attempt “to ameliorate the existing disparity between the total cash earnings and expenditure that may be required for the purchase of more quantity of food item”.⁵³⁵ Workers were also supposed to get certain concessions in the prices of foodstuff and supply of clothing – dhoti, saree, blanket, kerosene, umbrella, etc “at controlled rate”.⁵³⁶ The money value of these concessions amounted to 24.47% of the family income in 1947. Here is an illustration of the ration scheme of the Duars Planters’ Association (according to the rates in 1947-48)⁵³⁷:

	Concession rates		
	Rs.	As.	P.
Rice3 ½ seers per week.....	0	2	0 /seer
Other cereals..... ½ seer per week.....	0	2	0 /seer
Dhals..... 1 seer per week.....	0	4	0 /seer
Mustard oil..... 1/8 seer per week.....	1	0	0 /seer
Salt..... ¼ seer per week.....	0	2	0 /seer
Gur..... 1 seer per month.....	0	6	0 /seer

According to Deshpande’s enquiry report, workers spent 77.42% of total family income on food. Of the total expenditure, 52.18% was spent on cereals alone, rice and paddy being the most important items, accounting for 49.13% of the total. Therefore, any rise in grain prices - of rice and paddy - would severely affect the worker’s budget. Hence the vital dependence on rationing, particularly of grains. Discrepancies in the system could make conditions volatile. Halidar’s investigation that had started in January 1947, had pointed towards disparities in the ration system and recommended “early

⁵³³ S.K. Halidar, ‘Report on an Enquiry into the Living Condition of Plantation Workers in Jalpaiguri district (Duars), West Bengal’, Govt. of West Bengal, Labour Directorate, Alipore: West Bengal Government Press, 1951, p 10 [Henceforth *Report on an Enquiry into the Living Condition of Plantation Workers in Jalpaiguri district (Duars), West Bengal*]

⁵³⁴ *Report on an Enquiry into the Cost and Standard of Living of Plantation Workers in Assam and Bengal* p 43

⁵³⁵ *Report on an Enquiry into the Living Condition of Plantation Workers in Jalpaiguri district (Duars), West Bengal* pp 10-11

⁵³⁶ *Report on an Enquiry into the Living Condition of Plantation Workers in Jalpaiguri district (Duars), West Bengal* p 11

⁵³⁷ *Report on an Enquiry into the Cost and Standard of Living of Plantation Workers in Assam and Bengal* p 44

rectification” : especially discrepancies in “the question of quantity of supply which is sometimes less than the quota mentioned or even altogether denied on the plea of non-availability.”⁵³⁸ For a work force kept below subsistence wages, every such instance, in the general context of wartime scarcity, high prices and black-marketing, had explosive potential.

Violent agitations broke out primarily around blatant discrepancies, malpractices and profiteering through ‘ration cuts’, lower wages and ill-treatment/arrest of workers involved in the struggle. From June to December 1946, strikes, agitations, militant confrontations were reported from Dumchipara, Banarhat, Nayasylee, Jiti, Lankapara, Chalsa, Choonabhati, Youngton, Hantupara, Tulsipara, Makraopara, Dalmore, Ramjhora, Rajabhatkhaoo, Gangutia, Eina, Raimatang, Chinchula, Kalchini, Lothabari, Bandapani, Meechpara, Chuapara, Radharani, Dalsingpara, Achapara, and other estates. They were no longer sporadic and spontaneous. In the latter half of 1946, struggles were even coordinated across different gardens grounded in common issues. So much so that the state authorities were forced to take special note of this unprecedented and ‘alarming’ situation thereby also making certain revealing observations.⁵³⁹

I. Lightning strikes:

Let us look at some notable instances of ‘unrest’ and at the emergent themes that ran through them. A distinctively different pattern began roughly from June 1946 and continued through the rest of the year, and also beyond. On 23 June, 1946, labourers of Banarhat Tea Garden in Dhupguri, Jalpaiguri district, were “dissatisfied with the garden authorities over cloth and ration distribution.” They eventually struck work on the 25th. The police took no action and, thereafter, “the situation became normal through the tactful handling of the Manager of the Garden.”⁵⁴⁰ On 2nd July the labourers of Nayasylee Tea Estate, Nagrakata of this district “threatened to abstain from work if they were not

⁵³⁸ *Report on an Enquiry into the Living Condition of Plantation Workers in Jalpaiguri district (Duars), West Bengal* p 11

⁵³⁹ In a special report compiled by the Superintendent of Police, District Intelligence Branch [DIB] (Jalpaiguri) entitled ‘Review on Labour Unrest in the Duars in 1946’ the anxiety, the observations regarding causality, and remedial recommendations were categorically reported. See File No. 662/46, Labour Matter/Unrest: Labour Unrest in Tea Garden, Jalpaiguri, Intelligence Branch, pp 42, IB Archive [henceforth File No. 662/46 IB Archive]

⁵⁴⁰ Extract from the Weekly Confidential Report [WCR] of the Superintendent of Police, DIB, Jalpaiguri for the week ending 6th July 1946, Part II. Industrial Movement:(b) Strikes, File No. 662/46, p 4, IB Archive

provided with better provisions and increased wages". Local intelligence sources reported that the labourers apparently were agitated under the "misunderstanding that the Manager was responsible for their grievances". But when they were shown "concrete examples of mismanagement on the part of the junior staff" the situation returned to 'normalcy'.⁵⁴¹ Subsequently, the coolies of Jiti T.E. (Nagrakata) "abstained from their work and assaulted the Garden Babu" on 10th July. They attempted to raid the quarters of the Indian staff, drove away the servants of the Manager's quarters, disconnected the water supply and also obstructed the road. They struck work till the 15th on the ground of "low wages and smaller quantity of ration." They remained "furious" till the arrival of the police on the spot.⁵⁴² The Jiti T.E. strike according to a Special Report Case, was a sequel to the Nyasylee T.E. incident. The Manger was presented with certain demands: (1) Increase in basic pay. (2) More rations. (3) Dismissal of the 'Bara Babu'. (4) Supply of umbrellas. (5) Permission to allow the workers' cattle to graze on the Estate. The reaction of the DPA Sub District Chairman and one or two of his colleagues however was rigidly unrelenting. They decided to make no change as regards wages. The ration's scale, it was said, was fixed by government and could not be altered. The Manager, the Chairman maintained, was not prepared to dispose with the services of the 'Bara Babu' upon whom he apparently placed great reliance. Finally, he added "[U]mbrellas cannot be procured as asked for in (4) and the ridiculousness of the request in (5) is obvious."⁵⁴³ The demands indicate that along with the abysmally low basic pay, there was also considerable anger about the rabid malpractices/corruption involved in the distribution of ration and provisions. Hence, the targeting of the Garden Babu. The work force in duars, that was predominantly settled on "separate and independent holdings, each with its own plot of ground"; also took "much more interest in growing vegetables, and keeping pigs, cattle and poultry".⁵⁴⁴ The demand for grazing rights, suggest that the workers, due to their paltry income as wage-earners, were increasingly keen to meet their burgeoning expenses from the subsistence sector.

Again, in September, labourers of Lankapara Tea Estate, "became riotous over the system of issuing rations and attacked the Assistant Manager and the Head Clerk who were severely injured." In this instance too, on 10th September, the Manager's bungalow, factory and the office were attacked and damaged. As the police was called in the next day, labourers stopped their work in protest. The office-

⁵⁴¹ Ibid, p 4

⁵⁴² Extract from the WCR of the Superintendent of Police DIB, Jalpaiguri for the week ending 20.7.46, 3. Industrial Movement:(b) Strikes, File No. 662/46, pp 5, IB Archive

⁵⁴³ Extract from Report II dated 17.7.46 of Jalpaiguri Special Report Case No. 35/36, File No. 662/46, p 48, IB Archive

⁵⁴⁴ *Report on an Enquiry into the Cost and Standard of Living of Plantation Workers in Assam and Bengal* p 112

staff were reportedly “very frightened by this mob violence and ran away” for the time being. The Superintendent of Police subsequently visited Lankapara Tea Estate to ‘reinstate order’—an adequate police force was retained there “for the maintenance of peace and order and the protection of the Management and Garden property.”⁵⁴⁵ On the 19th, labourers of Chalsa Tea Estate in Matelli “became riotous over the system of issuing rations.” The Head-clerk was severely injured and other clerks got minor injuries. The factory and office were also similarly attacked and damaged and conditions were brought under control only through police presence.⁵⁴⁶ On 7th October, the labour force of Choonabhati Tea Estate refused to join work “on the issue of ration and the demands for enhanced wages.” Lal Kancha Paharia, a Dakwala of the garden, reportedly “disobeyed the orders of externment from the garden and instigated the coolies to go on strike.” The coolies resumed work only after an amicable settlement was arrived at.⁵⁴⁷ The workers of Youngton Tea Estate (Matelli) were disturbed over some orders of the Assistant Manager. He was physically assaulted and the factory office was damaged. For the time being it appeared that the Garden Superintendent could settle the matter on his return from Darjeeling but “further trouble was apprehended during the ensuing week and armed police were again deputed.”⁵⁴⁸ There is a definite pattern that is clearly discernible as to the causality, the prime targets, and grievances and demands that were thrown up.

The Dumchipara struggle:

Since May 1946, one of the gardens that remained in considerable focus for frequent ‘disturbances’ was the Dumchipara Tea Estate. While enquires were going on about earlier disturbances, this garden became a source of major anxiety. The Factory Babu for instance was “assaulted by some hill-coolies” on the 26th of July. The management feared that the situation might become “more inflammable” if the earlier cases ended in conviction. Therefore the Manager predictably asked for police assistance. The Circle Inspector suggested, and the Deputy Commissioner endorsed the dispatch of a small force to Dumchipara under the command of the Reserve Inspector.⁵⁴⁹ During the agitation in the Lankapara Tea Estate, the authorities had already thought that “the trouble-makers of Dumchipara Tea Garden

⁵⁴⁵ Extract from the WCR of the Superintendent of Police DIB, Jalpaiguri for the week ending 21.9.46, 3. Industrial Movement, File No. 662/46, p 7, IB Archive

⁵⁴⁶ Extract from the WCR of the Superintendent of Police DIB, Jalpaiguri for the weeks ending 28.9.46., 5.10.46. and 12.10.46, File No. 662/46, p 8, IB Archive

⁵⁴⁷ Extract from the WCR of the Superintendent of Police DIB, Jalpaiguri for the week ending 19.10.46, Industrial Movement, File No. 662/46, p 11, IB Archive

⁵⁴⁸ Extract from the WCR of the Superintendent of Police DIB, Jalpaiguri for the weeks ending 26.10.46, 3. Industrial Movement, File No. 662/46, p 18, IB Archive

⁵⁴⁹ Extract from the Monthly Resume of the Superintendent of Police, Jalpaiguri, for the month of July 1946, Appendix to review on labour unrest in the Duars, 1946, File No. 662/46, p 45, IB Archive

were the principle agitators in the neighbouring areas” and a decision was made to evict ‘undesirables’ from the garden. The Manager gave them marching orders but the workers disobeyed and began to mobilize other workers. This prompted the police to institute cases of “trespass” against them. On 12th October, as *Swadhinata*⁵⁵⁰ reports, 12 workers and their families (around 60 people) were evicted from the garden. Armed police force had been stationed in the garden area. Nokol Sing, Sugrib, Sanglaray and others among the 8 workers, who had refused to leave the garden perimeters, were forcibly thrown out along with their household materials by the police and their residence was locked. They were then arrested. They were among the most active members of the newly formed Union of the garden.⁵⁵¹

Workers organized a local demonstration on 13th October. Coolies of Hantupara, Tulsipara, Makrapara, Dalmore and Ramjhora Tea Estates came together in a procession led by Sunil Sarkar (Secretary, Alipurduar Congress Committee: Forward Bloc), Amrit Bahadur Rai, Birdhaj and other evicted persons. They moved into Dumchipara workers-lines and Ramjhora Bazar with Forward Bloc flags shouting “Bandemataram, Bagan Mat Churo, Hafta Bahar Bandh Karo, Police Julum Band Karo, Malikko Dabao, Mazdur Sub Ak Hao,etc.” The processionists held a meeting at Ramjhora Bazar under the president-ship of Sunil Kumar Sarkar and speeches expressed sympathy for the evicted. Further demonstrations were apprehended on 20.10.46 which called for immediate prohibitory orders from the police.⁵⁵² On November 4, *Swadhinata* reports the arrest of 27 workers along with their family members and others including the Mahakuma Congress Secretary (Forward Bloc)..⁵⁵³

II. The ‘November Disturbances’:

⁵⁵⁰ *Swadhinata*, a Bengali daily, was the mouthpiece of the CPI and was one of the most consistent in terms of reporting regarding peasant/workers’ movements. Left journalism, besides left unionism, was an important segment of party activity and was given due importance. The reporters took considerable risk in reporting from the struggle sites and also was quite bold in their presentation of it. Left journalism in this case (*Swadhinata*) remains an extremely important source of information that always give us the workers’ perspective while exposing the practices of the state and planter class. In the archives, particularly within the Intelligence Branch files, *Swadhinata* is preserved, not in its entirety, but in sections dealing with the particular issues being referred to in the gardens.

⁵⁵¹ ‘*Cha Bagan-e Sramik Dalan:8 union Workers arrested: Jalpaiguri,24th October*’, *Swadhinata* issue: 20.10.1946. File No. 662/46, p 13, IB Archive

⁵⁵² Extract from the WCR of the Superintendent of Police DIB, Jalpaiguri for the week ending 26.10.46, 3. Industrial Movement, File No. 662/46, p 18, IB Archive

⁵⁵³ ‘*Cha Bagan-e Sramik Dalan:27 workers arrested: Alipurduar, 1st November*’, *Swadhinata* issue: 4.11.1946. File No. 662/46 IB Archive

Labour militancy became heightened towards the end of the year and spread to other gardens. This phase reflected an enhanced hold of unions in leading garden agitations which was acknowledged by the authorities. From the 6th to the 10th of November, labourers of Rajabhatkhaoa, Gangutia, Eima, Raimatang, Chinchula, Kalchini and Lothabari Tea Estates “raised objection to the issue of certain quantity of bhutta (maize) instead of rice” in their rations. They assaulted clerks, shopkeepers of the Gardens and some of the Munshis. The SDO, the Superintendent of Police and the Deputy Commissioner visited the locality and police pickets were placed where necessary.⁵⁵⁴ This agitation, as the *Swadhinata* reports, spread among more than 15,000 workers in the nine Tea Estates around the Kalchini station in Alipurduar also invited the wrath of the authorities. On 25th November, 14 workers from the Raimatang Tea Estate were arrested and armed police posted in every garden “who in order to help the planters” were “hunting for several others of the workers’ leadership.”⁵⁵⁵

The threat of Unionization:

The Superintendent of Police of the District Intelligence Branch in his Special Report on the labour unrest in the gardens sums up what appeared to him as an ‘alarming situation’:

The general situation in the Duars is disturbing and further trouble of a character similar to that experienced in 1946 is foreseen during this year [1947]. The intention of this brief survey is to show to what extent labour unrest has manifested itself during the past few months, the degree to which political agitators have been involved, and give an indication as to the desirability of measures to improve the situation.

Generally speaking the basic cause of the trouble may be said to be economic, and in this field political agitators are able to and do find ample material for exploitation. They are not slow in seizing upon any pretext for stirring up trouble and in view of the inflammatory material among which they work (Tea garden labour) it is easy to start a conflagration. On not a few occasions some very serious situations have been experienced, the labour has become riotous in character; Managerial staff has been assaulted, Garden property damaged; and the law flagrantly broken.

⁵⁵⁴ Extract from the WCR of the Superintendent of Police DIB, Jalpaiguri for the week ending 16.11.46, File No. 662/46, p 20, IB Archive

⁵⁵⁵ ‘Alipurduar-e 15 hajar Cha-Sromiker Birotto-purno Shongram: Conspiracy by the White planters: Profiteering through Ration Cuts: Police Raj in Garden: 14 workers arrested: Workers win full rations’, *Swadhinata* issue: 13.12.1946, p 24, File No. 662/46, IB Archive

The closing six months of 1946 witnessed a deterioration in certain areas which culminated in about a dozen gardens in the Kalchini area being affected in November and damage to property in this area alone is estimated in the region of 74,000/-.⁵⁵⁶

Ingrained here is an acknowledgement of the deplorable economic condition of garden-workers. There is an official recognition of the scope for legitimate grievances of the workers. And more importantly :

*It is abundantly clear that the garden labour is steadily growing in political consciousness and with the absence of proper control and guidance in this respect, the authority of Managers is being steadily undermined. While, perhaps, this is not fully apparent in all parts of Duars, there is no doubt that unrest exists and authority must weaken in the absence of firm measures.*⁵⁵⁷ [emphasis added]

Gone were the days of sporadic restlessness in the new period of politically organized trade union activity. There were increasing instances of workers of one garden coming out in support of the struggles of the workers of other gardens.⁵⁵⁸ The Superintendent therefore observes:

[T]he promotion of Unions will be an active feature of future political activity in the Duars. The industry should make up its mind quickly as to the attitude it feels desirable to adopt towards unions, formulate a policy, and get it working. Every effort must be made to ensure that there is no further undermining of Managerial authority.⁵⁵⁹

In his report (dated 26.9.1946) on the 'Lankapara trouble' he had similarly observed,—“The Dumchipara and Lankapara incidents are examples of the state of lawlessness which arises from mass labour action. That serious efforts by political parties to build up 'labour fronts' are known. *The promotion of labour organizations (Trade Unions) with such inflammatory and illiterate material is fraught with not inconsiderable danger. Anything tending to undermine the authority of the Managers is likely to have unfortunate repercussions and any policy framed in this connection calls for careful*

⁵⁵⁶ 'Review on Labour Unrest in the Duars in 1946', File No. 662/46, pp 42, IB Archive

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid p 42

⁵⁵⁸ 'Chai Bagan Majduron Ki Ladai', by Ratanlal Brahman, p 12, NMML

⁵⁵⁹ 'Review on Labour Unrest in the Duars in 1946', File No. 662/46, p 44, IB Archive

examination and guidance."⁵⁶⁰ [emphasis added] . He concludes "that it is imperative that the industry makes up its mind what they are going to do about the promotion of Trade Unions and then get on and do it."⁵⁶¹

Workers in Darjeeling received only rice, and in Duars they received only rice and dal in their rations, while the supply of all other essential commodities was stopped.⁵⁶² Mr. Deshpande's enquiry report admitted that the workers in Bengal received less rice than the Assam gardens, the only reason being the higher market-price of rice in Bengal.⁵⁶³ Till the year before it was still possible for the workers to meet their requirements on the black-market, but skyrocketing black market prices during the inflation and dearth of grains in the market precluded this possibility.⁵⁶⁴ It was predominantly the Manager, or Assistant Manager of a particular garden, or the Babus, i.e., persons in managerial positions directly or indirectly linked to such malpractices, who were held responsible by the workers and faced the brunt of the assaults. *Swadhinata* gives a vivid account of the 'deliberate anomalies' in rations and accuses the management for engaging in blatant profiteering through ration-cuts. Regarding the simultaneous strikes that broke out in the Kalchini region of Alipurduar in November 1946 on the issue of ration cuts, *Swadhinata* remarks:

The white owners and the highly placed management of these gardens have been living off the exploited workforce. But off late the agitation launched by the Santhal, Gurkha and Nepali workers against ration cuts has shaken the very foundations of the exploitative structure. According to govt rules every worker is entitled to 3 sares of rice and 2 sares of kolai, chola etc. The white planters till date through the white Steel Brothers used to buy the requisite quantity. But then at the beginning of the month of November, they claimed that there were no grains left in the govt. stocks. With this excuse supply was stalled and thereby acute food-crisis emerged.

Profiteering through ration-cuts: in each of the gardens there were still stocks of ration that could at least last 3 weeks. Outside the price of rice was 35-40 rupees. Therefore the planters decided that instead of reducing their share of profits by buying the highly-priced rice from outside, they would rather reduce the quantity of workers' ration to half and thereby stretch the 3 weeks rations till 6 weeks. This could continue till the price of rice in the market fell with the coming of new supply. As of now they thought it would suffice to give the workers a portion of their rations in the form of

⁵⁶⁰ Extract from the Monthly Resume of the Superintendent of Police, Jalpaiguri, for the month of September 1946, Appendix to review on labour unrest in the Duars, 1946, File No. 662/46, p 46, IB Archive

⁵⁶¹ Extract from the Monthly Resume of the Superintendent of Police, Jalpaiguri, for the month of December 1946, Appendix to review on labour unrest in the Duars, 1946, File No. 662/46, p 48, IB Archive

⁵⁶² 'Chai Bagan Majduron Ki Ladai', by Ratanlal Brahman, p 7, NMML

⁵⁶³ Ibid p 7

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid p 7

horrible maize. Therefore take care of your own share of profit, don't think about the rations of workers.

But the moment this conspiracy of the profit-hungry white planters came into the open it triggered extreme anger among the 15,000 workers that spread like wildfire. Particularly the Santhal workers were most agitated as they did not have maize in their diet.

In spite of repeated appeals to the management against ration cuts and maize, the adamant authorities maintained that workers should "have the maize".

'We want full rations': as a result on the first week of November, on the day of the distribution of rations, anger peaked. Spontaneously but with a determined organization back up, thousands of workers started agitating in their respective gardens. The oppressive managerial staff, the babus and the usurious shopkeepers now ran off to the town. Kalchini and Shalbari managements were forced to agree to the demands of the workers. But as the owners of the rest of the gardens refused to give full rations it further infuriated the workers. Women and male workers gheraoed the ration office and taught a lesson to the obstinate and oppressive staff.

Finally the white planters kneel: the continued militant agitation of 25 thousand workers from the 6th to the 11th November in the gardens around Kalchini gave rise to a new Movement. And they finally forced the white planters to kneel in front of the workers' might. The workers have received full rations and they have resumed work.⁵⁶⁵ [emphasis added]

Even if one questions the extent of reliability of political rhetoric; the picture gains credence from what the authorities themselves reported. Responsible voices from within the state apparatus attests to the fact that gross mishandlings were widely prevalent particularly in the distribution of ration in food grains, etc. There was also an anxiety that unless these were checked, workers would have legitimate grounds for unrest. The Superintendent of Police (DIB, Jalpaiguri) in his special report observes:

Regular supply to the area and equable distribution will go a long way towards staving off trouble. As regards distribution, variations have been observed in different areas of the Duars and it may be said that in places practices have been indulged in which seem to bring the authors within the power of the law. It is desirable that a general warning reach Managers to the effect that any illegal practices coming to notice in future will necessitate investigations being initiated by the District Enforcement Branch. It is also evident that although a definite policy in respect of ration-issue and other Garden Administrative matters appears to be laid down, this policy has existed rather in theory than in practice. Maintenance of close contact with labour must be insisted upon

⁵⁶⁵ 'Alipurduar-e 15 hajar Cha-Sromiker Birotto-purno Shongram: Conspiracy by the White planters: Profiteering through Ration Cuts: Police Raj in Garden: 14 workers arrested: Workers win full rations', *Swadhinata* issue: 13.12.1946. File No. 662/46, p 24, IB Archive

and policies laid down enforced; particularly in respect of any rationing system and in so far as is practicable the rationing system should be uniform. [emphasis added]⁵⁶⁶

The report further observes:

A solution of the food problem would go some way towards staving off trouble. From my conversation with and listening to comments of Managers it can only be deduced that arrangements for supplies (rice) and the issue of rations have not been under that strict supervision which is so essentially desirable. Generally speaking, the subject is of a domestic character and the DPA should be in a position to profit by its recent experience and ensure some smoother and uniform working during the forthcoming years. *It is suggested that with your approval the association be warned of the reactions likely to arise if the food policy is not on a sound and uniform basis and also that a closer official examination of their ration arrangements may be expected in future.*⁵⁶⁷ [emphasis added]

The management randomly imposed 'fines' for absence from work by denying subsidized rates of rations to workers. The longer the absence, the higher was the price extorted from workers.⁵⁶⁸ In many gardens in Duars, like in Shankhana, Bedrajura, Songachi, etc., if a worker failed to appear for work for a day, the family was forced to pay for their rations. The sudden 'withdrawal of rations' was used as a weapon against the 'recalcitrant' workers.⁵⁶⁹ The Inspector-General of Police thought that "nothing effective can be done until the Tea Trade itself takes a strong line to insist on Managers maintaining closer contact with their labour and enforcing a uniform rationing system in every garden."⁵⁷⁰ The desirability of a uniform labour policy, particularly for food had been evident deemed necessary or quite some time. Finally it was stressed that though for the time being the Aman crop harvest could avert the current crisis, yet in the longer run the "problem of feeding the labour and the formation of Trade Unions in the tea Industry are factors which as we see in the past are potential sources of danger in the future."⁵⁷¹

⁵⁶⁶ Extract from the Monthly Resume of the Supdt of Police, Jalpaiguri, for the month of June 1946, Appendix to review on labour unrest in the Duars, 1946, File No. 662/46, p 45, IB Archive

⁵⁶⁷ Extract from the Monthly Resume of the Superintendent of Police, Jalpaiguri, for the month of November 1946, Appendix to review on labour unrest in the Duars, 1946, File No. 662/46, p 47, IB Archive

⁵⁶⁸ 'Chai Bagan Majduron Ki Ladai', by Ratanlal Brahman, p 8, NMML

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid p 8

⁵⁷⁰ Extract from the Monthly Resume of the Supdt of Police, Jalpaiguri for the month of December, 1946, Appendix to review on labour unrest in the Duars, 1946, File No. 662/46, p 48, IB Archive

⁵⁷¹ Extract from the Monthly Resume of the Superintendent of Police, Jalpaiguri, for the month of November 1946, Appendix to review on labour unrest in the Duars, 1946, File No. 662/46, p 47, IB Archive

Garden shopkeepers were frequently attacked and their shops ransacked and looted by the angry workers. Most of these shops within the tea estates were owned by “Hindus and Marwaris” (who were predominantly supporters of the Congress)⁵⁷² and many of them were notorious for their “usurious practices”⁵⁷³ or charging “exorbitant prices”.⁵⁷⁴ In the coming days Communist activists would identify the jotedars and the European planters simultaneously as prime class enemies for “idly taking the major profit of the Tea Business”. This opened up larger possibilities of mobilization during the *Tebhaga* Movement.⁵⁷⁵ Much of the post-war phenomenon of ‘food crisis’/‘high grain prices’ was deliberately and artificially created by the local potentates for the purpose of profiteering at the cost of the workers and peasants. This created the objective conditions for a solidarity between the garden workers and the struggling share-croppers during the period of *Tebhaga* movement.

The ration-unrest continues:

Demands for a regular supply of adequate and quality rations continued to expose the garden babus, the ration clerks and the managerial officers to the wrath of the workers. In Haihaipather T.E. the workers went on strike for a day on the 27th of January 1947 against ration cut and delay in cloth distribution forcing the Manager to agree to the grievances.⁵⁷⁶ From the report of the DIO it is evident that CPI had played an active role behind the mobilization of the workers in Hahaipather through organizing “secret meetings” with the workers preceding the strike. On the 27th morning about 400/500 coolies assembled at the office compound and approached the Manager in writing. Their main demands were (1) Removal of Head Clerk, Factory Babu and Ration Clerk, (2) Supply of cloth after every three months, (3) Full ration to the sick and full hazira, (4) Better dwelling houses, (5) Establishment of girls’ school, (there were few boys’ schools in some of the gardens) (6) Supply of 5 seers of rice per week, 2 seers of oil, 3 seers of kerosene oil, 2 seers salt, and 4 seers sugar monthly for every individual @ -/4/- per seer, (7) increased rate of Hazira @ 1-8-0, 1/- & -/12/- for men, women

⁵⁷² Extract from the WCR of the Superintendent of police DIB, Jalpaiguri for the week ending 1.6.46, Miscellaneous, File No. 662/46, p 2, IB Archive

⁵⁷³ ‘Alipurduar-e 15 hajar Cha-Sromiker Birotto-purno Shongram: Conspiracy by the White planters: Profiteering through Ration Cuts: Police Raj in Garden: 14 workers arrested: Workers win full rations’, *Swadhinata* issue: 13.12.1946, File No. 662/46, p 24, IB Archive

⁵⁷⁴ The case of the Dalsingpara T.E. SI No. 14, *List of cases arising out of labour unrest in Duars Tea Gardens in 1946, Appendix to review on labour unrest in the Duars, 1946*, File No. 662/46, p 54, IB Archive

⁵⁷⁵ Jalpaiguri WCR, 15.2.47, Attempt by the CPI to stir up agrarian unrest [in Jalpaiguri district], p 29, File No 1118/46, IB Archive

⁵⁷⁶ ‘Cha Bagan Sramik Dharmaghat’r Biraat Joy’, *Domohani*, 31st January, *Swadhinata* issue: 3.2.47, p 49, IB Archive

and children respectively. Two other “secret meetings” were said to have been held right after at the Railway gang quarter inside the Toonbari T.E. on 28th and 29th January with Mansingh of Mal Rly Station and Sukdeo and Budhu of Haihaipatha T.E. being attended by Etwa Uraon and Jaga Ruotia of Toonbari T.E. and some other Sardars of Malnadi, Dalimkote and other neighbouring Gardens. Here, the report states, the workers of the adjacent gardens were “instigated” to follow the coolies of Haihaipatha T.E. in redressing their grievances “and the result was simultaneous unrest in Needham, Toonbari and Malnadi on 29.1.47, 30.1.47 and 2.2.47 respectively with more or less similar demands.” The workers of Needham, Gurjanjhora and Dalimkote T.E.s were assured by the Manager that they were looking into their grievances. While in Toonbari and Malnadi T.E.s certain Babus and Manager of the latter Garden were assaulted by the workers. The main causes of the trouble, as ascertained in the report of the DIO were again supply of rations & harsh treatment by the Garden Clerks. Further, the rations supplied were “not always accurate and short in weight” owing to the “lack of supervision by the Managers specially in the Indian Gardens.” It was noticeable, the report says, that the Tea Gardens where unrest took place, the coolies assaulted mainly those Babus who were in close touch with the ration distribution system and demanded their immediate removal from the gardens.⁵⁷⁷

About 300 workers of the Rajabhat Tea Estate assembled at the office of the garden on 3rd October 1947 and complained that the rations and emoluments of certain juvenile workers have been unfairly reduced. The Assistant Manger, a European, and some Bengali employees attempted to negotiate a settlement, finally leading to the assault of the Assistant Manager and the office employees by the angry workers. Three days later when a number of the accused in the case were arrested by the police, they were surrounded and the workers attempted to rescue those in custody and to snatch away the rifles of the armed police finally ending with a bayonet charge by the police injuring 21 workers. Just two days later, on the 5th, about 100 workers of the Karala Valley T.E. assaulted three Bengali employees of the garden on 5th October and damaged the house and furniture of the Manager, also a Bengali, as the Bengali employees ordered the workers to work after the usual working hours. The workers were already quite discontented over their wages and rations, and the attitude of certain Bengali employees. A number of the workers of the Hageswari Tea Estate entered the garden office during the distribution of rations demanding the same quota of rations as was allowed to the workers of neighbouring estates, and alleging there were discrepancies in their ration cards. Following an altercation between the workers and the clerical staff the two Bengali employees were beaten up by the workers. On 13 October, about 1500 workers of the Central Duars Tea Estate, some armed with

⁵⁷⁷ Copy of the report of a DIO dated 10.2.47, File No. 662/46, p 51, IB Archive

kukris and lathis, entered the garden office and demanded cloth and rations for their dependents. A section of the infuriated workers assaulted some of the garden clerks. On the same day, a number of workers of the Manabari T.E. demanded 4 seers of rice for each worker on the ground that the workers of the same garden living in the surrounding villages were receiving rice on the strength of their Union Board ration cards, in addition to the amount drawn by them from the garden. They later assaulted the head clerk who resorted to firing causing injuries to some of the workers.⁵⁷⁸

On December 8th the labourers of the Denguajhar Tea Estate attacked and assaulted the European Manager and Assistant Manager of the garden while the Head clerk and other Bengali staff of the garden ran away from their quarters for safety out of fear. The cause of the unrest was again around the issue of rations as it was alleged that the “Manager had ignored a complaint of the labourers that they were getting paddy at the rate of six seeres per rupees instead of 8 seeres. The labourers held secret meetings and decided to drive away the ration clerk from the garden. Efforts of the Manager to pacify the agitated labourers proved abortive and they resorted to violence.” Matters took an even more serious turn when police attempted to arrest some of the workers on the 11th leading to protest by a huge group of angry workers. The police opened fire which further infuriated the workers leading to a series of protest demonstrations subsequently.⁵⁷⁹ After two months of strike, the Manager was forced to agree to the demands of the workers, but attempts continued allegedly to divide the workers even on the basis of ‘Christian-non Christian’ by the padri.⁵⁸⁰ The Denguajhar Tea Estate labourers were again in the focus on 6th July 1948 for agitating against the non-supply of kerosene oil on the ration day. The workers went on strike when force was stationed in the garden demanding the withdrawal of police.⁵⁸¹ Again there was a two-month strike following which the Deputy Commissioner promised to agree to all the demands.⁵⁸² On 18th May 1948, the workers of Sorugao T.E. in Falakata demonstrated around malpractices in ration provisions. Workers were also angered due to the oppressive practices of the European Manager and Babus and they beat them up. *Swadhinata* reported that the police reached the spot and a camp was set up. Since then the workers had to face various forms of harassment.⁵⁸³

⁵⁷⁸ Extract from the WBRA of 8.11.47, File No. 662/46, p 98, IB Archive

⁵⁷⁹ Extract from the WBRA of 20.12.47, File No. 662/46, pp 105, IB Archive

⁵⁸⁰ ‘*Chai Bagan Majduron Ki Ladai*’, by Ratanlal Brahman, p 27, NMML

⁵⁸¹ Copy of Radiogram Message dated 6.7.48 From the supdt of Police, Jalpaiguri To DIG, IB, AIG (W.B.), Labour Commissioner, West Bengal, Calcutta & Asst. Labour Commissioner, *Darjeeling*, File No. 662/46, p 121, IB Archive

⁵⁸² ‘*Chai Bagan Majduron Ki Ladai*’, by Ratanlal Brahman, p 28, NMML

⁵⁸³ ‘*Jolpaigurite Cha Bagan Mojdurder Upor Ottachar: 14 workers arrested*’, Jalpaiguri, 13th January, *Swadhinata* issue: 15.6.48., File No. 662/46, p 118, IB Archive

One is struck by the frequency with which the Bengali Garden Babus, Ration Clerks or Managerial Officials were attacked. Most of these Bengali employees were the immediate masters when it came to ration distribution and accounting. In most cases they were accused of mal-practices and corruption 'misbehaviour', 'ill-conduct' and 'oppressive practices'. Most struggles led to a police crackdown either in the form of arrests or by use of force – lathi-charge, bayonet charge and even firing. These proved to be a further rallying point. In several instances they could push through their demands.

State's Response: Militarizing the 'troublesome' gardens:

The next step for the garden authorities was to summon the armed forces to their rescue. In many 'troublesome' gardens, armed police camps were set up "for the maintenance of peace and order and the protection of the Management and Garden property". They hunted down union-leaders or "trouble-makers" in order to "quell disturbances". Suggestions were made about the 'necessity' of permanent military presence. This was an attempt to match the politicization and the rise in trade union activities in the gardens with more military might. The Superintendent of Police (DIB, Jalpaiguri) concludes in his special review report:

The state of communications in this district, particularly during the rains give rise to *the conclusion that Armed Forces should be permanently located east of the river Teesta*. There is nothing at present to show that the general economic and political situation existing in the Duars is likely to improve and trouble experienced in the past six months may be expected to continue. Tea Gardens are isolated units and in order to assure adequate protection for those who are the targets of mob violence, *the Jalpaiguri District Special Armed Forces must be strengthened. It is proposed that additional forces be located at Alipurduar and Moynaguri where Inspectors of Police are already posted.*⁵⁸⁴

⁵⁸⁴ 'Review on Labour Unrest in the Duars in 1946', File No. 662/46, p 43, IB Archive

Mobilizational role & influence of different political organizations & ideologies within the garden spaces

The Communist Party of India (CPI)

The CPI organized a mass Tea Garden labour rally at Mal area of Duars on 11th August 1946. It was addressed by Ratanlal Brahman, MLA from Darjeeling. Labour conditions were analysed and the garden management was criticized. According to the Monthly Resume of the Superintendent of Police (Jalpaiguri), "[I]t seems that this meeting marks a real start for the formation of Unions of Tea Garden labour." About 450 garden workers (both Madesia and Paharia) of the Duars joined the rally. Parimal Mitra, Debaprasad Ghosh, and Charu Mazumdar were the main speakers. "They urged the coolies to unite and form a Union-the only weapon whereby their demands can be formulated for redress."⁵⁸⁵ This was immediately followed by another meeting of about 150 workers on the 18th at Banarhat Railway Station and thereafter the Tea Garden Labour Union was formed with its office in Jalpaiguri under Ratanlal Brahman's (CPI) president-ship and with Debaprasad Ghosh (CPI) as its secretary. The latter has been moving in the Tea Gardens in order to recruit members.⁵⁸⁶

Communists created a "favourable field of operation" among the Tea Garden labour particularly in the Mal Circle. Considering the fact that most of the Gardens in this area were more or less adjacent to Railway Stations, the Railway Staff, predominantly members of the Bengal Assam Rail Road Workers' Union, could have easy access to the Garden Sardars & workers. Moreover, Debaprasad Ghosh, Lal Bahadur Chettri and Monsing, all railway employees, frequently visited this area and held "secret meetings with the Sardars and their places of meeting [were] generally the Railway gang quarters inside the Tea Gardens." The Bengal Assam Rail Road Workers Union (BARRWU) workers played a pivotal role in unionizing the garden workers. They moved from garden to garden and took Communist ideas (leaflets being one form) to the workers lines and maintained close connections with them.⁵⁸⁷ It was in 1938, ex-Union member Bimal Dasgupta recalls, that the Bengal Duars Railway and the Assam Railway came together to form the BARRWU at Domohani and this was at a time when in the whole of north Bengal and Duars there was no other notable union in any formal sector. They often used to "send squads" to Darjeeling and Assam made of a band of organizers to initiate union-

⁵⁸⁵ Extract from the WCR of the Superintendent of police DIB, Jalpaiguri for the week ending 17th August 1946, Communism, File No. 662/46, p 6, IB Archive

⁵⁸⁶ 'Review on Labour Unrest in the Duars in 1946', File No. 662/46, p 42, IB Archive

⁵⁸⁷ Copy of the report of a DIO dated 10.2.47, File No. 662/46, p 51 IB Archive

work in newer areas.⁵⁸⁸ Union-workers simultaneously organized the Duars tea-workers and the local peasantry. "In those days of British rule outsiders were not allowed to enter the garden perimeter. Workers were thrown out on any minor pretext. In these circumstances the railway pointsmen and the gangmen contacted with the garden-workers and the peasants. Many a time they used to call them near the railway tracks to conduct meetings."⁵⁸⁹ The peasants and the workers gained inspiration and courage from the strength of the railway Union. They joined hands during the historic *Tebhaga* struggle which spread all across Duars. Mansing, Jadunath, Budhan, Julius of the railway were the prime organizers of these struggles.

On the 6th, 7th and 8th of December, 1946, the BA Railroad Workers Union held its 4th Annual Conference in Laming. In this important conference, among the various resolutions that were passed, the 4th resolution was about the *Tebhaga* struggle. It read:

This conference extends full support to the *Tebhaga* struggle launched by the peasants of Bengal and Assam. This conference thinks that those land-owners who do not take part in cultivation should not be entitled to more than one third of the harvest. And we demand that the governments of Bengal and Assam must pass laws forthwith in tune of the demands of the peasants.

Two garden workers attended the conference as delegates. They were Faguram Uraon and Jagannath Uraon. Bimol Dasgupta recalls, "[T]hey came back encouraged. The conference gave them guidelines to follow. So they immediately plunged into unionizing the plantation workers. The first unions came up in the Haihaipather Tea Estate in Malbazar and the Lakhipara Tea Estate in Malbazar. The youth of these two gardens at the end of the day's work used to put up red flags on their cycles and moved from garden to garden campaigning about the union. Now it is called the Zilla Cha Bagan Workers' Union."⁵⁹⁰

Hence Domohani played a major role in the promotion of unionization in this area. On the 3rd of March 1948, in Domohani there was a big meeting of the workers and peasants in which the railway workers, tea-workers and the peasants came together in great numbers. People covered great distances by rail

⁵⁸⁸ Bimol Dasgupta, 'Duars'r Rail-Sromikra Jaglo', *Bichinta*, Year 4, No. 4, 1975, Bhabani Sen Pathagar [BSP] p 212

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid pp 215-216

as well as by foot to come for the meeting.⁵⁹¹ Even in the days of *Tebhaga* (as shall be discussed in greater detail later,) Deba Prasad Ghosh alias Patalbabu and many other railway gangmen held regular meetings with the Modhesia workers of the Mal region as recollected by Samar Ganguli of the CPI.⁵⁹² Debaprasad Ghosh used to enter the gardens at night secretly with other workers to hold secret meetings. Among the volunteer forces built during the days of *Tebhaga*, tea-workers overwhelming outnumbered the others in participation.⁵⁹³ The BARRWU by the 22nd session of the AITUC in 1947 had a total membership of 16,358⁵⁹⁴ and took a leading role in politicizing the garden-workers and forming their Union-the Jalpaiguri Cha Bagan Majdoor Union which by around the same time had 3,508 members.⁵⁹⁵

Meanwhile, certain shifts were taking place at the central party level since end of 1947 in terms of its understanding that challenged the two decades of the PC Joshi leadership. It accused the Indian bourgeoisie of “capitulation” to the imperialists and called its government as one of “national surrender” and that of “collaborators”. By the beginning of 1948 CPI was said to have 90,000 members. It held the second party congress where BT Ranadive replaced what it called the “reformist” leadership of Joshi and adopted what was called the Kolkata Thesis. It called for combining the tasks of the democratic and the socialist revolutions to be completed by the “armed overthrow of the Indian state”. It called for armed uprisings, especially in the urban areas led by the organized working class. Its complete lack of attention to and linkages with the historic anti-feudal struggles in Telangana and *Tebhaga* and its sheer lack of preparations for mobilizing any such urban upheaval by the working class meant that it was fraught with setbacks.⁵⁹⁶ But to start with, such a line alarmed the state apparatus and it identified the CPI as a malevolent force working amidst the workers.

By early 1948, the Superintendent of Police (Jalpaiguri) in correspondence with the Deputy Inspector-General of Police said that “the CPI represents the biggest threat to the security of this district as its unrestrained propaganda denigrating the Government, the Congress Party and the managerial garden staffs can only produce a diminution of the authority of these bodies with the inevitable result that

⁵⁹¹ Bimol Dasgupta , ‘Jolpaiguri’r Duars-e Sromik-Krishok’r Rokte’r Rakhibondhon’, *Tebhaga Shongram: Rajat-Jayanti Smarak Grantha*, Kolkata: Kalantar Office, 1997, p 15 BSP,

⁵⁹² Samar Ganguli, ‘Duars’r Sromik o Krishok Bidroho’r Kahini’, Dhananjay Ray (ed.) *Terai Duars’r Sromik Krishok Bidroho o Tebhaga Andolon*, Kolkata: Pratibhash, pp 55-56 1988, BSP

⁵⁹³ Bimol Dasgupta, ‘Duars’r *Tebhaga* Andolon Proshonge’, *Bichinta*, Year 4, No. 2, 1975, pp 102-103, BSP

⁵⁹⁴ *Proceedings of the 22nd Session of the AITUC*, Calcutta, 1947, NMML

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid

⁵⁹⁶ KN Ramachandran, *Nine Decades of Communist Movement in India*, Delhi: Umakant, 2011, pp 23-24

the simple illiterate labourers of this district will rapidly get more and more indisciplined and violent. I cannot overstate the baneful effects of communist propaganda.”⁵⁹⁷

The CPI, however, in its own review, lamented the absence of a well developed structure of organization in the gardens. There was also the absence of campaigns regarding the ‘fundamental issues’ like wage-level etc. among the workers along with the continuing issues of discontent in the gardens.⁵⁹⁸ Much of the labour unrest was evidently triggered by the immediacy of the ‘ration-crisis’. What is probably indicated here is the failure on the part of CPI to connect the immediate concerns of the workers with the more fundamental issues. Part of it could be the subjective weakness of the CPI to act upon the situation as it evolved in the gardens. But alongside, it is also quite evident that the program of unionization of the gardens was being pursued within (if not subordinated to) the CPI’s primary emphasis on the peasant front in terms of launching the Tebhaga agitation. From a very early stage, the process of union building within the gardens was treated as one that would be subjected to or complementary to the sharecropper’s struggle and the question of land. This found its reflection in the manner in which garden labourers were mobilized in large numbers as volunteer corps for the Tebhaga movement. This too could explain the absence of more concrete campaigns on the labour front. But then how could they still connect with the workers and vice versa? Firstly, this was achieved by identifying the jotedar – involved in hoarding and stockpiling – as the common enemy who along with the garden management was responsible for the shortage and high prices. Secondly, a large section of the adivasi workforce had its extended families/relatives involved in share-cropping in the neighbourhood and a peasant consciousness still dominate its worldview. All of these factors played a role in building connections with the CPI’s agenda, despite the lag on the labour front.

The narrative of the CPI party literature would often give an impression of plans flowing from the party headquarters and the workers being passive recipients. But that was not the general state of affairs on ground. Many a time, to identify the British as the single enemy, or to explore the possibility of organizing the Bengali garden employees too under the red flag, or may be just out of Bengali bhadrak sentiment, the CPI leadership appealed to the workers not to attack Bengali Babus in managerial roles. But the Babus were very much a part of the comprador exploitative and corrupt

⁵⁹⁷ Extract from D.O. No. Nil dated 4.3.48 from the Supdt of police, Jalpaiguri, to the Dy. Inspr.-Genl. of Police, Jalpaiguri, File No. 662/46, p 114, IB Archive

⁵⁹⁸ ‘*Chai Bagan Majduron Ki Ladai*’, by Ratanlal Brahman, pp 12-14, NMML

garden hierarchy. And hence, more often than not, such appeals were unheeded by the workers who made the ration-dealing Babus as one of their prime targets of wrath in the war-years.

There existed a general state of paranoia among the Management and the garden officials about Communist influence among the garden workers and this palpable anxiety was duly addressed by the state as it attempted to “suggest remedies against Communist activities in some of the gardens.” The fear can be gauged from the frantic efforts by the management to monitor their activities. In the Tour Notes of the L.C. West Bengal we find mention that the Assistant Secretary, ITA in his letter dated 14th June 1949, had sent copies of Communist leaflets which had been distributed in Darjeeling and Terai gardens, notably in Matigara T.E. Sri Satyendra Prasad Roy, Secretary, ITPA, in his letter dated the 4th of May, sent copies of Hindi pamphlets distributed among some of the Terai gardens and the Assistant Secretary, ITA in his letter dated 21st March, had sent cyclostyled Communist leaflets distributed in the Pandom T.E. All of these desperately asked for the help of the Government in “counteracting communist activity.” The L.C. was accordingly asked “to discuss with planters the present position of Communist activity in Darjeeling, Terai and Duars and report how far in what manner Govt. can help to check such activity.” The Management tended to brand any dissent to be “communistic” in order to brush aside real issues. The L.C. for instance reports a case of labour unrest in the Teesta Valley T.E. which originated from an alleged incident on Christmas Day, 1948 when apparently “the Assistant Manager, Mr. Holland took a girl named Nizamful and spent the night with her in the Bungalow.” The Manager had since then suspended 60 workers and along with Col. Rerrie, the L.W. Officer, the Management claimed that the trouble that ensued over this was communistic in nature.” But interestingly, the Teesta Valley workmen did not belong to any Communist union but to the Congress-affiliated INTUC and the L.C. further observed that: “While strongly condemning the acts of alleged lawlessness on the part of the workmen, an impartial observer cannot but say that Management officials should also behave properly and that their conduct in the past should have been such as no aspersions could be cast on the moral character of any of them, particularly in their relations with women.”

The planters, and more particularly their L.W. Officer Col. Rerrie, strongly urged, as a measure to fight against communism in Tea Gardens, that “there should be closer cooperation between Col. Rerrie, the regional Labour Officers at Darjeeling & Jalpaiguri and the DC and SP, and that they should act in coordination.” Sri Ray Chaudhury, DC Darjeeling, said such cooperation already existed, but added that “it was a good thing that this cooperation should be closer.” But, he wanted to exclude Col. Rerrie

(who had been at Midnapore as Liaison Officer during ‘terrorist activities’ there) as he had apparently developed a complex : that just as whatever was wrong in Midnapore in those days was due to ‘the activity of terrorists’, similarly whatever went wrong these days in Darjeeling area was due to “the nefarious activities of communists.”⁵⁹⁹

The All India Gurkha League (AIGL)

The All India Gurkha League was formed in 1943 at Darjeeling with for “forging unity among the Gurkhas scattered all over India for preserving their tradition, culture etc.” The League wanted to form a separate province for the Gurkhas with Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and some other districts of North Bengal. But this seemed to be thwarted by the Radcliffe-Award or the Boundary Commission that presided over the partition of the subcontinent. It was decided that the tea producing districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri would go to West Bengal, with the exception of the five Muslim majority thanas of the Boda-Debiganj-Panchagarh area. This made the Gurkha League increasingly apprehensive that being a minority, their case would not be properly considered by the future West Bengal Government. As early as February 1947 the League passed a resolution to demand recognition of Gurkhas as a minority community. The League intended to detach Darjeeling district from West Bengal and form a separate province comprising Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar and Sikkim. An intense campaign was launched by the League for the creation of Uttarakhand Pradesh particularly since 1949. If this was not feasible, it sought to try its level best to amalgamate Darjeeling district and the Duars with Assam which they perceived as essential to safeguard the interests of the Gurkhas. Two other alternatives were amalgamation with Bihar, and lastly with the territories of Pakistan. Basically, almost all options was considered to be better than to remain under Bengali hegemony or Bengal’s rule/neglect.

The Special Report on the labour unrest of 1946 states that the Gurkha League’s influence was never particularly marked and only extended to those recruited from the hill types. It also states that the League “suffers from vigorous encroachments by the CPI.”⁶⁰⁰ The approach of the garden management as well as the local state machinery was radically different when it came to the activities of the Gurkha League in the Duars region. However, it was often difficult for the state to actually distinguish the ‘lawlessness displayed’ by the local branch of a Gurkha League from that ‘incited’ by a

⁵⁹⁹ Extract from tour notes of L.C. West Bengal, File No. 662/46, p 182, IB Archive

⁶⁰⁰ ‘Review on Labour Unrest in the Duars in 1946’, File No. 662/46, p 42, IB Archive

'Red Flag' union.⁶⁰¹ Nonetheless, the authorities always maintained that "the League's policy is agitation on constitutional lines, but the material upon which it is working is inflammatory and mob violence is a spontaneous result." In its meeting at the Ramjhora Bazar in Madarihat the Gurkha League declared "that the aims and object of the Gurkha League is to improve the social, economic and the political status of the Gurkhas all over India. The proper way of ventilating their grievances is to move constitutionally through labour associations or unions which are to be formed among the hill-men who are mostly tea garden labourers. The police and the garden authorities are not responsible for the illegal and high-handed coolie trouble... the Gurkha coolies should be united under the banner of the Gurkha League and in every tea garden the Gurkhas will have to be organized. The Gurkha League will guide them."⁶⁰² The Management and the local authorities now took the Gurkha League into confidence and also encouraged them in more ways than one to counter the more 'dangerous' politicization of Communists. This is clear from the correspondence between the Superintendent of Police and the Deputy Commissioner. Questioned about whether the garden Management was overtly sympathetic to the League, the former said:

I find nothing highly subversive in certain employers of labour supporting a trade union...Employers must be permitted to use their own discretion as to what labour organizations they approve of and which they dislike...if an employer considers that a particular labour organization will have a restraining and beneficial influence on his labour I would only be prepared to disabuse him of such ideas if I had convincing evidence to the contrary, which I have not in the case of Gurkha League.⁶⁰³

A review report on the activities of the Gurkha League in 1946-47 states that the lack of success of the League in Darjeeling is "due to counter propaganda by the CPI" which forced the Gurkha League leaders to concentrate on the Duars gardens. They seemed to have "very little hold" in Darjeeling where the CPI was also raising the slogan for a separate "Gurkhalistan" at this point. In their Duars endeavour, the Gurkha League received active support from the Muslim League leaders like Md. Ismail of Rajabhatkhaoa, Jehiruddin of Kalchini and Hazi Sahib of Kalchini presumably because of the Gurkha League's open-ness to the idea of joining Pakistan as one of the options in its consideration.⁶⁰⁴ Moreover, considering that certain sections of hillmen such as the Lepchas and the Bhutias, were not

⁶⁰¹ Extract from Report I dated 15.9.46 of Jalpaiguri Special Report Case No. 44/46, File No. 662/46, IB Archive

⁶⁰² Extract from the WCR of the Superintendent of police DIB, Jalpaiguri for the week ending 15th June 1946, Miscellaneous, File No. 662/46, IB Archive

⁶⁰³ Strictly Secret No. 272/ 12-48, DIB, Jalpaiguri, the 6th February, 1948, File No. 662/46, IB Archive

⁶⁰⁴ Extract from a report on the activities of the Political Parties in the Alipurduar Circle, Gurkha League Activities, File No. 662/46, p 100, IB Archive

in favour of the Gurkha League, it forced the leadership to divert their attention to the Duars for organizing the garden workers. They tried to rally the “backward communities there with a view to getting their support” for the League’s agenda of amalgamating Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri into Assam. It is in this context that the “anti plains-man agitation” was furthered by the League leadership. They tried to campaign among the hillmen and madhesia workers, and the natives of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri, for rousing a strong public opinion in favour of the movement.

The *Bangali Khedao* (Chase Out Bengalis) movement is a new form of agitation among the Modhesias in the tea gardens of the Alipur Duars subdivision. On 15th August it was decided that the workers of the local tea garden should assemble at the Kalchini School, from where they would proceed to Hamiltonganj in a procession and hold a meeting there. The Gurkhas and *Modhesias* abstained from joining the Bengalis, and led a separate procession carrying with them the flag of the Indian Union and that of the Gurkha League.⁶⁰⁵

It is also worth noting that the labourers other than Gurkhas, were not willing to join the Cha Bagan Majdoor Sangha (affiliated to the Gurkha League). In their opinion, though, this is styled as “Cha Bagan Mazdoor Sangha”, yet it is meant for Gurkhas alone. The Gurkha League workers, it is reported, “are trying to make propaganda amongst the labourers, other than Gurkhas in their own way, spreading ill feeling against the Bengalis and other labourers. Mr. R.S. Moss, The Superintendent of Buxa Tea Co., and Mr. J. Palton, Acting Manager in charge of the Mechpara T.E. are directly favouring the Gurkhas and indirectly helping the Gurkha League.”⁶⁰⁶

However, by 1949, it seems the Gurkha League came much closer to the Congress with the formation of the Indian National Planters’ Federation on 26 August at Jalpaiguri with the local Cha Sramik Congress (Congress), Duars Cha Bagan Majdoor Sangha (Gurkha League), Duars Tea Garden Indian Employees Association (Congress), Terrai Cha Karmachari Samiti (Congress) and Darjeeling Cha Bagan Majdoor Congress (Congress) affiliated to INTUC under the president-ship of L.M. Prodhan (of the Gurkha League. European Planters thereby reportedly lost the “majority of the labourers from their group.”⁶⁰⁷

⁶⁰⁵ Extract from the BRA of 20.9.47, 172. Jalpaiguri, File No. 147/47, IB Archive

⁶⁰⁶ Copy of report dated 30.8.49. of a DIO, Jalpaiguri, File No. 662/46, p 163, IB Archive

⁶⁰⁷ Copy of a DIO’s report dated 24.9.49, File No. 662/46, pp 168, IB Archive

The Socialist Party of India (SPI), Revolutionary Socialist Party of India (RSPI), Forward Bloc (FB) and the Congress

The other political parties in the area that had influence among the workers were the Socialist Party (SPI), the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSPI), the Forward Bloc and gradually INTUC (Congress). The Socialist Party initially faced some problems when it dropped the word 'Congress' from its name. But they slowly began their work in some of the gardens, ⁶⁰⁸ RSPI, too, under A.H. Besterwitch built its base slowly among the workers. The SPI, RSPI and CPI undertook joint actions particularly after the firing in Denguajhar T.E. The Forward Bloc had a considerable influence, particularly in the Kalchini area, and along with CPI, they kept the politics in this area in a flux, particularly since the November 1946 strikes. So much so that the official Review of the 1946 "disturbances" states with alarm:

It is worth bearing in mind that during the famine in 1943 when 'maize rations' issued there was no reaction of the character recently experienced; a fact alone clearly indicating that on this occasion some other influence was at work – underground activity.⁶⁰⁹

Communitarian 'fissures':

Bengali garden babus, as has been mentioned earlier, were the prime targets of the wrath of the workers in the ration-related unrest that gripped Duars since 1946. Discrepancies in the supply of rations and the "Harsh treatment by the Garden Clerks" were the reasons behind the discontent. "It is noticed that the Tea Gardens where unrest took place," the DIO reports, "the coolies assaulted mainly those Babus who are in close touch with ration distribution and demanded their immediate removal from the garden."⁶¹⁰ However, they were not the only stakeholders. Other stakeholders contended with each other in the context of a growing workers' militancy - Bengali Garden Babus, the European Management, the local executive and the higher bureaucracy. The only common thread

⁶⁰⁸ English translation of a Bengali letter dated 21.3.47, intercepted at the Burrabazar P.O. on 22.3.47, File No. 662/46 IB, p 70, IB Archive

From: Ghanshyam Misra,
Secretary, Socialist Party,
Jalpaiguri District Headquarters,
Nidam Jhara Tea Estate, Jalpaiguri.

To: Com. Sina Nath Banerji,
Secy., S.P. Bengal
150, Chittaranjan Avenue, Calcutta.

⁶⁰⁹ 'Review on Labour Unrest in the Duars in 1946', File No. 662/46, p 42, IB Archive

⁶¹⁰ Copy of the report of a DIO dated 10.2.47, File No. 662/46, p 51, IB Archive

among the multiple voices was that all of them were threatened by the political consciousness of the garden-workers who became aware of their economic exploitation and their exploiters. All stakeholders tried to downplay the economic aspect by evoking the historically developed communitarian fissures in the labour lines.

I. The Bengali Garden Babus, the Ration Unrest & the 'Conspiracy':

Bengali clerks and garden officials had organized themselves into the Tea Garden Indian Employees Association which was affiliated to the Congress and they looked up to the Congress government to counter workers' agitations. They also came to have a strained relationship with the European planting community. K.N. Dasgupta, a Congress MLA for instance "urged the workers to oppose the European Managers instead of the Bengalis who, he said, *were merely paid clerks and majdoors like themselves.*"[emphasis added]⁶¹¹ But such appeals, whether from the Congress, or from even the CPI more often than not, was in vain. The anger against the Bengali Babus in the gardens was of a structural nature.

The Bengali garden babus came to acquire their particular position in the gardens of Bengal and Assam by virtue of their easy access to colonial education and clerical experience. Hence, their source of power had always been located in their subordination to the British Managers. The latter, on the other hand, along with their profound dependence on this parasitic structure of garden hierarchy, also had extreme racial contempt for the "effete" and "conniving" Bengali babu. The new-found context of the waning authority of the garden management as a whole vis-à-vis the workers only aggravated this dormant contradiction. The white owners now wished to shift the onus solely onto the corrupt Babus as they didn't want the wrath of the workers to be directed towards the entire Garden Raj. And the Babus in their turn tried to shift the onus onto "anti-Bengali conspiracies". The ambivalence of the intermediary post of the garden babu became further pronounced with the growing strength of the Congress as heir apparent to the British Raj. Closer to 1947 many babus began weighing the relative advantage of aligning with the Congress, instead of cultivating close ties with European managers. However, their position within the overall exploitative structure of the plantation economy, and, by virtue of it, their active involvement in all forms of malpractices, corruption and oppression, were of course sought to be carefully hidden. In a letter dated the 3rd of September 1947, the Joint Secretary of the Employees Association writes to the Deputy Commissioner, Jalpaiguri:

⁶¹¹ Extract from the WBRA of 8.11.47., File No. 662/46, p 98, IB Archive

I beg to draw your attention to the growing *anti-Bengali hatred* that is becoming evident here for sometime. *It is reported that Lt. Col. R.S. Moss, Manager Kalchini T.E., Sub-district Chairman is playing this dirty trick through the Gurkha League, local Mechia leaders of Scheduled Caste federation and through Padris particularly of the Mendabari and Damanpur.* Sometimes after the November disturbance the Gurkha League opened a branch here at Hamiltonganj Bazar with the pretension of forming Labour Union. *Now it is becoming evident that they are being actively helped by the local planters particularly by R.S. Moss, Subdistrict Chairman, and with them has joined some Mechia Leaders of the Scheduled Caste Federation Moni Ram Mondal of Mendabari, who is also a school teacher there, (named Ekka) is actively preaching anti-Bengalee hatred.* Meetings are being held frequently in the Bustees and Hamilton Bazar and in the Gardens where none but chosen men of the planters are allowed. Today a meeting was held at the European Club, where today the Meches, Christians and the Gurkha League Secretary were invited. We do not know what transpired there, and *we have every reason to think, from the growing temper of the labour that something is being hatched. There are handful of Babus, here, who are very much panicky.*

I appeal to you to kindly take note of the matter and to do what best to stop another flare up here which we are very much apprehending. As the rice will become scarce they will at once jump on saying that this is your Congress Raj: they did the same thing during the last disturbances. The Managers in the name of forming Works and Welfare Committee are bringing the Sardars in their bungalows at times and without times, and are trying to impress them that this has become the “*Babu Raj*”, now where you will go if you have to leave India. I cannot detail all the matters here but just like to draw your attention to *the dirty game these planters are playing to discredit the Congress Govt.*

I hope that you will kindly treat this letter as confidential and try to find out the truth of my report herein.⁶¹²

As is apparent, the Bengali Babus invoke the idea of the ‘Congress Raj’ being threatened or maligned by the planters as ‘Babu Raj’. Based on this, they appeal for a speedy intervention from the state authorities in their favour. In this manner they project the entire ‘flare up’ regarding rationing in the midst of overall inflation as merely an opportunity for adverse propaganda against the ‘Congress Raj’. Alongside, (as the rest of the letter would clearly suggest) they are also attempting to reduce workers’ wrath to nothing more than a product of “anti-plainsman agitation” or ‘anti-Bengali hatred’, propagated by primarily the League.

Of course an “anti-plainsman agitation” was under way, but does such a claim stand up to the actual events unfolding on the ground? A closer look into the gardens contradicts this as Gurkha workers

⁶¹² Confidential Copy of letter dated 3.9.47 from the joint Secretary, Tea Garden Indian Employees Association to the Deputy Commissioner, Jalpaiguri, File No. 662/46, p 91, IB Archive

under the League (along with the other ‘conspirators’) were in no way the ‘single-largest threat’ to the Bengalis. Rather, even a fleeting inspection would prove it beyond doubt that it was the Duars garden-workers at large (the majority of them being Adivasis) and not just a handful of Gurkhas who had made the Garden Babus their target during the garden agitations. There already existed “a general ill feeling between the coolies & the Babu staff of several Gardens in Kalchini area over distribution of rations”.⁶¹³ Second, in all the gardens where the ‘ration-riots’ spread in the Kalchini area during the ‘November disturbances’, political leadership was in the hands of the Forward Bloc and the CPI. The Gurkha League’s presence or “influence was never particularly marked and naturally only extended to that portion of labour which is recruited from the hill types.”⁶¹⁴

Garden Babus conjure up a convenient narrative by dubbing the entire issue as merely a product of a “conspiracy” and an attempt to “malign” the Congress Raj. That there was a real economic reason behind the anger is however substantiated by the fact that even some of Congress trade unionists working among the workers, and dealing with their real grievances, “incited” them against the Bengali garden staff. A report about the political situation in Mateli for instance says “that the speeches of one Congress worker Subal Basu sometimes incites the labourers, as the speech sometimes contains criticism against the garden Managing and the clerical staff. The Bengali staff of different gardens often take objections to his speeches as they think that the labourers who are illiterate as well as rough and remain almost always drunk, may anytime resort to violence...”⁶¹⁵ This aspect of the Congress trade union politics was contrary to the general approach of Congress party-line which was to align themselves with the garden employees and there could not have been any ‘anti-plainman’ feeling to propel it. The assault on the ‘Bagan Babus’ was, thus, more than anti-Congress propaganda or anti-Bengali hate-campaign of the Gurkhas.

II. Communitarian ‘fissures’ & consequent community assertions: Gurkha/Paharia/hill men vs Madhesia/Bengalee/plainsmen/adivasi:

There did exist an ‘anti-plainmen’ element in the League’s rhetoric, agenda and practices. “The League thought that as Gurkhas were a minority in this province [Bengal] their case will not be properly considered by the West Bengal Government but if Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri could be amalgamated

⁶¹³ List of cases arising out of labour unrest in Duars Tea Gardens in 1946, Appendix to review on labour unrest in the Duars, 1946, File No. 662/46, p 54, IB Archive

⁶¹⁴ ‘Review on Labour Unrest in the Duars in 1946’, File No. 662/46, pp 42, IB Archive

⁶¹⁵ Report about the present political situation at Metali, File No. 662/46, p 174, IB Archive

with Assam, they would have a better future there in all respects.” With this idea the League started their ‘Assam Chalo’ movement, “and to make the movement virile a communal complexion was given to it and it has come to be known as the Anti-Plainsmen Movement. Because of their lack of success in Darjeeling, due to counter propaganda by the CPI, Gurkha League leaders diverted their attention to the Duars and set about organizing the garden coolies and cultivators.”⁶¹⁶

Multiple communitarian identities among workers had the potential of emerging into sharp fissures. The propensity of a community solidarity often spilling over into sharp community chauvinism/antagonism could come into force intermittently in the labour-lines in terms of Gurkha/Paharia/hill men vs Madhesia/Bengalee/plainsmen/advasi.⁶¹⁷ Dipesh Chakrabarty in his pioneering work *Rethinking Working Class History*, highlights the preponderance of communitarian interests in the relationships between workers and the hierarchies of management and even unions.⁶¹⁸ Garden Babus and the Management played upon the identity differences. But, even with the problem of multiple and conflicting identities, when one identity gains greater prominence, other identities do not cease to exist. More importantly, as Chitra Joshi would argue, there is no ‘pre-givenness’ in the categories that the workers identified themselves with—they are ‘actively created’ at different junctures by the workers themselves, mediated by socio-economic circumstances.⁶¹⁹ It is better not to assume ‘essential’, ‘predetermined’, ‘impermeable’ or ‘static’ boundaries as a collective body is ‘made, unmade and ruptured’ continuously.

The pre-history of recruitment and settlement in terms of ‘ethnicized landscapes’ led to the emergence and perpetuation of the ‘hill-man/plains-men’ divide. It was the same hill/plain divide that explains the exclusive nature of Gurkha membership in the Cha Bagan Majdoor Sangha (the labour section of the AIGL that was supposedly open to both Gurkhas and Madhesia).⁶²⁰ According to the DIO’s report, “The labourers other than Gurkhas, are not willing to join in Cha Bagan Majdoor Sangha. In their opinion, though this is styled as “Cha Bagan Mazdoor Sangha”, but it is meant for Gurkhas

⁶¹⁶ Extract from a report on the activities of the political parties in the Alipurduar Circle, File No. 662/46, p 100, IB Archive

⁶¹⁷ For recent reflections upon the perceived impact of such ethnic divide on workers’ politics read Sharit Bhowmik, ‘Wages and Ethnic Conflicts in Bengal’s Tea Industry’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XLVI No. 32, August 2011

⁶¹⁸ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal 1890-1940*, Delhi: OUP, 1996

⁶¹⁹ Chitra Joshi, *Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and Its Forgotten Histories*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003

⁶²⁰ Confidential letter No 424/18-48/p.31 dated 26.2.48., from the DIB, Jalpaiguri to Sri B.B. Banerji, Spl. Supdt. of Police, IB, CID, West Bengal, Calcutta, IB Archive

only.”⁶²¹ The report also said that the Gurkha League workers were “also instigating up-country people against the Bengalee.”⁶²² This was the communal expression of a rather valid apprehension that once Bengalis came to govern West Bengal, hills people would face neglect.

III. The Planters, the Gurkha League & the Bengali Babu:

A close understanding/alliance did exist, however, between the planters and the Gurkha League. An unnerved local Congress leadership complained that this nexus is “*taking a move to link up Duars with Assam and also they are indirectly inciting the tea labourers to drive Bengalees from Duars resorting to violence.*”⁶²³

The apprehensions were sent by the local Congress Committee to both P.C. Ghosh, the premier and B.C. Ray, the Chief as well as Home Minister of Bengal, demanding that “*In the interest of peace and order and also in the interest of this province it is desirable that all such reactionary and subversive elements should be externed from this district*”. A letter revealing the intent of the Labour Officer Mr. Jenkins of ITA and Mr. L. Tocher of Samsing who was a Superintendent of a group of tea gardens of DPA was placed as evidence:

My dear Haggart,

Jenkins advised me yesterday that a P.H. Union is being formed called the “Western Duars Tea Plantation Workers’ Union” sponsored by the Gurkha League and they are to be working in the Chalsa District soon.

I haven’t met the Labour Man of the G.L. but Jenkins is favourably impressed with him and I would advice that his workers receive every encouragement.

Yours sincerely

Sd/- L. Tocher. [emphasis added]

⁶²¹ Copy of report dated 30.8.49. of a DIO, Jalpaiguri, File No. 662/46, p 163, IB Archive

⁶²² *ibid*

⁶²³ Secret D.O. No. 146 C from H. Banerji, Deputy Commissioner’s Office, Jalpaiguri dated 3.2.48 to the Supdt. of Police P. Barnes, File No. 662/46, p 107, IB Archive

Undeniably, planters tried to support trade unions that were affiliated to the Gurkha League. A DIO report clearly states that “Mr. R.S. Moss, The Superintendent of Buxa Tea Co., and Mr. J. Palton, Acting Manager in charge of the Mechpara T.E. are directly in favour of the Gurkhas and indirectly helping the Gurkha League.”⁶²⁴ And in this respect, even the local executive, for instance the Superintendent of Police P. Barnes, came out most outrightly and vociferously in support of the planters by dubbing all allegations in this respect as “baseless and pointless accusations” and vouched for the “reasonableness and sound judgment” of Col. Moss. This favouritism shows the desperation of the planters to shelter and nourish a more pliant trade union as opposed to the left-leaning unions towards which they were most suspicious and antagonistic. Barnes, for instance, stated “that the Gurkha League is not a subversive organization and its representatives have right to contact garden labour with a view to forming trade unions.”⁶²⁵ This accorded with the policy adopted by the ITA at this stage. “The fundamental principle in this note was that it was best to help bona fide trade union organizations, backed by genuine parties like the Congress and Gurkha League, rather than to oppose all parties and run the risk of subversive organizations eventually infiltrating amongst the labour forces and gaining the upper hand.”⁶²⁶ In defense of Col. Moss (i.e., the planters) he rubbished all allegations of a ‘conspiracy’, justifying his dealings with the League as being in line with the ITA policy:

In furtherance of this policy Mr. Moss, quite innocently and little suspecting the odium and vilification that would be heaped on him, met L.M. Pradhan, Secy. of the Gurkha League, in his office or house on one or two occasions, and thereafter, in common courtesy sent him away in his garden lorry. These open and harmless meetings have been seized upon by persons, who evidently are deliberately attempting to create trouble, and have been distorted and enlarged upon until they now assume the form of secret conclaves at which Messrs. Moss and Pradhan, in true conspiratorial style, plotted the utter destruction of all Bengalis in the Duars.⁶²⁷

The Jalpaiguri S.P. said, “I do not consider the Gurkha League in this district is as dangerous as the Communist Party, India. It’s policy is mainly constructive and its workers are prepared to listen to both

⁶²⁴ Copy of a report dated 30.8.49. of a DIO, Jalpaiguri, File No. 662/46, pp 163, IB Archive

⁶²⁵ Secret correspondence, No. 2235/ District Intelligence Branch, Jalpaiguri, 1st October, 1947, File No. 662/46, p 97, IB Archive

⁶²⁶ Secret correspondence, No. 2235/ from P. Barnes, District Intelligence Branch, Jalpaiguri to R.K. Ray, Deputy Commissioner, Jalpaiguri, dated 1st October, 1947 Copy forwarded to H.N. Gupta Esq. IP, Deputy Inspector-General of Police, Jalpaiguri Range, & to B.B. Banarji Esq., Special Supdt of Police, IB, CID, West Bengal, Calcutta, File No. 662/46, p 97, IB Archive

⁶²⁷ Secret correspondence, No. 2235/ from P. Barnes, District Intelligence Branch, Jalpaiguri to R.K. Ray, Deputy Commissioner, Jalpaiguri, dated 1st October, 1947 Copy forwarded to H.N. Gupta Esq. IP, Deputy Inspector-General of Police, Jalpaiguri Range, & to B.B. Banarji Esq., Special Supdt of Police, IB, CID, West Bengal, Calcutta, File No. 662/46, p 97, IB Archive

sides of the argument, whereas the Communists are only interested in weakening the authority of Government by any means, sordid mean or despicable, at their command.”

The anti-plainman rhetoric in the League’s repertoire was useful to the white owners as a ploy to bypass the issue of structural oppression by passing the buck onto the Bengalis and making the malpractices merely look as a community affair where the higher echelons of management had no role to play. So, a British official of the local intelligence maintains that the “Bengali office personnel will not be able to rule the roost as they formerly did” owing to the growing political consciousness amongst the workers. “Certain Bengalis in Tea Gardens during the war years”, he adds, “have not always been honest in their dealings with garden labour. They have sometimes defrauded them, particularly of food and cloth rations. Workers now hark back to such instances and demand enquiries.” So, to diminish this political outlook, he maintains, that the Bengalis are hell bent on firstly, to weaken the Gurkha League, which he claims has the “most influence” on workers; and secondly, to call for police action on workers by fabricating charges of intimidation on their part. According to the European official, the moment there is the slightest suspicion of any clash of sentiments between Bengali employees and the aboriginal workers, the former get into “uncontrollable panics and do unwise things before they fully realize their implications.” They tend to exaggerate petty incidents into serious crimes, to call in the Police and affect the entire working of the tea estate. He concludes, “There is no anti Bengali campaign in the Eastern Duars. Bengali garden employees, for reasons best known to themselves, have concocted a tissue of falsehoods that local aboriginals, instigated by local Europeans, are about to rise against them and slaughter them. Bengalis in the Duars should rid themselves of groundless fear, amounting to cowardice, of aboriginals. Aboriginals are simple people and will not be impressed by people who turn tail and flee on the merest suspicion of trouble.”⁶²⁸

Bengali garden employees were, indeed, neck deep in malpractices. But planters, in their desperation, tried to pass the entire share of blame onto Bengalis to divert the wrath of the workers from the garden-economy itself, to a particular community.

⁶²⁸ Secret correspondence, No. 2235/ from P. Barnes, District Intelligence Branch, Jalpaiguri to R.K. Ray, Deputy Commissioner, Jalpaiguri, dated 1st October, 1947 Copy forwarded to H.N. Gupta Esq. IP, Deputy Inspector-General of Police, Jalpaiguri Range, & to B.B. Banarji Esq., Special Supdt of Police, IB, CID, West Bengal, Calcutta, File No. 662/46, pp 97, IB Archive

Duars & Tebhaga: Regional & Historical Specificities

The genesis of the trade union movement in the tea gardens of Duars has a historical specificity of its own which can never be fully perceived without situating it within the larger context that had engulfed the districts of North Bengal in mid-1940s. This was the *Tebhaga* movement of 1946-47: the mobilization of share-croppers or adhiars who demanded two-thirds instead of half as their share of produce. Under the aegis of the CPI, this was directed against the jotedar-mahajan stratum that without bearing costs of cultivation enjoyed the right to claim 50% of the harvest.

Grain-dealing jotedars of Duars had successfully monopolized all the profits accruing from agriculture through 'pre-capitalist' forms of appropriation and by acting as buffers between the actual tillers and the market. The "first class-based challenge" to the jotedars had started in these tracts in 1939-40, primarily concentrated in the districts of Dinajpur and Jalpaiguri.⁶²⁹ The main centers of this struggle were the *hats* the main issue being the tolls collected by the ijaradars in these *hats*. From the beginning of 1939 the '*Tolagandi Andolan*' began under the direction of the *Krishak Samiti* in the Boda, Pachagarh and Debiganj thana areas of Jalpaiguri. According to the *Samiti* Jalpaiguri began to be seen as the "Vanguard of the Bengal Kisan organization".⁶³⁰ Following this, the '*Adhiar Andolan*' lasted from 1940 to 1941 in this region. It primarily aimed at lowering of interest rates and the abolition of the multifarious exactions by the jotedars above the customary share of half of the harvest.⁶³¹ This prepared the grounds for the *Tebhaga* struggle in 1946-47.⁶³² *Adhiars* and landless labourers in Jalpaiguri by the end of 1941 were also raiding and looting paddy from the houses of the jotedars primarily because of the disaffection over their war-profiteering through grain-export.⁶³³ Then came the devastating famine of 1943. While big jotedars continued to amass huge wealth through black-marketeering, sharecroppers suffered untold miseries, food-crisis, hunger and death.⁶³⁴ With the rise in the market price of grains, jotedars began demanding payment of interests in grains. In many areas interest rates increased two to three times while the market price of rice galloped from Rs 16-17/- to

⁶²⁹ Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, social structure and politics, 1919-1947*, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1986, p 253 [henceforth Sugata Bose]

⁶³⁰ Sachin Dasgupta, 'Tarai Anchaler Krishok Andolon', Dhananjay Ray (ed.) *Terai Duars 'r Sromik Krishok Bidroho o Tebhaga Andolon*, Kolkata: Pratibhash, 1988, pp 16-17, BSP

⁶³¹ Sugata Bose, p 253

⁶³² Sachin Dasgupta, 'Tarai Anchaler Krishok Andolon', Dhananjay Ray (ed.) *Terai Duars 'r Sromik Krishok Bidroho o Tebhaga Andolon*, Kolkata: Pratibhash, p 19, 1988, BSP

⁶³³ Sugata Bose, p 262

⁶³⁴ Bhawani Sen, 'Banglay Tebhaga Andolon', *Tebhaga Shongram: Rajat-Jayanti Smarak Grantha*, Kolkata: Kalantar Office, 1997, p 10, BSP

Rs 40-50/-.⁶³⁵ The government's policy to procure grain from North Bengal jotedars to feed Calcutta and urban areas spelt disaster for *adhiars*. By the end of 1946, the wrath against the jotedars and a demand for a greater share of the grains led sharecroppers to attack the stockpiles of grains of the jotedars under the CPI, culminating with the *Tebhaga* struggles.

I. Railway-workers, Garden-workers & Share-croppers:

This was predominantly a peasant movement waged primarily by sharecroppers or bargadars (and a section of the landless agricultural labourers) which received not more than ideological declarations of support from various workers' unions in Bengal. In Jalpaiguri, however, the movement had emphatic support from the tea-garden workers and the railway workers. "The only proper and effective peasant-working class alliance for the purpose of the movement could be achieved by CPI leadership in Jalpaiguri district. Even in Dinajpur and Mymensingh where the movement reached its apex, no major collaboration could be organized."⁶³⁶ Jute mill workers expressed their support to the *Tebhaga* struggle at Jagaddal, Kamarhati, Bali, etc, but nothing significant happened in other parts of Bengal. This was true even for the 24 Parganas, where in some areas there even existed family ties between the jute workers and the share-croppers.

Railway workers in Parbatipur condemned police repression on peasants fighting for *Tebhaga* while the workers of Macferlane Company expressed their support and also promised to raise funds. Such resolutions were also passed by several other unions like the Calcutta and Banagram branches of the Railroad Workers Union, the Behar Iron Workers Union, and the working committee of Birla Laboratories Employees Union.⁶³⁷ But largely, the workers' organizations did nothing other than adopting resolutions and not even a single delegation of jute, engineering or tramway workers visited Khanpur or Jalpaiguri Duars. Somnath Lahiri, in his autobiography, laments this gap : " The working

⁶³⁵Abani Lahiri, 'Shakkathkar (interview)', *Bortika* (ed.) Mahashweta Devi, July-December 1987, pp 145-146, BSP

⁶³⁶ Asok Majumdar, *Peasant protest in Indian politics*, Kolkata: NIB Publishers, 1995, p 112 [henceforth Asok Majumdar]

⁶³⁷ Ibid p 114

class had a bigger role to play in those days when blood flowed in the rural areas.” But it was only in the Duars region of Jalpaiguri where he could recollect a coming together.⁶³⁸

One such notable instance of unity occurred at the Lalmonirhat railway workers’ conference in 1946 when the *Tebhaga* struggle was already expanding in Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Maldah, parts of Pabna and Rangpur. The conference was attended by 5000 workers and more than 15,000 peasants. It was called to judge the preparedness of the railway workers for a strike. On the day of the conference a number of Kisan processions, holding the Red Flag from adjoining villages, marched to the venue, raising slogans like ‘concede the demands of rail workers’, ‘workers & peasants of the world Unite’ and ‘concede the demands of *Tebhaga*’. Railways workers were apprehensive about a strike, but finally the assurance from the peasants to support them with food during the strike made them confident.⁶³⁹ During the peak point between February and April 1947 in the Duars area of Jalpaiguri, tea garden workers participated in large numbers in favour of the sharecroppers. As had been mentioned earlier, the 4th Annual Conference of the BAARWU between 6th and 8th December 1946 held at Lamdim in Assam adopted a resolution in support of *Tebhaga*. We also know that the BAARWU played a key role in “organizing the tea garden workers and creating a bond between them and the struggling peasants in Duars.”⁶⁴⁰ Bimol Dasgupta has a vivid account of this sharecropper, tea-worker and rail-worker unity.⁶⁴¹ This was of great concern not only for the jotedars and the state, but also for the planters. A Report of the Indian Tea Association said:

...as a result of the outside agitation bands of labourers had left their works and headed by communist leaders, were roaming the countryside, in many cases armed with lathis and spears, with the object of entering the bustees (settlements) and raiding paddy stocks in support of a general demand of the ryots of the district for the two-third share of the paddy crop, instead of the half share which they had always received in the past from the zamindars. In most cases demands were put forward by the labour to the tea garden managers: these included demands for increased ration of food and cloth.⁶⁴²

⁶³⁸ Abani Lahiri, *Postwar Revolt of the Rural Poor in Bengal: Memoirs of a Communist activist*, Interviewed by Ranajit Dasgupta, Introduced by Sumit Sarkar, Translated by Subrata Banerjee Calcutta : Seagull Books, 2001 pp78-79 [henceforth Abani Lahiri]

⁶³⁹ Satyen Sen, *Gram Banglar Pothe Pothe*, pp 47-51

⁶⁴⁰ Asok Majumdar p 112

⁶⁴¹ Bimol Dasgupta , ‘Jolpaiguri’r Duars-e Sromik-Krishok’r Rokte’r Rakhibondhon’, *Tebhaga Shongram: Rajat-Jayanti Smarak Grantha*, Kolkata: Kalantar Office, 1997, p 15, BSP

⁶⁴² Asok Majumdar p 113

Patal Babu, alias Debaprasad Ghosh along with his co-workers in the BAARWU, built up a Volunteer Force of the peasants trained in archery. Tea garden workers predominated. They used to stop work in the gardens and join in the struggle for grain.

II. Jotedars & Planters: The struggle *outside* & the impact *within*:

The context of the rise and growth of an organized workers' movement and the (late) emergence of the trade union movement in the plantation areas of Duars can be understood and studied as a simultaneous and intrinsically connected development of the Tebhaga mobilization in the district of Jalpaiguri. The role of CPI under the banner of the Zilla Cha Bagan Mazdoor Union or the 'Red Flag' (that was still in its early days, being formed on 20th January 1946 and registered on 14th January 1947) identifying the jotedars and white planters simultaneously as the main enemy made a definitive mark on the garden-workers.

Police reports say that the final plan to launch Tebhaga was taken on 3rd December 1946, in a meeting attended by Radha Mohan Barman, Hara Prasad Ghosh and Charu Mazumdar in the house of Niru Charan Barman of Langalgaon police station, Boda.⁶⁴³ On 7th December, in a meeting organized at Joydarbhanga in Union VII of Pochagarh, attended by people from neighboring villages, Hara Prasad Ghosh (of CPI) urged peasants to fight against the jotedars, zamindars and the British. Charu Mazumdar (also of the CPI) added that the Tebhaga system must be introduced and warned that the communal riots were a ploy of the government to divide the people. On the following day some communist members such as Hara Ghosh, Biren Pal and some 10/12 local people belonging to the party and carrying red flags, moved in Pochagarh hat/ market, shouting '*Inquilab Zindabad*', '*Patit jami dokhol koro*' (Take over wastelands), '*Dhakal rekhey chaash koro*' (Hold them and cultivate), '*Adhi nai Tebhaga chai*' (We demand two-third of produce), '*Nij kholaney dhan tolo*' (stock two-thirds in own barn) and distributed leaflets. On the 11th, at a meeting at Haribhasha *hat* in Pochagar P.S., presided over by local CPI member Maniruddin and attended by a large audience, speakers urged *krishaks* to harvest paddy and to carry it to their own houses and to give the jotedar a 1/3 portion, if they wanted, on proper receipts. If the jotedar obstructed them, to fight against them as well as against the police; they will get help from the Garden Coolies and Railway Labourers.⁶⁴⁴

⁶⁴³ Abstract of the Weekly Confidential Report Jalpaiguri [WCR] dated 21.12.46., File No.1118/46, p 31, IB Archive

⁶⁴⁴ Abstract of WCR Jalpaiguri dated 28.12.46, Communism, File No.1118/46, p 39, IB Archive

On 8th February, about 300 'Santhal coolies,' armed with bows, arrows and lathis, divided the paddy from the threshing ground of Aftabuddin Ahmad, a Deonia (jotedar) of Batabari basti in Metelli. Adhiars and workers of Batabari and Haihaipathar Basti P.S. Metalli, also divided the paddy of Khaliar Rahman and Oliar Rahaman of Haihaipathar under the Tebhaga system. On the 9th, 10th, and 11th of February, the Communist Party held meetings at Mal and propagated the Tebhaga movement and also spoke about garden coolies. They distributed booklets among the villagers of Metalli.⁶⁴⁵ Temba Bhat of Batabari tea estate took the lead and some of the gang Khalasis (translate) of Mal Railway station visited the muffassil area mobilizing the adhiars for Tebhaga.⁶⁴⁶ On 9th February, around 100 workers attended a meeting at the Mal football ground, under the president-ship of Parimal Mitra (Vice President, Zilla Chabagan Mazdoor Union), Bhabatosh Sen of Darjeeling, Sushil Chatterjee (of Darjeeling Chia Kaman Workers' Union), Debaprasad Ghosh (CPI). Sahadeb and Sukdeb, union workers of Haihaipatha tea estate, demanded higher wages and more ration. Adhiars were directed to apply Tebhaga even by force and oppose police interference. Tea Garden Companies and the jotedars, it was said, were taking away profits from the business. Thus, grievances of garden labourers and of the sharecroppers were conjoined. Two workers, Kancha Chapidar and Champa Sardar, were threatened with fines for giving out secrets of the labour organisation. Debaprasad Ghosh urged coolies to oppose police activities in tea gardens and Railway Gangmen were requested to attend the meeting of the Labour Union. He proposed stoppage of railway communications at odd moments to stop police entry into troubled areas. He asked labourers and the babu staff of the Gardens to join the Union.⁶⁴⁷

On 20th February, a meeting of about 500 coolies was organized at the Mal railway football ground where Deba Prasad Ghosh urged workers of Haihaipathar, Baintguri, Malnadi, Tunbari and other neighboring gardens to form Tea Garden Mazdoor unions. Their main struggle was against the garden authorities and not against the Babus. Deba Prasad Ghosh also warned coolies against any use of violence.⁶⁴⁸ The Weekly Confidential Report from Jalpaiguri of 22.2.47 expressed concern about the expanding mobilization among the garden workers. The Communists "are very active instigating the Tea Garden labour for higher rate of wages, rations etc. and for formation of union in every garden.

⁶⁴⁵ Some of the booklets: *Swadhinatar Ghosana Chai*; *Nutan Gonototrer Jonyo Bangkar Krishoker Shongram* (pub by Kanai Ray from 8E, Baker Lane, Calcutta); *Krishoker Loraier Kayda*; *Tebhagar Lorai* (pub by Bagala Guha from No 249, Bow Bazar Street, Calcutta on behalf of Bengal Provincial Krishok Sabha); *Sesh Aghat Hano* (pub by Suren Sen from NBA)

⁶⁴⁶ Extract from WCR Jalpaiguri dated 15.2.47, File No.1118/46, p 30, IB Archive

⁶⁴⁷ Extract from WCR Jalpaiguri dated 15.2.47, File No.1118/46, p 29, IB Archive

⁶⁴⁸ Extract from WCR Jalpaiguri dated 22.2.47, File No.1118/46, p 47, IB Archive

They are also holding meetings every now and then with the help of the garden coolies who are constantly putting forth their objections to the garden authorities on some plea.” Requisition for police was received from several tea gardens. The Superintendent of Police with the Circle Inspector, Moynaguri, two DIGs and a number of armed forces, were stationed in the ‘disturbed Tea Garden area’ and orders u/s 144 C.P.C. was enforced.⁶⁴⁹

There was a string of intense activities among the garden workers that had been on the rise along with the demand for Tebhaga . Factory labourers of Lakhipara tea estate under the Assam Duars tea Company under P.S. Dhupguri suspended their work peacefully from 19th Febtuary till the 24th. On the 22nd a meeting of about 1000 coolies was held at Banarhat Tea Garden land under the leadership of Dukhan Uraon and a railway employee. Dukhan and Danda Goala of Bandhapani tea estate demanded more clothes, rations and higher wages. A meeting of about 3000 workers of different Tea Gardens and neighboring villages was held at Bataigola where Deba Prasad Ghosh specially asked garden coolies to unite and form Unions, to enlist themselves for working on the lines. Further instructions would be communicated to them by the CPI worker later. He said that every worker should become a volunteer and enrolment would start after the meeting. He said that there was an incident which was falsely reported by a jotedar named Mansur Uddin of Batabari, and an innocent worker was arrested and sent up, while the latter went there along with others for having had their Tebhaga of paddy. Deba Prasad Ghosh stressed that had there been a Union and volunteers at Batabari, the jotedar could not have done this. On the 23rd about 1000 garden coolies headed by Dukhan Uraon, a Railway employee of Domohani railway station, went on a procession and held a meeting at Banarhat. Dukhan and Dondo Goala of Bendapani tea estate P.S. Madarihat. He advised all garden labourers to demand enhanced ration. They distributed Hindi and Bengali handbills. Bengali handbills were issued by Deba Prasad Ghosh, Secretary, Tea Garden Labour Union, Jalpaiguri. Hindi ones were issued by the Jalpaiguri Zilla Committee. They mainly discussed the labour movement in Duars and the Tebhaga system.⁶⁵⁰

On the 21st again, about 40-45 workers went to Odlabari P.S. Mal in, connection with Tebhaga Movement under the leadership of Samar Ganguli (CPI). They tried to take paddy from a jotedar named Sona Mia of Odlabari but as the paddy was not completely threshed, they left to attend a

⁶⁴⁹ ibid p 48, IB Archive

⁶⁵⁰ Extract from WCR of the Supdt of Police, DIB, Jalpaiguri, for the week ending the 1st March 1947, File No.1118/46, p 54, IB Archive

meeting of about 600 to 700 coolies of Basti and tea gardens near the railway station at Odlabari. Samar Ganguli explained how the paddy is to be divided and taken away under the Tebhaga system and if jotedars do not agree, they should also take away the 1/3 share of the jotedars. He requested the workers to express their grievances to the Company in a peaceful manner. On 27 February, about 50/60 *adhiars* and workers of Haihaipathar village P.S. Matelli assembled to get the paddy crop of jotedar Brihaspati Kalwar of Malbazar.⁶⁵¹

There were two stark instances of police firing that the peasants and workers of Duars braved together. On the first occasion, on 1st March, the police ordered a meeting of peasants and garden-workers in Haihaipather to disperse. The agitated masses retaliated by snatching away the rifles from the patrol party, and they opened fire indiscriminately. Then again, on the 3rd of April, about 1500 workers of Odlabari tea estate, Odlabari village, Khagrabari, and Gazalboda, in Mal, started a procession, armed with lathis, bows and arrows, spears, axes, etc. They carried red flags, shouted slogans and went towards Neoramajhiali village in Metelli, defying attempts by the police to disperse them. They came to Neoramajhiali where a meeting was held till midnight in the house of Sauza Uraon, one of the agitators. Some of the workers of Neoranaddi tea estate, Neoramajhiali, Gokhuljhora and Chetladhua (Khariarbandhar) also joined them. They decided to attack the stack of paddy of Gayanath Das, Jote Munshi of Nawab Shahib and Prabhat Khen of Moynaguri from villages Mangalbari, Dhupjhora, and Khariarbandhar on the 4th, 5th, and the 6th of April. They also settled in the meeting that they would not be frightened by police intervention, and they must die for their plan of action. Samar Ganguli, an absconding leader of the CPI was accused of organising huge processions and attacking the jotedars. Workers numbering about 3000, carried red flags, dankas, improvised loud speakers, and also big lathis, spears, axes, bows, and arrows, khukries, etc. Sloganeering started from Neoramajhiali and went up to the house of Gayanath Das of Khariarbandar. They surrounded the house of the jotedar Gayanath Das and hoisted red flags there. The SDO arrived with a force and when they could not dissuade the workers, he ordered the force to open fire. Workers and peasants fought back with bows and arrows. The force fired 122 rounds of ball ammunition, killing nine workers instantaneously.⁶⁵² All of them were from the Odlabari tea estate.⁶⁵³

⁶⁵¹Extract from WCR Jalpaiguri dated 1.3.47, File No.1118/46, pp 55, IB Archive

⁶⁵² Extract from WCR of the Supdt of Police, DIB, Jalpaiguri, for the week ending 12.4.47, File No.1118/46, p 72, IB Archive

⁶⁵³ Samar Ganguli, 'Duars'r Sromik o Krishok Bidroho'r Kahini', Dhananjay Ray (ed.) *Terai Duars 'r Sromik Krishok Bidroho o Tebhaga Andolon*, Kolkata: Pratibhash, 1988, p 61, BSP

The *Swadhinata* on 7th March revealed sensational information. Just before the Haihaipathar shootout, European Tea Garden owners appealed to the Premier of Bengal, Mr. Suhrawardy, and received the promise of more forces in the gardens. On 19th February in DamDim (Duars), there was an important meeting of the garden owners where the police superintendent was also present. He reportedly promised to take strict action against the workers and the Tebhaga agitators. But garden owners were apparently still not satisfied. The prominent member of the Law Committee, Mr. Stevenson, met Mr. Suhrawardy and it was decided that the Premier would meet the Chairman of the Duars Planter's Association, Mr. Bankin. With the mediation of Stevenson, on 24th February, Bankin, along with the Chairman of the Darjeeling & Duars Planters Sub-Committee, talked for around an hour with Suhrawardy. P.D. Fortin, Home Department Additional Secretary, was also present. Mr. Bankin narrated the story of Communist instigation in Mal and Chalsa. They complained that the District Magistrate was not paying any attention. They asked for an immediate posting of armed police and military in the area. Only if they stayed in camps in the villages and routinely patrolled, could the situation be brought under control.

Initially Suhrawardy apparently rejected the plea. But Mr. Bankin kept exerting pressure on the PM and complained that the primary demands of the workers were rice and clothes and it is the inability of the government to supply these that has led to the crisis. The PM then agreed to send in troops. Describing their great success, on 28th February, a secret circular of planters stated: "After this meeting we have gathered information that to crush the 'Communist instigators' orders have been issued and the local officers have started acting on the behest of our opinion. As per the latest district-level news it has been learnt that the police force in the district has been increased." It is just the next day that 5 peasants were shot dead in Haihaipathar.⁶⁵⁴ This report is corroborated in a correspondence dated 6th May 1947 where in response to an inquiry made by the Special Superintendent of Police, IB, Calcutta, the SP of Jalpaiguri reports that "It is a fact that all the Managers of Tea Gardens of Damdim Sub-District P.S. Mal, met the Superintendent of Police in a meeting at Mal Club-House but that meeting was absolutely a private and secret one and as such nothing could be known what resolutions, if any, were passed in that meeting."⁶⁵⁵

It is abundantly clear that the struggle of the sharecroppers for Tebhaga and the fight of the garden-workers for adequate grain rations and higher wages, were intrinsically linked. Both were results of

⁶⁵⁴ *Shoshostro Police pathanor jonno Shwetango Malikder aabdar: Jalpaiguri gulichalonar pechone chancchollokor kahini*, *Swadhinata* issue: 7.3.47., File No.1118/46, p 76, IB Archive

⁶⁵⁵ Correspondence from the DIB Jalpaiguri dated 6th May 1947 to the Special Supdt. of Police, IB, CID, Bengal, Calcutta, File No.1118/46, p 88, IB Archive

the processes that spiraled in the post-war period in the context of the overall food-scarcity, inflation, war-profiteering (by Garden Babus and jotedars), black-marketeering, and hunger. The fight inside was organically linked with the struggle outside. There was an urge for a larger alliance going beyond the restrictive domains of trade union 'economism'. The capabilities displayed by the plantation workers probably were overlooked in the longer term politicization, thereby resulting in a narrower economism in the following decades.

III. Adivasi *communitarian* solidarity:

A galvanizing or cementing factor in all this was 'adivasi communitarian solidarity'. Many sharecroppers and poor peasants in the Duars region belonged to the Rajbansi or adivasi communities like Santhals, Oraons, Mundas, Rajbansis, Paliyas, Koches : all belonging to the scheduled tribes. Many, like the Mundas, Oraons and the Santhals, had been encouraged to migrate to North Bengal in the 19th century because of their "cultivation skills".⁶⁵⁶ They brought with them their specific social organization and "traditions of rebellion." Because of their particular religions and customs, they were considered 'socially inferior' and were subjected to economic oppression, most of them had lost their land through debts and became sharecroppers or landless labourers. With their history of rebellions, they provided the lead in spearheading the *Tebhaga* movement. Therefore, areas that were dominated by adivasi sharecroppers, like Jalpaiguri and Maldah, saw the most militant struggles.⁶⁵⁷

Most Duars workers were madhesia or from the same adivasi communities-Santhals, Oraons & Mundas. Abani Lahiri, a stalwart of the Communist leadership of the *Tebhaga* Movement says that "Many members of the families of Santhal, Munda and Oraon workers in the tea plantations were sharecroppers in the Duars itself."⁶⁵⁸ Such pre-capitalist peasant or community linkages did play a crucial role in forging this alliance. They made the boundaries of the gardens much more porous than is usually presumed and played a crucial role in mobilizing the workers for the cause of the adhiars. Samar Ganguli (one of the organizers) says that the Duars chapter of the *Tebhaga* movement was primarily an adivasi movement.⁶⁵⁹ The common adivasi origins of the garden workers and the

⁶⁵⁶ Adrienne Cooper, *Sharecropping and Sharecroppers' Struggles in Bengal, 1930-1950*, Calcutta: KP Bagchi & Company, 1988, pp 257-258 [henceforth Cooper]

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid p 258

⁶⁵⁸ Abani Lahiri p 78

⁶⁵⁹ Samar Ganguli, 'Duars'r Sromik o Krishok Bidroho'r Kahini', Dhananjay Ray (ed.) *Terai Duars 'r Sromik Krishok Bidroho o Tebhaga Andolon*, Kolkata: Pratibhash, 1988, p 62, BSP

sharecroppers created a bond between them “and many tea-garden workers became the most militant volunteers of ‘Tebhaga Bahini’ (of Samar Ganguli). It was only in Jalpaiguri that the Tebhaga struggle exploded, quickly reaching a crescendo, and armed conflict became an important characteristic of the struggle right from the beginning. Adivasi tea-garden workers and Kisans, armed with their traditional bows and arrows, became the mainstay of the movement. Samar Ganguli organized Tebhaga in the adjoining villages of Binaguri-Banarhat area and got tremendous support from adivasi tea-garden workers. The common background with sharecroppers developed into a revolutionary bond and even some adivasi jotedars supported the movement.⁶⁶⁰ Adivasi communitarian unity and the traditional *lathi, tangi*, bow and arrow, organized under the political leadership of Patal Babu and Samar Ganguli that became the mainstay of the Tebhaga movement. It was not simply an exclusivist unity. The particular character of the working class – its communitarian and peasant linkages also enabled the sharecroppers to readily accommodate help from outside – at times adivasi garden workers, at times even the adivasi jotedars.

So duars workers, and the Indian working classes in general, possessed multiple, layered, or foliated identities. The pre-bourgeois community or peasant consciousness (in this case the adivasi identity) of the workers exists along with as well as within a larger and dynamic contestation with a working class consciousness. They remain adivasis, peasants as also garden-workers. It would be mistaken to freeze them at either of the two extremes. Neither are they proletarians with a fully evolved working class consciousness. Nor are they ‘necessarily incapable of forging class solidarities’ owing to their pre-bourgeois nature.

Both views suffer from one or the other kind of determinism – economic or cultural.⁶⁶¹ Both end up being essentialized and static notions that seem to ignore and overlook the fact that the Indian working class remains in constant flux. It is a process wherein the class identity is continually in contestation – as also sometimes in collaboration - with communitarian, caste, regional and religious identities. When any one of these identities gain prominence at any given point in time, it does not mean that it does so at the cost of the other identities. There is no ‘pre-given-ness’ in the categories that the workers identified themselves with; these identities and categories are ‘actively created’ at different junctures by the workers themselves, mediated by socio-economic circumstances. In the context of the specific socio-economic circumstances prevailing in the Duars in the post-war years, the

⁶⁶⁰ Majumdar pp 113-114

⁶⁶¹ Chitra Joshi, *Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and Its Forgotten Histories*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003

solidarity that emerged from the adivasi identity of the workers was most effective in forging a larger unity vis-à-vis the jotedar-planter nexus.

Conclusion

As I try to conclude this study on the Dooars gardens, what looms large in my mind is their present predicament. During my last field visit, I remember one of the locals who sighed and said: “death lurks in the gardens.” The garden lock-outs, the unpruned tea-bushes, the dishevelled garden factories and the hunger in the workers’ lines - all contribute to the gloom that the scenic landscape of the Dooars tries hard to hide. With the shocking tales of starvation deaths, chronic mal-nutrition, out-migration and child-trafficking in the Dooars, for many who have been working there over generations, the gardens have themselves turned into graves. Ramesh Minj, a resident of one of the closed gardens, said he felt he could sense the melancholy in the tea gardens. “With every dying plantation worker,” he said, “The gardens too are dying a slow death.”⁶⁶²

⁶⁶² Ashutosh Shaktan, “The Plight of the Tea Plantation Workers of Dooars”, *The Caravan*, 24th June 2016

The despair is a general one among various sectors of the working classes and it is reflected in the labour historiography of the last three decades. We find its particular manifestation in the gardens of Dooars. The high hopes of the earlier years of labour organizations have given way to hopelessness and a dismal weakness in collective assertion is undeniable. What was the exact trajectory of the workers' movement in the Dooars over the years? What were the myriad reasons that contributed to the nightmarish conditions that prevail today? These are questions beyond the scope of this study. But a brief overview of the immediate two decades (1947-67) of union activities right after its emergence in the melting pot of the post-war/Tebhaga years might just provide some insight.

The militant ration struggles, the spate of unionization in tandem with Tebhaga, as has been observed, had made the planters – both British and Indian – wary of communist incursions into the gardens. Within fifteen days of transfer of power, on 25th August 1947, both the Dooars Planters Association (DPA) and the Indian Tea Planters Association (ITPA) met with the Congress leadership (as per the Annual Report of the ITPA) to arrive at a joint understanding to stave off increasing labour militancy in the gardens. All efforts were made to dissuade workers from union activities: starting from threats, intimidation and going on to coercive action. In 1948 itself, however, the workers in Grassmore garden waged a 11-day strike raising basic demands. All gardens across Nagrakata PS observed a one day symbolic strike in solidarity with Grassmore.⁶⁶³ This was the first of its kind after Independence. Much was awaited in the years to follow.

Till 1954, investment in Indian tea plantations was 113.06 crore rupees out of which 72.55 crore was foreign capital and 40.51 crore was Indian. What is astounding is that the 247 tea companies doubled their assets in the period between 1939 and 1953 and most of this was acquired post 1946. But this explosive growth in profit margins did not translate into any improvement in the conditions of labour. On the contrary, much of it was at their expense. The wage level in Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri was in fact lower than that prevailing even in other colonial plantations – whether in Sri Lanka or in Kenya. For instance, in 1953, the Dooars

⁶⁶³ Manik Sanyal, "Cha-Shipo o Sromik Andolon", *Pashchimbanga (Jalpaiguri Zila Parishad)*, 22nd June 2001, p 71

garden workers received Rs.1.84 per day which was far lower than even the prevailing wage-levels in Rhodesia or Kenya which were known for their cheap labour. Government records in fact show that the garden workers were receiving less than agricultural labourers in the vicinity even in 1953, that is well after the fixing of the minimum wages.⁶⁶⁴

As per the Minimum Wages Act (1948), the Minimum Wages Committee was set up with representations from the state, the planters and the workers. On 24th March 1950, the West Bengal government formed the Modak Committee to look into the wages of the Bengal plantations and it was on the recommendations of this Committee that on 5th September 1951, the minimum wages for the plantation labourers were declared. With effect from 20th December 1951, it was fixed at one rupee and three annas per day for male workers. The struggle for equal wages for both male and female workers had not been fought for so far. Simultaneously, in 1951, with much fanfare, was passed the Plantation Labour Act that fixed the responsibility of the workers' health, drinking water, sanitation, canteen, crèche, education and housing on planters. Following this Central Act, the West Bengal government also passed the Plantation Labour Rules (1951) that further highlighted these labour rights. But such rules and Acts would certainly not give the real picture as it unfolded on the ground. The fixing of the minimum wages was for instance met with by the planters with a massive retrenchment of labour from the gardens to cut costs. In 1950, the total strength of the garden workers in Bengal was 3 lakh 29 thousand. In 1955 it came down to 2 lakh 42 thousand. The tea acreage, however, was still expanding all this while. Retrenched workers were sent off to their respective districts and even the standard disbursal of rations was stalled, in the context of a slump in the international tea market in 1951. The labour-management relations also did not change overnight with the promulgation of such Acts. The plantocracy used all means to retain its arbitrary authority.⁶⁶⁵

In the Dooars Terai region, the organization of tea-workers through unionization remained a difficult process even after 1947. The planters continued to remain far more organized and intolerant towards union activities over vast stretches of the garden area. During the 1952 elections, the CPI was allowed in to some extent to openly campaign in the garden areas. Kanu

⁶⁶⁴ *ibid* p 72

⁶⁶⁵ *ibid* pp 71-72

Sanyal, one of the legendary communist leaders from this region, recalled that the workers in this area were so isolated that when during the in 1952 election campaign loudspeakers were used, they scared away the garden workers.⁶⁶⁶ Red Flag unions came up in this period in Dagapur, Sukna, Muhurgaon, Gulma, Trihana, Phoolbari, Sonachandi and Merryview gardens. In 1952 Jangal Santal also joined the Communist Party and was to remain a prime organizer in the years to follow.⁶⁶⁷ But even then, it faced stiff resistance from the management. Sabrati Mia, a worker of Merry View, for instance, faced expulsion owing to his union-related activities.⁶⁶⁸

While in Dooars, the peasant organizations were stronger ever since the 1940s, in Terai the Red Flag unions expanded their activities amongst the farmers and peasants after 1952. Following the decision of the Darjeeling District Committee held in Malbazar in 1952, Biren Basu was put in charge of organizing the garden workers, while the other leaders were in charge of the peasant front. Charu Mazumdar said in his resolution that “Organization of tea workers and the peasants should run parallel.”⁶⁶⁹

The distinct characteristic of the Dooars-Terai (since the days of Tebhaga) that shaped the garden workers’ agitations over these years was its organic link with the peasant movement. Khokon Mazumdar, a Communist leader of that time, in his memoir recounts an instance to highlight this. He talks of their secret efforts to start union building in Satbhaiya estate. A secret meeting was fixed in the house of Dari Oraon, a local peasant. Despite all efforts, a meeting within the garden could not materialise owing to the opposition and surveillance of the management. Using the extended familial links of the adivasi farmers all efforts were made to hold the meeting in one of the adjacent gardens, but to no avail. In the context of non-payment of wages for two weeks, an attempt was made to organize the workers and to gherao the management. In consultation with other communist leaders like Charu Mazumdar Kanu Sanyal, Biren Basu and some peasant leaders, the secret meeting was fixed at Dari Oraon’s

⁶⁶⁶ Ashok Gangopadhyay, “Darjeeling Jelar Cha-Bagichay Sromik Andolon”, *Madhuporni: Bishesh Darjeeing Jela Shonkhya*, 1996, p 150

⁶⁶⁷ Prof. M. Das Gupta, Asoke Ganguly, Paritosh Chakladar, “Labour and Trade Union Movement in the Tea Plantation of Terai (186-1955) - Problems of Class Formation”, *Paper Presented a an All India Seminar of the Department of History of North Bengal University*, 6-8 November, 1987, p 21

⁶⁶⁸ Ashok Gangopadhyay, “Darjeeling Jelar Cha-Bagichay Sromik Andolon”, *Madhuporni: Bishesh Darjeeing Jela Shonkhya*, 1996, p 150

⁶⁶⁹ Prof. M. Das Gupta, Asoke Ganguly, Paritosh Chakladar, “Labour and Trade Union Movement in the Tea Plantation of Terai (186-1955) - Problems of Class Formation”, *Paper Presented a an All India Seminar of the Department of History of North Bengal University*, 6-8 November, 1987, p 21

house where the workers were to secretly congregate. But when nobody turned up, as they got to know through the Adivasi peasant networks that the management was apprehending such a meeting and had threatened the workers with suspension if they attended any meeting and had also posted chaukidars at workers' lines. With vital help from a sympathetic garden clerk, however, they were able to organize a small group of workers the next morning (at the time of *haziri*/attendance) to march towards the managers' office demanding payment. This however, turned into a sizeable gathering by the time it reached the office, as peasants from the nearby villages joined in large numbers in support. The agitation was a success and the immediate demand was accepted. Such instances led to further unionization in the surrounding garden areas.⁶⁷⁰

For the purpose of unionization of the gardens, the communist leadership in the area were heavily reliant upon the Adivasi peasants – several of them ex-garden workers. They had links with the labour lines on the estates. Some, like Ashok Gangopadhyay, even go to the extent of saying that without the help of the Adivasi peasants it is doubtful whether there could have been any headway in such matters as the peasants were far more organized and was more capable of taking initiatives than the worker could by that time.⁶⁷¹ This is considered to be a “peculiarity” of the Terai-Dooars region. Contrary to the general Communist notion that it would be the workers who alone were capable of leading the peasantry, here the movement rode on the collective strength of the peasants. There are two reasons identified behind this “peculiarity”. One, the workers were far more constrained in their free mobility because of the strict garden regime as compared to the peasants. And two, the fact that the workers and the surrounding peasantry (largely share-croppers) shared the same Adivasi community linkages, languages and culture had facilitated this camaraderie. Now, what some characterize as a “peculiarity” of this region, could also be seen as the particular nature of the garden working class – their peasant consciousness, community identity – which helped them in forging solidarities of various hues. This again was a result of their foliated identities.

⁶⁷⁰ Khokon Mazumdar, *Bharater Bukey Basanter Bajranirghosh*, Siliguri: Press De Picasso, 2004, pp 1-2

⁶⁷¹ Ashok Gangopadhyay, “Darjeeling Jelar Cha-Bagichay Sromik Andolon”, *Madhuporni: Bishesh Darjeeing Jela Shonkhya*, 1996, pp 152-3

Even Khokon Majumdar, a prominent and one of the few surviving communist leaders of that era, in his memoir in no unambiguous terms recognizes that without the distinctive presence of the Adivasi peasants with their bows and arrows, the garden workers by themselves could not have sustained their struggles. His reference point was the 17 day long strike across the tea belt in 1955. He recalls the 4000 strong peasant-worker rally with bows and arrows from Naxalbari tea garden that clashed with the police. The Congress-led pro-management union workers, wherever they were present, tried to sabotage the struggle and dissuade the workers. He recollects one of the sarcastic gestures by them towards the striking workers saying “Bora-loke abe bonus lebek le?” (will you come with a sack to fill it with your bonus?)⁶⁷²

This struggle for bonus in 1955 was one of the landmark struggles in the Dooars and the first of its kind here that had a lasting impact on the gardens even in terms of defining the management-workers relationship. Till this point there were other struggles like the three day strike in 1953 (17th August to 19th August) and then again the threat of a struggle on the issue of an annual bonus (equivalent to 60 days’ wages) in mid-1954.⁶⁷³ But what brewed in the gardens in 1955 had a different flavour and is still remembered by many. Earlier in the year as the demand for bonus, wage hike, reduction of workload and pukka houses was raised in the Darjeeling hills, a militant strike was called by communist and the Gorkha League unions from 22nd June. Police firing on 25th June in the Margaret Hope Garden took the lives of six workers – women, men and a 14 year old child. Twenty thousand garden workers in the hills broke section 144 to march with their bodies. The planters were finally forced to accept the demand for bonus in the hills.⁶⁷⁴ The Margaret Hope firing, and the subsequent fight to victory went into the legends, inspiring the workers of the hills, Terai and Dooars for years. Later in the year, on 24th August, a strike was declared across the gardens in the Terai and the Dooars, primarily on the issue of the payment of bonus to workers. It also served to challenge the planters’ arbitrary and authoritarian dealings with union workers. In this unprecedented strike too what was notable in the Dooars was the massive participation of the peasants marching in

⁶⁷² Khokon Mazumdar, *Bharater Bukey Basanter Bajranirghosh*, Siliguri: Press De Picasso, 2004, pp 3-4

⁶⁷³ Manik Sanyal, “Cha-Shipo o Sromik Andolon”, *Pashchimabanga (Jalpaiguri Zila Parishad)*, 22nd June 2001, p 72

⁶⁷⁴ Souren Basu, “Darjeeling Jelar Gana o Rajnoitik Andolon”, *Madhuporni: Bishesh Darjeeing Jela Shonkhya*, 1996, p 177

thousands, along with the garden workers. They played a crucial role in providing both food and shelter to the agitating garden-workers.⁶⁷⁵

If in the Dooars the strike was near total, it was not so in Terai. A section of adivasi Christians joined work even before the strike was called off.⁶⁷⁶ The strike was finally called off after ensuring a 100-130 rupees bonus per head. The strength of the strike also forced the central government to constitute an enquiry committee to look into garden-issues.⁶⁷⁷ The struggle proved to be a historic one for the workers as for the first time they could understand the efficacy of joint action on their part. From 1955 to 1962, the movement went unabated and the forced the owners to discuss issues related to wage and bonus payment with the workers' representatives.⁶⁷⁸

A new development in these years was the multiplicity of trade unions under various flags in the same garden. While the Gorkha League and the INTUC already functioned with a certain degree of patronage from the planters, the subsequent splits in the communist movement ensured a range of unions divided according to their respective loyalties to Congress, Gorkha League, CPI, CPIM, CPI(ML), RSP and so on. There were also instances of unions divided along religious lines as some unions cropped up to serve the interests of Christian Adivasi workers.⁶⁷⁹

Meanwhile, on the peasant front, the struggle to forcibly seize the ceiling-excess lands from the jotedars was gathering strength. The West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act was enacted in 1953 which declared that none of the intermediaries and the raiyats or under-raiyat could hold land in excess of the ceiling under section 6(1) of the Act. This gathered momentum since 1958

⁶⁷⁵ Ashok Gangopadhyay, "Darjeeling Jelar Cha-Bagichay Sromik Andolon", *Madhuporni: Bishesh Darjeeling Jela Shonkhya*, 1996, pp 152

⁶⁷⁶ Prof. M. Das Gupta, Asoke Ganguly, Paritosh Chakladar, "Labour and Trade Union Movement in the Tea Plantation of Terai (186-1955) - Problems of Class Formation", *Paper Presented at an All India Seminar of the Department of History of North Bengal University*, 6-8 November, 1987, p 21

⁶⁷⁷ Souren Basu, "Darjeeling Jelar Gana o Rajnoitik Andolon", *Madhuporni: Bishesh Darjeeling Jela Shonkhya*, 1996, p 177

⁶⁷⁸ Prof. M. Das Gupta, Asoke Ganguly, Paritosh Chakladar, "Labour and Trade Union Movement in the Tea Plantation of Terai (186-1955) - Problems of Class Formation", *Paper Presented at an All India Seminar of the Department of History of North Bengal University*, 6-8 November, 1987, p 21

⁶⁷⁹ *ibid* p 22

in the name of “Benami Jomi Andolon”. This meant acquisition of land held in excess of the permissible limit under fictitious heads.⁶⁸⁰ The call was to bring all paddy to the panchayat threshing ground and at once hide all the rice from the Benami lands so as to avoid police raids.⁶⁸¹ Taking the shape of a mass upsurge, the seizure of paddy from Benami lands from the jotedar’s stock became rampant which eventually contributed to the weakening of the jotedari system.⁶⁸² Though this process entailed gaining land by a section of the landless peasantry, yet the cumulative effect of a range factors was to contribute to a massive swell in the ranks of landless agricultural labourers in the region. The decline of the jotedar-adhiar system, the growing immiserisation of the peasantry and their increasing landlessness, the enactment and implementation of the West Bengal Land Revenue Act (1955), the ravages of the devastating floods of 1968-70 in the Tista valley, lack of sufficient employment opportunities in the non-agricultural sector and the influx of immigrants from then East Pakistan – all contributed to the massive rise in the proportion of agricultural labourers in the countryside. From 1961 to 71, there was a 264.15% growth rate in their ranks - so much so that agricultural labourers who constituted just 3% of the rural workforce in 1961 became as large as 11% by 1971.⁶⁸³

There was yet another contributive factor to the phenomenon that was related to the gardens. A large overlap became more and more pronounced in the Dooars between the non-permanent (bigha) workers of the gardens and casual agricultural labour. Considering the total labour force employed in the gardens of Dooars was so large (1.71 lakh in 1961), any fluctuation in their size was bound to affect the reserve of agricultural labourers in the surroundings. While there was one round of retrenchment of permanent workers in the mid-1950s after the promulgation of the Plantation Labour Act (PLA) and minimum wage fixation, the 1960s saw a further curtailment in the ranks of the non-permanent (bigha) workers. First, the slump in the international market led to lower production and thereby shrinkage of the seasonal labour force that constituted 40-50% of the total workforce at the peak of the plucking season. Secondly, the transfer of several of the established foreign firms to speculative and trading activities

⁶⁸⁰ Souren Basu, “Darjeeling Jelar Gana o Rajnoitik Andolon”, *Madhuporni: Bishesh Darjeeing Jela Shonkhya*, 1996, p 178

⁶⁸¹ Khokon Mazumdar, *Bharater Bukey Basanter Bajranirghosh*, Siliguri: Press De Picasso, 2004, p 6

⁶⁸² Souren Basu, “Darjeeling Jelar Gana o Rajnoitik Andolon”, *Madhuporni: Bishesh Darjeeing Jela Shonkhya*, 1996, p 178

⁶⁸³ KK Bagchi, “Changing Profile of Land and Labour in Jalpaiguri:1950-51 to 2004-05”, *Working Paper Series, Special Assistance Programme, Department of Economics, University of North Bengal*, Volume 1, October 2005, pp 38-39

meant mismanagement and erosion of capital resources that again added to the push factor from within the gardens. All put together, there was a considerable spill-over from the gardens to the agricultural sector over the 1960s. Moreover, “since long past there was a tendency amongst the plantation workers to purchase cultivable land in the fringe of tea gardens and settle down as cultivators or agricultural labourers after their retirement or retrenchment from the gardens.”⁶⁸⁴ All of this not just swelled the ranks of the agricultural labourers, but also explain the strong interlinkages between the garden workers and the peasants in the vicinity that could be activated at any moment.

All through these years what continued unabated is this strong linkage between the garden workers’ struggles and the peasants. Abhijit Mazumdar attests to this around the time of the Naxalbari uprising in 1967.⁶⁸⁵ While large numbers of peasants in and around Naxalbari under the call and leadership of the Kisan committees took to a violent seizure of land and crops from the jotedars from 1966 onwards, in the gardens too there were struggles brewing. In August-September 1966, a general strike was called across Darjeeling-Terai-Dooars leading to a militant struggle, demanding a wage-hike. In the hills, this time, yet again a worker was killed in police firing leading to even larger protests.⁶⁸⁶ In the plains the Adivasi armed peasantry once again took a “leading role” in the tea workers’ strike in the Naxalbari area. Abhijit Mazumdar recounts how “at the fag end of the striking days, an English manager Craig of Gungaram tea estate tried to* bring in some outsiders as strike breakers. The surreptitious move was subverted by the armed resistance of peasants under the Krishak Sabha leader Munshi Tudu.”⁶⁸⁷

The famine-like severe food scarcity across Bengal in the days of *Khaddo Andolon* also worked as a catalyst for such united struggles. On 9th May 1967, the management of the Sanyasithan tea estate tried to grab agricultural land from a section of peasants, which fell within the leased out garden area. The peasantry and workers unitedly fought against it, as is evident from Case

⁶⁸⁴ *ibid* p 40

⁶⁸⁵ Abhijit Mazumdar, in a personal interview. He is a local activist based in Siliguri with considerable experience of the garden history and present context. He is also the son of the legendary communist leader Charu Mazumdar.

⁶⁸⁶ Souren Basu, “Darjeeling Jelar Gana o Rajnoitik Andolon”, *Madhuporni: Bishesh Darjeeing Jela Shonkhya*, 1996, p 178

⁶⁸⁷ Interview with Abhijit Mazumdar

No. 4 Dt. 9th May 1967, Phansidewa P.S.⁶⁸⁸ More or less around the same time, the Naxalite leader Jangal Santhal, the then the secretary of Siliguri Sub-Divisional Krishak Samity, published his famous "Red Leaflet", urging civil society to stand behind the peasant-worker joint struggle.⁶⁸⁹ Naxalite groups are said to have organized their own trade unions, according to Kanu Sanyal, in Fulbari, Gangaram, Thanjhera, Naxalbari, Sonachandi, Batasi and Motidhar tea gardens.⁶⁹⁰

Commenting upon the continuance of such crucial interlinkages, Abhijit Mazumdar says that from the organizational point of view, “the mass organizations of both working class and peasantry [were] under the umbrella of the communist party that continued across the divisions of CPI-CPIM an CPIM-CPIML.” But “most importantly”, he opines, since the inception of tea plantations in North Bengal, the Adivasi labourers were given to cultivate the fallow land beyond the plantation area but within the garden territory. Thus, the tea workers also became seasonal peasants. This dual character of the workforce as garden workers as well as peasant cultivators made such calls for united struggles more viable, particularly in times of crisis, for a formidable section of the garden workforce.⁶⁹¹

From the days of Tebhaga to Naxalbari, it is difficult to fathom the workers’ struggles in the gardens without taking into account these significant interlinkages. It is impossible to understand the workers’ agitations in isolation from the land relations, the particular condition of the sharecroppers, the jotedari system, in short, the overall socio-economic milieu and history of the region as a whole. Developments outside determined to a large extent relations and conditions within the gardens and the tone and tenor of the struggles that they generated. In such an understanding - the particular character of capital - labour relations as they unfolded in the gardens under the sardari system, the labourers’ reliance on subsistence cultivation for a living, their community or Adivasi identity and solidarities based on that, their peasant consciousness and hunger for land, their collective struggle as workers for a better living – all come together in determining the particular nature of the working class that evolved in the

⁶⁸⁸ ibid

⁶⁸⁹ ibid

⁶⁹⁰ Prof. M. Das Gupta, Asoke Ganguly, Paritosh Chakladar, “Labour and Trade Union Movement in the Tea Plantation of Terai (186-1955) - Problems of Class Formation”, *Paper Presented at All India Seminar of the Department of History of North Bengal University*, 6-8 November, 1987, p 22

⁶⁹¹ Interview with Abhijit Mazumdar

gardens. It is the complex interplay of all these multiple and foliated identities that shaped their struggles and consciousness.

It is beyond the scope of this study to map the exact trajectory of workers' movements traversing the next four decades. There must have been a multiple range of factors that had come together to contribute towards the despair as it pervades in the gardens today. I may tentatively suggest that the increasing disjunction or isolation of the workers from the lot of the peasantry or the virtual absence of any worthwhile peasant movement post Naxalbari could very well have contributed in diminishing their collective strength over the decades. What stands as an indisputable fact today is the bitter reality of hunger and death in the gardens facing closure.⁶⁹² Before drawing to a close, we would end with a brief overview of where exactly does the Dooars workers stand, 144 years since tea made its way into the region, and 69 years since the transfer of power.

At Kathalguri, the first tea estate to shut down in 2002, as many as 525 workers and dependents were reported to have died over the next three years. In the next five years between 2002 and 2007, when 17 tea gardens shut down, at least 1,200 deaths were reported in the Dooars gardens. The fact that these were hunger-related deaths is corroborated by a survey by the Siliguri Welfare Association in 2014 which found the BMI (Body Mass Index) of workers in some of the Dooars gardens to be 14. BMI of 18.5 constitutes a "famine-affected population" according to the WHO.⁶⁹³ The health centre sources in the gardens suggest that the average worker does not get even 1500 calories a day, whereas the minimum should be more than 2200 calories per head per day. The average calorie intake is less among women.⁶⁹⁴ Diseases related to prolonged and acute malnutrition have increased and the death rate among children has risen significantly. The number of premature deaths and physical impairments also seem to have

⁶⁹² For greater details refer to Sharit Bhowmik, 'The Politics of Tea in The Duars', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XLIV No. 9, February 2009

⁶⁹³ "13 years too late for many in North Bengal's tea gardens", *The Indian Express*, 22nd November, 2015

⁶⁹⁴ Renuca Rajni Beck, "Condition of the Workers in Closed Tea Gardens: A Report on Jalpaiguri District of West Bengal", *Behind Closed and Abandoned Tea Gardens – Status Report of India, Centre for Education and Communication*, September 2007, p 23

grown in recent times. The break-down of water supply and health facilities means an increasing incidence of water-borne diseases and malaria.⁶⁹⁵

Closure of gardens has also meant suspension of all maternity benefits that women workers were entitled to, i.e no maternity leave or allowance. Far from making an extra income to take care of themselves – for medicines and vital nutrition - women, during pregnancy, are having to go without any earning. They are not even getting 1,500 calories against the standard of 2,250 calories per day. The fast deteriorating economic condition of the workers' has also translated into increasing drop-out rate at school-level. Children are increasingly engaged in odd jobs for whatever income they may add to the family's dwindling resources. The workers themselves talk of a drastic swell in the incidence of child labour.

Alongside, taking full advantage of the closure of several gardens, the management of the adjacent gardens are further exploiting the workers. According to a senior trade unionist, the management of other running gardens are tapping onto the huge reserve of unemployed workers and are forcing them to work at paltry sub-human wages with an inhuman workload. This way, the planters are trying their best to dismantle whatever the workers' movement could achieve over the decades, including established wage-structure as well as work schedules.

A closer look into the shut down shows the extent of the plight. The Dumchipara garden – one of the nerve-centres of the ration-strikes in 1945-46 – was shut down in May 2015. Workers at the colony scrounge in the undergrowth of the tea garden and in the forests beyond for food. They collect tea flowers and scramble for *sabzi* along with edible roots and leaves. Ever since the closure, the workers were pushed into selling off whatever precious little they possessed - cycles, goats, utensils. The last time the workers got their due ration in Dhumchipara was in 2011. While some have resorted to breaking stones in the nearby river-beds in exchange for a meagre daily wage, some other lucky ones travel four hours daily to pluck leaves in the partially open Lakhipara tea garden. One of the other worst affected gardens was the Bandapani tea garden (established in 1895) and shut since July 2013. "Between 2013-15, as many as 15 people have died in one labour line here. And that's just one labour line," says tea garden worker Raju

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid p 23; *Report on Hunger in Tea Plantations in North Bengal*, January 2004, West Bengal Advisor to the Commissioners of the Supreme Court, in the case PUCL vs UOI & Ors. Under Writ Petition (Civil) No. 196 of 2001.

Thapa. “Thirty-two workers have died and we haven’t even counted the number of dead non-workers.” According to a recent survey, 74% of the children in the garden was found suffering from malnutrition. Child-trafficking was rampant in between the ages 12-15. The Bagrakote garden – one of the earliest in Dooars established in 1876 - was shut down in 2015. Since April that year, the 1000-hectare estate has seen 25 deaths — six of them in just one week.

Lakhan Santal and his wife were both tea pluckers in Bagrakote. For about a month before the wife’s death there was little to eat and on the day she died there was none. Lakhan hasn’t been the same mentally any more. He barely mumbles. What is most disconcerting however, is the fact that in his memory the time of the “white sahib” when he joined the garden 45 years ago being paid one anna a day, appears better than the conditions today.

Then, what about the gardens that are still functional? In the Joint Labour Commissioner (North Bengal)’s latest survey of the gardens, the picture is not quite bright in the working gardens. The survey observes that “in spite of being industrial workers, the tea garden workmen get the wages lesser than any other employment and to live the livelihood at this meagre wages is really unaffordable.”⁶⁹⁶ In a total of 273 tea estates under the purview of the Survey across Dooars, Terai and the hills, it estimates a total permanent workforce of 2,62,626. And out of the above even today 95,835 workers remain without any housing facilities provided by the management. 62 gardens in the year of survey had not spent a single penny on new construction, repair or maintenance of housing for the workers.⁶⁹⁷ The workers’ lines, even after all these years, are still not adequately supplied with clean and sufficient drinking water sources. In terms of health facilities, out of the 273 gardens under survey, only 166 have hospitals. And out of the 166, only 56 estates have full time residential doctors. Again, out of the 166, only 74 doctors are qualified holding MBBS degree. And 116 of them have no nurses serving in them. Out of the total, 113 gardens do not even have any primary health centre or ambulances, leave aside hospitals. And till now, 175 of the gardens under survey have no Labour Welfare Officer. In lieu of a detailed study of the prevailing conditions, what we have here are just some indicators of the far from satisfactory conditions prevailing even within the gardens that are still functional.

⁶⁹⁶ *Synopsis on Survey of Tea Gardens conducted by Regional Labour Offices under the jurisdiction of Joint Labour Commissioner, North Bengal Zone, February 2014*, State Labour Institute, Labour Department, Government of West Bengal, p 34

⁶⁹⁷ *Ibid* p 22

Even after 25 deaths in a matter of months, the Superintending Manager of Bagrakote and two other Duncans tea gardens, C P Kapoor, says, “I don’t think the deaths are because of malnutrition, rather because the families are not literate and aware and couldn’t provide medical attention in time.”⁶⁹⁸ Sumanto Guha Thakurta, Secretary of the Dooars Branch of the Indian Tea Association (DBITA), explains the current crisis as an outcome of the loss of an international market and the failure of the industry to tap new markets. The USSR, he says, was one of the biggest consumers of Indian tea, and that market was lost after its disintegration, giving a severe blow to the industry which it could not recover from. Failing to meet international standards, India has also lost the European and American markets to Kenya, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and even Bangladesh. Today, Pakistan remains India’s biggest tea market, importing as much as 35 per cent of India’s tea, apart from the Middle East.

The workers, however, contradict this, by pointing out the disinterest and mismanagement of the garden management and an excessive orientation towards short-term quick profits instead of long-term investment in replanting, etc, as the prime reasons. A classic example of course is Bandapani that witnessed 32 deaths in two years since its closure. One of the garden workers blames the management for the closure. He points out how originally the estate was owned by the Darjeeling Dooars Plantation Limited (DDPL) and was first sold to Mohta Enterprises, and then to Sarada Pleasure and Adventure Limited, a Siliguri-based hotel, having no interest other than quick profit.⁶⁹⁹

The myriads of reasons that could have contributed to the present crisis, just as the reasons behind the weakening of the workers’ collective strength – are not the fields within the purview of the present work. But what remains a fact is that, while there was a time when practically the entire district was peopled through immigration fuelled by the needs of the tea gardens; today history has taken a full circle with both paharia and madhesia tea-workers out-migrating from the gardens in search of a life and living. In the Samsing garden, for instance, there has been a considerable increase in the trickling away of workers from the gardens after the closure. Some work in the security forces, while others at the private sector as office staff, etc. Women

⁶⁹⁸ “13 years too late for many in North Bengal’s tea gardens”, *The Indian Express*, 22nd November, 2015

⁶⁹⁹ *ibid*

tend to migrate to Delhi, Chandigarh, Punjab, Bombay, Bangalore and even to Siliguri to work as construction labourers or as maid servants. The same has been the predicament of the women workers in Bawandanga garden after closure.⁷⁰⁰ Half of the residents (4000 of them), mostly male, of the Chongtong garden in Darjeeling have migrated to Kolkata, Chennai, Mumbai, Goa and Delhi in search of work.⁷⁰¹

While the garden working class strives its best to continue its lives and struggles against mounting odds, it is for historians to decipher the mysteries that make us travel from Margeret Hope to abject despair in the annals of labour history.

⁷⁰⁰ Renuca Rajni Beck, "Condition of the Workers in Closed Tea Gardens: A Report on Jalpaiguri District of West Bengal", *Behind Closed and Abandoned Tea Gardens – Status Report of India, Centre for Education and Communication*, September 2007, pp 18

⁷⁰¹ Milindo Chakrabarti and Animesh Sarkar, "Closed Tea Gardens in Darjeeling Hills: A Case Study", *Behind Closed and Abandoned Tea Gardens – Status Report of India, Centre for Education and Communication*, September 2007, pp 29

Appendix

Producing Tea - from the Gardens to the Factory:

In his Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India, Whitley characterizes the 'Plantation System' in the following words:

The plantation represents the development of agricultural resources of tropical countries in accordance with the methods of western industrialism; *it is a large scale enterprise in agriculture*. The plantation system connotes the acquisition of a limited but fairly extensive area for the cultivation of a particular crop, the actual cultivation being done under the direct supervision of a manager, who in some cases may himself be the proprietor. A considerable number of persons are employed under his control in the same way as the factory workers are under the control of the factory manager, *but there is one important difference in that the work is essentially agricultural and is not concentrated in a large building.*⁷⁰²

⁷⁰² Royal Commission on Labour in India, Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India, Whitley, 1931, Calcutta: Government of India, Central Publication Branch, 1931 p 349

For a close reading of the *nature* of work that the plantation workers have to undertake, and also to evolve a better understanding of the plantation economy it is imperative that we delve here at a certain length with the entire process of the making of tea in the gardens. Here we will try to sketch the chain and kind of labour involved from the field-worker to the factory-worker in “its cultivation and subsequent manufacture into the marketable product we drink”.⁷⁰³ The range of activities that the workers have to perform starting from cultivation of the plant, the collection of the leaves and finally the processing of it is a fairly lengthy and exhaustive process stretch over the annual calendar with seasonal variations. In this ensuing discussion regarding work in the plantation regime, we would be focussing only on the Duars gardens and would also look into the changes (if any) in the process over the years.

Preparing the land:

While opening up new land for tea gardens in British India, to start with, the brushwood and other undergrowth are cut immediately at the close of the rainy season. These are burnt, trees cut down and the stumps pulled out to avoid any likely root disease. A few trees, particularly those of the leguminous variety are allowed to stand, in order to give shade to the tea bushes. Thereafter, the land is hoed, stones and roots removed, and the soil well mixed.⁷⁰⁴ The soil best suited for tea is the reddish or dark brown loam which is found in the lands of the northern taluks of Maynaguri, Falakata, and Alipur tahsils, along the Bhutan frontier. But any soil that is light and friable is considered fine for tea as opposed to stiff clayey soil.⁷⁰⁵ The tea bushes need to be protected from strong sun at lower altitudes and hence shade trees are planted at regular intervals in the Duars. The most commonly used is the ordinary Sau which gives a “light, even shade” while the falling leaves form good manure for the plants.⁷⁰⁶

Procuring the seeds:

Most Indian gardens have a plot of “carefully selected tea, especially cultivated to produce tea.”⁷⁰⁷ This plot is kept as far removed from the rest of the garden as possible “in order to

⁷⁰³ ‘The Industry in 1895’, Extract from DHE Sunder’s Settlement Report of 1895, CHB Jalpaiguri 1951 pp ccxviii [Henceforth The Industry in 1895]

⁷⁰⁴ ‘The activities of a tea garden in 1935’, Extracts from ‘All About Tea’ by William H. Ukers, Vol I, The Industry in 1895, pp ccxiv [Henceforth The activities of a tea garden]

⁷⁰⁵ The industry in 1895 pp ccxix

⁷⁰⁶ The activities of a tea garden pp ccxxv

⁷⁰⁷ The activities of a tea garden pp ccxxv

insure it against hybridization.”⁷⁰⁸ Generally, this tea was not pruned, but was rather allowed to grow to its normal height of 30-40 feet. Of late years, however, in order to fight the pests better, some planters have preferred to keep pruning until a shrub of 12 feet height and 15 feet diameter is obtained. In certain gardens though, the seeds are selected “promiscuously from the healthiest plants over a large area.”⁷⁰⁹ There are several types of tea bush that are grown in the gardens of North-East India. The China type is preferred in the hills of Darjeeling where the climate is severe. The Assam or the “light-leaved indigenous” type is grown in the Bramhaputra Valley.⁷¹⁰ The first gardens opened in the Duars were planted with the China tea which for a long time was thought to be the only suitable option. Later the hybrid of Assam indigenous and the China varieties was found to be more profitable. “In recent years the favourable varieties have been Assam and Manipur indigenous, the latter of which is the most hardy of all, though the tea produced by it does not possess a fine flavour.”⁷¹¹ The tea flower appears some time between August-October and the fruit ripens in about 12-14 months. The seeds are gathered as it falls and are sorted after leaving them over a cool surface over-night. The testing is done by the “water method” whereby the seeds are thrown into a trough of water and the dried or partly empty seeds that float are skimmed off.⁷¹²

Sowing the Tea Nurseries:

The *viridis* and *sinensis* varieties of the tea-plant (*Thea sinensis*) are raised from seeds which are sown around the months of November-December or sometimes little earlier “if the weather be favourable and the soil not too damp.”⁷¹³ The land used as a nursery is first carefully dug over, the soil pulverised, roots and stones removed. Thereafter the nurseries are laid out in rectangular beds some 5 feet wide with pathways in between. The seeds are sown about an inch deep around 4-9 inches apart.⁷¹⁴ The germination of the seeds takes place in 4-6 weeks. Great care has to be taken in terms of shading, watering, mairing the seedlings.

Transplanting:

After a period varying roughly between 6-18 months, the seedlings are transplanted at regular intervals of 4-5 feet onto lines that are staked. Holes are dug a foot wide and around ten inches

⁷⁰⁸ The activities of a tea garden pp ccxxv

⁷⁰⁹ The activities of a tea garden pp ccxxv

⁷¹⁰ The activities of a tea garden pp ccxxv

⁷¹¹ Gruning 1911

⁷¹² The activities of a tea garden pp ccxxv

⁷¹³ The industry in 1895 pp ccxix

⁷¹⁴ The activities of a tea garden pp ccxxv

deep at these spacings and with that the “land is then ready for the plants.” Although much of the transplantation has been and is still carried out by hand, there are also instruments namely Jeben’s transplanter (being the oldest) and the newer Elliott’s transplanter that are in use in some gardens. These instruments ensure a proper clod of earth around the roots of the seedling while it is transplanted from the nursery onto the gardens.

Manure for cultivation:

The Settlement Report of 1895 does not consider this as essential as still in these early years, “[A]nything like exhaustion of soil is unknown at present in the tea tracts of the Western Duars.”⁷¹⁵ The soil in the northern taluks is considered extremely rich and fertile producing an outturn of 8-10 maunds per acre. By 1935 however, we hear that “[P]ractically every type of manure in the market is used on tea.”⁷¹⁶ This includes both green and chemical manures that are applied at least once in every two years during spring hoeing.

Hoeing:

Hoeing is a regular practice particularly in the gardens of North India to keep weeds at bay. The soil around the young plants is frequently loosened to a depth of 3 inches for a distance of about 12 inches. As long as the plant is young and weeds are able to grow quickly on the uncovered soil, “it receives both deep hoeing and light hoeing.”⁷¹⁷ Deep hoeing is undertaken at the beginning of the dry season for a depth of 8 inches while light hoeing takes place every six weeks for a depth of three inches. Later experiments however indicate that it is more beneficial to let the sides of the bushes grow so that they cover the soil and tend to keep down weeds. This not only reduces the need for hoeing, but also helps keep the soil in better shape.

Pruning:

The young tea plants are first pruned a year after planting following which they are allowed to grow a little higher each successive year until the required size is reached. The object of the exercise being to produce thick bushes branching from the ground about three feet high. Mature plants are pruned every year and dead wood and unnecessary twigs are cut away. Occasionally

⁷¹⁵ The industry in 1895 ccxix

⁷¹⁶ The activities of a tea garden pp ccxxv

⁷¹⁷ The activities of a tea garden pp ccxxv

heavy pruning is resorted to in order to remove the twisted and knotted wood and promote a growth of new clean stems.⁷¹⁸ Heavy pruning would mean cutting near the ground to a height of 9-15 inches. This is generally done at an interval of ten years and amounts to a heavy loss of crop that year. Though the ideal is to prune each bush on its own merit, but “generally the unit is a field, or section.” The usual form of bush is that which is pruned to leave a flat surface. One system of pruning, called the “skiff pruning” or “switching”, is done by the worker using a measuring rod marked at a certain place. By palcing this rod against each bush all of the growth above the mark is cut off leaving the weaker part intact. Different proportions of this pruning process are named ‘cleaning-out’, ‘thinning-out’, ‘spacing-out’, or the removal of certain centres and the whole of it is an arduous task requiring immense labour. The prunings are thereafter usually hoed into the soil (or burnt in case they are old wood) which add to the humus of the soil.⁷¹⁹ Pruning is said to be relatively lighter in the Duars than in Assam.⁷²⁰

Plucking:

The plucking season, the busiest in the working cycle of the garden, commences in April, and sometimes depending upon the weather, by the end of March.⁷²¹ This marks the coming of the spring flush as the leaves turn bright green. The second flush arrives by late May or early June which produces tea that are “very tippy and bring high prices.” After the second flush which is quite a definite one, the subsequent flushes are not well defined as there is more or less a continuous supply of leaves. By the middle of December, as cold and dry wind starts blowing in from the Himalayas, the bushes cease to flush and manufacture stops marking the end of the season.

There are different gradations and techniques of plucking, each producing different qualities of the brew. Fine plucking takes off two leaves and a bud which produces quality tea. Coarse plucking comprises three or four leaves. Long plucking is done at a distance from the old wood of a bush while close plucking is done on older bushes within about six inches from wood. The “best tea is made by plucking close and fine.” The plucking of leaves from the bushes is done by hand and is in a way a gendered activity in the gardens as women (and children) are primarily preferred for this as they are considered to be “quicker with their hands than men.”

⁷¹⁸ Gruning 1911

⁷¹⁹ The activities of a tea garden pp ccxxvi

⁷²⁰ Gruning 1911

⁷²¹ Gruning 1911

The latter are employed only when there is a rush of leaf and it is important to pluck them off the bushes quickly. The workers gather the leaves in a bamboo basket that hangs over the back of the plucker supported by a plaited grass or cane band that is passed over the pluckers' forehead. The weight of leaf that a woman is expected to pluck for a day's pay is 6 to 10 seers. However, it varies in accordance with the season, the method, i.e., coarse or fine plucking, and the quality of tea, etc. The method of payment and the wage structure however is more complex and needs independent attention later in the chapter. In order to prevent the plucked leaves from "premature withering", the leaves are generally taken to the factory for processing twice in a day by the workers where it is weighed. At times, the weighing is done in the field itself in order to carry on plucking uninterrupted. This by far is the most important and hectic activity of the field workers in the garden and one that determines most directly the quality of tea produced in the factory. From here on we will move to the factory site which involves a much smaller share of the work force of the garden but at the same time is where the finished product is manufactured through a complex and careful procedure.

Withering:

After weighment the leaf is spread out in the withering house upon long wire trays which are fitted to shelves erected for the purpose.⁷²² It is usually withered in 10 or 12 hours but in very wet weather it may take as much as 48 hours and, on these occasions, in factories where there is not much withering space, considerable difficulty is felt in dealing with the leaf that constantly comes in. In the Duars, terai and Darjeeling, where the monsoon is rather more humid than in Assam, lofts are used. There are two kinds of withering sheds: the "chung" or frame type and the wire rack. The former consists of a series of bamboo floor racks covered with canvas. The chungs are 3 feet apart, just enough to allow the workers to creep in and spread the leaf. They cover the whole floor except the centre aisle. There may be as many as ten tiers of chungs in a shed. The latter kind consists of a series of shallow racks of wire netting that are built on a slant 6-9 inches apart reaching a height of about 6 feet. The newer and more expensive withering sheds are built of iron and are tin roofed fitted with wither board. Some times, movable mats or blinds are used to keep off the direct sun or to shut out the rain. Chung withering, though more expensive a set up, provides more surface area and withers more evenly as compared to the wire method. When lofts are used, fans – wall fans and centrifugal cased

⁷²² The industry in 1895, pp ccxix

fans – are employed.⁷²³ Already by 1895, the Blackman’s fans were being used to facilitate withering.⁷²⁴

Rolling:

When the leaves become softened after the process of withering, it is placed on a rolling table and rolled in order to break the cells and bring the sap to the surface so as to induce fermentation. It also twists and curls the leaves.⁷²⁵ Two workers are employed at each table. One of them feeds it through the hopper from where the leaf is carried down between the roller and the table, while the other replaces into the machine any leaf that may be thrown out.⁷²⁶ There are two parts to the process: light rolling which continues for 10-30 minutes after which comes the 45 minutes of heavy rolling. The most popular machine being employed for the purpose are the Jackson Rollers. A modern roller by 1935 could deal with about 80,000 pounds of finished tea in a season.⁷²⁷

Fermenting:

The fermenting room usually is separated from the other parts, but is kept conveniently near the rolling room at the coolest place of the factory where the temperature needs to be kept under 85° Fahrenheit. The leaf is spread from 1-4 inches thick in accordance with the season and the condition of the leaf. It is generally covered with a wet cloth, which is so spread as not to come in direct contact with the leaf. The time required in the process of fermenting generally ranges from 2-6 hours. In modern fermenting rooms humidifiers are put to use so as to create a cloud of water vapour.⁷²⁸ Leaves by the end of it attain a bright coppery colour suggesting that it is ready for firing. But before this they are usually passed through the rolling table for a short while.

Firing & Drying:

The next process involves putting the leaf into the firing machine of which there are several patterns the most common ones being the Victoria, Updraft and Downdraft Sirocco, and Power. The latest additions have been Empress and Paragon. The Victoria for instance, is fed through

⁷²³ The activities of a tea garden pp ccxxvi

⁷²⁴ The industry in 1895 pp ccxix

⁷²⁵ Gruning 1911

⁷²⁶ The industry in 1895 pp ccxix

⁷²⁷ The activities of a tea garden pp ccxxvi

⁷²⁸ The activities of a tea garden pp ccxxvi

a hopper on the top from which the leaf passes downwards on a series of trays travelling on an inclined plane backwards and forwards until they reach the discharge opening at the bottom. The machine at this time is heated to a temperature of 250° to 300°. By the end of the process the leaf changes colour from bright coppery to black and when it comes out from the lower end of the drier, it is received in baskets or mats.⁷²⁹ The first firing is to make the leaves three-quarters dry after which in the Duars they are again subjected to a second round of firing.⁷³⁰

Sifting, sorting and cleaning:

The leaf having now lost all its moisture, and being now dry, is put through the breaking machine from which the broken tea is carried to the sifter. In this machine there are several compartments with nets of various mesh. As the sifter revolves, the tea passes from division to division and falls through the net into trays or baskets after which it is classed.⁷³¹ The classes being produced in this process are: Broken Orange Pekoe, Orange Pekoe, Pekoe, Broken Pekoe, Pekoe Souchong, Fannings, and Dust. Some fancy varieties are also sifted in some gardens like Golden Tips, Flowery Orange Pekoe or Flowery pekoe.⁷³²

The sorting and cleaning of tea is a long arduous process and in some factories the tea is picked over by hand several times after sifting to remove the stocks and other extraneous matter. Primarily women and children are employed to undertake this strenuous task. Thereafter, in order to remove the fannings and dust from each of the already graded tea the winnowing machine is used.⁷³³

Bulking and packing:

After sorting, the tea is usually kept in the factory until sufficient bulk is collected to make a “break”, i.e., a marketable quantity. Before packing, generally the tea tends to absorb more moisture which makes it lose its briskness and become flat. Too much drying however makes the leaf acquire an undesired harshness. Tea keeps best with a moisture content of just under 6% for which it is subjected to one last firing. In bulking, baskets of tea are placed around a canvas sheet placed on the floor, and then dumped on the sheet, one by one. Wooden spades are used to turn over and mix each pile after which the tea is put in the packing machines wherein the tea chests are shaken rapidly as the tea is being put in. A break of common teas

⁷²⁹ The industry in 1895 sunders pp ccxix

⁷³⁰ The activities of a tea garden pp ccxxvi

⁷³¹ The industry in 1895 sunders pp ccxix

⁷³² The activities of a tea garden pp ccxxvi

⁷³³ The activities of a tea garden pp ccxxvi

generally consist of anything between 50-300 chests. In case of fine quality tea it ranges from 25-40 chests of one class. Three-ply or local made board chests are used in packing that are lined with lead or aluminium foil. “After the chest has been packed, a sheet of lead is soldered on top, and the chest is carefully nailed up. Then it is stencilled with the garden mark and the progressive number, after which it is ready for shipment.”⁷³⁴

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⁷³⁴ The activities of a tea garden pp ccxxvi

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