

**COOLIE EXODUS IN CHARGOLA: MOBILISATION,
CONTROL AND COLLECTIVE ACTION IN THE
COLONIAL TEA PLANTATIONS OF ASSAM**

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the Dissertation entitled "**Coolie Exodus in Chargola: Mobilisation, Control and Collective Action in the Colonial Tea Plantations of Assam**" being submitted by **Mr. Nitin Varma** is worthy of consideration for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy**. The Dissertation has not been submitted in part or full to any other University or Institute for the award of any other degree or diploma.

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INTRODUCTION: NARRATIVES OF AN EXODUS

Chargola exodus of 1921 is one of the most “celebrated” episodes of ‘mass resistance’ to the plantation systems in Assam.¹ Early in May 1921, plantation workers officially and otherwise called *coolies*², “struck” work primarily in the Chargola valley³, apparently demanding a higher wage, which was refused by the authorities. It was followed by an *enmasse* desertion of *coolies* in batches, resolved to

¹ Rana Pratap Behal generally talks about the “evolving” modes of labour protest in the post World War I period especially the predominance of *strikes* showing a greater degree of organisation and political consciousness in comparison to the earlier forms of protest, shown by the changed terminologies by the officials to describe these activities. Chargola exodus he argues was significant, as it obviously had connections with the non-cooperation movement though economic factors were predominant. However his focus being the Assam Valley does not allow him to go into the matter extensively. Amalendu Guha talking about the incident writes, ‘though a well known historical episode it awaits further analysis as a social phenomenon.’ Rana Pratap Behal, ‘Forms of Labour Protests in Assam Valley Plantations’, *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. XX, No.4, Jan 26 1985; Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj, Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947*, (Delhi, 1977), p.131.

² I understand the pejorative sense of the use of the word *coolie* for plantation workers. However this usage will be retained not just to emphasise the difference between ‘*coolie*’ and ‘labourer’ but also to tease out its fundamental moorings and the historical contradictions. *Coolie* identity was neither fixed nor stable but historically constituted. Its discursive and material strategies have been subject to a variety of studies in different contexts. Especially see John D. Kelly, ‘*Coolie*’ as a Labour Commodity: Race, Sex, and European Dignity in Colonial Fiji and E. Valentine Daniel and Jan Breman, ‘Conclusion: The Making of a *Coolie*’ in *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, special edition, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1992, 19(3&4). Also see Kaushik Ghosh, A Market for Aboriginality: Primitivism and Race Classification in the Indentured Labour Market of Colonial India, *Subaltern studies* and Piya Chatterjee, “Secure This Excellent Class of Labour”: Gender and Race in Labor Recruitment for British Indian Tea Plantations, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, Vol. 27, No.3, July-Sep, 1995.

³ Chargola valley was located in the district of Sylhet in the Surma valley, one of the two valleys in which tea was commercially cultivated in Assam. See Chapter I for more details.

go back to their home districts, chanting victory cries to Mahatma Gandhi and claiming to serve under his orders. Beginning from one or two gardens, the entire valley by the middle of June was beginning to have a 'deserted' look, with two gardens reported to have 'lost' almost the entire labour force, and most of the gardens suffering 'losses' of around thirty to sixty percent.⁴

The *coolies* of Chargola Valley marched into Karimganj – the sub divisional headquarters, and continued their onward journey some by train and some on foot to Chandpur in the Tippera district of Bengal, to be carried by steamer to Goalundo, to make way for their home districts. The Government of Assam and Bengal when called upon to intervene in this extraordinary situation refused to 'meddle' in relations between 'labour and capital', leading to substantial levels of congestion in towns of Karimganj and Chandpur. The local volunteer groups and district level Congress workers mobilised its resources, and came to the aid of the *coolies*, in the form of food and medicine supplies.

By the middle of the first week of the exodus, already a thousand *coolies* from Anipur, Mookamcherra and Damcherra had left their gardens and *coolies* of Balacherra were reportedly on strike. The local planter community was extremely concerned about this changed state of affairs. Warrants were issued on certain *coolies* under agreement and a few of them arrested. However these *coolies* were bailed out and garlanded by non-co-operators in Karimganj, and on the advice of the local officials the further issue of warrants was stopped.⁵ An emergency meeting of the

⁴ *Forthnightly report of second half of May for the province of Assam; Communiqué issued by Government of Assam on 5th June 1921*. Reproduced in Appendix II of *Report of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee 1921-22*, pp 116-118; *Report on the administration of Assam for the year 1921-22; India Annual Register 1922* (Ed. N.N. Mitra) and P C Bamford, *Histories of Non cooperation and Khilafat*. Though strikes were showing a sharp upward trend in the Assam Valley plantations during this period but it did not see a mass exodus of the scale witnessed in Chargola Valley and to some extent the adjoining Longai valley area.

⁵ *Report of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee 1921-22*, p.57. (Hereafter *ALECR 1921-22*).

managers of the Chargola valley and government officials was called at the local Dullabcherra club on 6th May.⁶ The close nexus and support, which the planter community and the official machinery shared, was aptly reflected in this desire for getting together and devising a common course of action. They expressed grave concern over the unrest among the *coolies* in the valley citing the hike in *hazira* (daily wages) as their primary demand; apprehended more strikes in the forthcoming days, and also feared these strikes turning violent. There was a general "consensus" that the wages were too low and it was decided to offer new rates, which amounted to an increase of thirty to fifty percent, to apparently quell the disquiet among the *coolies* and check the exodus.⁷ This had reverberations in the higher echelons of the powerful and highly organised tea lobbies. Representatives of the Indian Tea Association, from Calcutta and Surma Valley met the Governor and Chief Secretary of Assam on the 17th of May, in which the issue of wage hikes in tea gardens, was raised. The Calcutta representative maintained that if the increased wages were persisted with, then the gardens would be compelled to close down.⁸

In the meanwhile, the 'non-interventionist' stand of the government of Assam and Bengal in repatriation of the *coolies* was coming under relentless attack by the nationalist press of Calcutta, which was closely reporting the turn of events.⁹ The situation became all the more critical after the 'Gurkha Outrage'. On the 21st of May, a large body of *coolies* waiting to be repatriated were brutally assaulted by fifty men of Gurkha Rifles, under the personal supervision of the Assistant Deputy Commissioner KC De, at the Chandpur railway station. The official position on the

⁶ *Conference of Chargola Valley Tea Planters and Government officials, 6th May* (See Appendix III).

⁷ This position however was retraced by the planters during the course of the enquiry suggesting that they accepted the stand because of the awe of the officials present! *ALECR, 1921-22*, p. 12.

⁸ *Forthnightly Report 2nd half of May for the Province of Assam and Conference of Chargola Valley Tea Planters and Government officials, 6th May* (See Appendix III).

⁹ The attention that the Calcutta Press gave to this episode can be gauged from the increase in the articles published on the Assam tea gardens. See the *Report on Native Newspapers of Bengal* for the years 1921 and 1922.

incident was that a threat of cholera epidemic, due to the insanitary conditions in the vicinity of the station, had induced the action, where force was used “minimally”. The public ire over the incident could be gauged from the series of hartals, which followed in the wake of the event.¹⁰ C.F. Andrews, a close associate of Gandhi, who on his way to Assam stopped at Chandpur. He was particularly derisive of the Bengal government’s position of not involving itself in the repatriation of the *coolies* and thereby taking a ‘pro-capitalist’ stance, expressed in his writings in newspapers and the public speeches that he made.¹¹ The official enquiry committee into the incident under Montgomery Wheeler led to heated debates in the Bengal legislative assembly in July 1921, and the report he presented was considered by the Calcutta press as nothing but a ‘white-washing’ attempt. Meanwhile the situation was becoming more critical in Assam with the ‘strike wave’ spreading to the Assam valley plantations. A Labour Enquiry Committee was instituted in late 1921 with JC Arbuthnott as the President and politicians, bureaucrats, tea representatives and missionaries on board, to understand and explain this new moment of crisis in the tea industry of Assam.¹²

Manipulated *coolie*

Right from the early official reports on the incident, the general depressed state of the industry in the post-war period was brought into focus. In a telegram dated 13th May 1921, the Assam administration brought to the notice of the Government of India

¹⁰ There was hartal in the town of Chandpur, Karimganj and steamer strikes etc. Most significantly the “sympathetic” Assam Bengal Railway strike led by C.R. Das. For details see R. Chatterji, ‘CR Das and the Chandpur strikes of 1921’, *Bengal Past and Present*, 1974 and Dipankar Banerjee, ‘Historic Assam-Bengal Railway Worker’s Strike (1921): A Survey’, *Proceedings of North East India History Association*, Barapani, 1983.

¹¹ CF Andrews role in the whole incident is carefully documented in PC Roychaudhury, *CF Andrews: His Life and Times*, (Bombay, 1971). Especially Chapter IV, pp 78-95.

¹² The other members of the committee were Rai Bahadur Giris Chandra Nag [MLA], Major HB Fox [MLC], Babu Ramani Mohan Das[MLC], SSP Barua[MLC], T MacMorran [representative of ITA], Rev. Dr. OC Williams [Medical missionary], Khan Bahadur Wali Muhammad and JA Dawson [bureaucrats].

about the unrest among *coolies* in Karimganj Subdivision. The affected *coolies* were said to be newer recruits from the famine stricken provinces, feeling the pinch of the 'hard times', falling prey to the Non Co-operation propaganda going on in the village marts, *hats* and the adjacent towns. The local administration issued orders banning public meetings and propaganda within seven miles of certain tea gardens.¹³ The Government of India concurred with this view that " [the] trouble is economic in main and though being exploited by politicians has probably no political complexion in the minds of the *coolies* themselves."¹⁴ This position was reiterated in a Communiqué issued by Government of Assam on 5th June 1921:

Gardens in the area concerned (the region of exodus), like other gardens in the Surma valley, have been specially affected by the depression of the tea industry...however clearly a vast difference between these conditions and starvation wages, and the Government is forced to the conclusion that these causes alone could not have produced the sudden stampede which occurred.¹⁵

The economic downslide in the official accounts, did not entirely explain the extraordinary nature of collective action of the *coolies*, brought in this form of a mass exodus. The underlying argument in most of these accounts was that the "grim" situation would not have taken this aggravated form if not "exploited" by the manipulating non-cooperators working on the ignorant, docile yet extremely excitable *coolies*. The Labour Enquiry Committee also came to this conclusion "[that] the unrest was due to a combination of economic and political conditions, and undoubtedly the existence of economic grievances rendered *coolies* more ready to

¹³ Telegram from Chief Secretary of Govt of Assam to Secretary to Government of India, Home Department dated 13th May 1921. Home Department, Political Branch, June 1921, Nos 143-146, NAI.

¹⁴ Telegram from Secretary to Government of India, Home Department to Chief Secretary, Government of Assam dated 20th May, 1921. Home Department, Political Branch, June 1921, 143-146, NAI.

¹⁵ Communiqué issued by Government of Assam on 5th June 1921.

listen to the exhortations and incitements of non-cooperators and other agitators.”¹⁶ The practice of sending paid emissaries, underground non-cooperation propaganda and the public meetings conducted by the non-cooperators were said to have been principally active in deluding the *coolies* exploiting their religious sensibilities and making false promises under the commands of Gandhi fomenting the entire action. The Superintendent of Police of the region clearly makes the point:

As regards the exodus from the Chargoala valley, I am definitely of opinion that it was due almost wholly to propaganda and superstitious and religious excitement and fear, and of this we have proof.¹⁷

The officials argued that the *coolies* were made to believe that British Raj had ended and that Gandhi Raj had taken over; that Gandhi had personally sent a steamer to Karimganj to take them back home where they would be given land for free. *Coolies* were further reportedly informed that Gandhi had issued orders that they were to no longer to work for European employers and must leave the garden in a body or face grave supernatural consequences!¹⁸ The assumption of the lack of the agency of the *coolie* and falling prey to the slightest provocation in the name of religion is implicit in these narratives. The use of terms like ‘manipulation’, ‘contamination’, ‘infection’, and ‘delusion’ to explain their participation in the exodus evidently suggests that the *coolies* had no control over their lives; their volatile nature and religious susceptibilities became the all-explanatory categories for their actions.

This is more clearly revealed in the way the Labour Enquiry Committee of 1921-22 conducted its enquiries which among other things claimed to examine the reasons behind the ‘disturbances’ in the gardens and the mass exodus from the region.

¹⁶ ALECR 1921-22, p.20.

¹⁷ WJ Ballantine, Superintendent of Police, Sylhet. *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee 1921-22*, p.30 (hereafter *Evidence, ALECR, 1921-22*)

¹⁸ *Evidence, ALECR, 1921-22* and PC Bamford *Histories of Non cooperation and Khilafat*, p. 61.

The questions given out by the committee to the managers of tea gardens most clearly revealed the mindset at work:

15. Is it a fact that there has been a widespread feeling of unrest among tea-garden labour during the past few years...were you [the manager] aware of a feeling of unrest apart from any caused by the efforts of political agitators and do you think that without these efforts the unrest would have manifested itself?

16. To what extent do you attribute recent disturbances among tea-garden labour to the incitement of agitators?

17. Have *coolies* had any real grievances-economic or personal of which agitators could make capital? If not, how do you account for the sporadic nature of the troubles that have occurred?¹⁹

Out of the ninety-nine gardens visited by the members of the committee and one hundred thirty-nine witnesses examined, not a single *coolie* was interrogated. They reasoned that 'it [was] doubtful if reasonable and fair conclusion could be arrived [by examining the *coolies*] and also has the tremendous 'risk' of playing into the hands of unscrupulous agitators.'²⁰ The total loss of *coolies* over their lives and actions is mooted, where the evidence of the eye was said to be a better indicator than their verbal testimony. To be fair to the committee, they could not find any precedent of taking formal evidence from the *coolies*. They concurred with the Duars Committee of 1910 that talked about the futility of interrogating *coolies*:

The committee [Duars Committee] thought no useful object would be served by recording formally the statements of *coolies*. Any *coolie* brought up to give evidence before a number of strange Europeans would inevitably become frightened and confused and no information of value was likely to be obtained in that way.²¹

¹⁹ Letter from JA Dawson, Secretary, Assam Labour Enquiry Committee to the managers of the tea gardens in Assam valley and Surma valley, dated 30th November 1921. ALECR 1921-22, p.113.

²⁰ ALECR 1921-22, p. 4.

²¹ ALECR 1921-22, p. 5.

In order to establish the role of the nationalists/emissaries in the event, the local officials were at pains to establish a chronology of their activities dating back to the annual meeting of Surma Valley Conference—a major agency of nationalist politics in the region, held in September 1920. This particular meeting, apart from fanning anti-British feeling was said to have devised a future course of action—forming the ‘master-plan’ of the troubles that the gardens of Chargola and Longai valley faced the following year. The minority report by H.B. Fox and T McMorran concurred with this view:

...Certain political agitators set out deliberately to organise the destruction of the tea industry. That such was their object was made clear at a meeting of the Surma valley Conference...it has since transpired that a widespread secret campaign, which culminated in the Chargola exodus, was carried on among the *coolies*.²²

A distinct attempt was made on account of this of sending ‘emissaries’ to the vicinity of the gardens sometimes disguised as *sadhu* and *fakeers* addressing the *coolies* through meetings and covert propaganda.²³ Instances were cited of emissaries lecturing the *coolies* of Balisera gardens at Srimangal in February 1921, lamenting their oppression and advising them to leave their work. Similar advice was tendered at the two meetings held in Lungla valley, in the end of March, which resulted in a prolonged strike. The enquiry Committee claimed to be in possession of certain documents that established ‘[that] towards the end of April certain upcountry men, admittedly non-cooperators, visited gardens in the Longai and Chargola valley, and presumably tampered with the *coolies*.’²⁴

²² *ALECR 1921-22*, p.108.

²³ *ALECR 1921-22*, p.14.

²⁴ *ALECR 1921-22*, p.14.

The Non co-operation meetings held in May 1921 at Ratabari in the Chargola valley—the focal point of the exodus, assumed a particular significance in this explanatory strategy. *Coolies* were persuaded by the circulation of religious exhortations like '*dharam ka bat hoga: sab kohi ah ke suno.*'(Speeches will be delivered about religious matters; all are invited to attend and listen) to attend this meeting, which finally boasted of an attendance of around four hundred tea *coolies* of the nearby gardens.²⁵ In the first meeting held on 1st May, apart from speeches by local nationalist leaders on politically charged themes of Non-Cooperation and Khilafat wrongs, one Hindi speaker Radhakrishna Pande specifically addressing the tea *coolies* attacked the managers of European owned gardens comparing them with *Shaitan* (Satan). He further stated that the English nation had seized India by foul means and that now Swaraj could be attained through non-cooperation. He commanded the *coolies* to ask for higher daily wages of 12 annas for men and 8 annas for women, and 3 annas 6 pies for boys, claiming it to be *Gandhi ka hookum*. In the next meeting held on May 2nd, the demand was reduced to 8 annas and 6 annas, but *coolies* were urged to cease work like the *coolies* of Khoreal Tea Estate, if their claims are not met. On the very next day, *coolies* of adjoining Anipur Tea Estate numbering in excess of seven and half hundred stopped work, and started moving out of the gardens with shouts of *Gandhi Mahatma ki Jai*.²⁶ The Subdivisional officer of Karimganj where Ratabari was located, in his testimony to labour enquiry Committee talked on these lines:

I am of the opinion that it [exodus] was mainly the result of the efforts of the political agitators. I believe that for some time before this event happened there was some sort of propaganda work in the neighbourhood of the tea gardens

²⁵ Evidence, ALECR 1921-221, p.63.

²⁶ ALECR, 1921-22, p.10 and *Communiqué issued by Government of Assam*.

carried on by the political agitators in the villages, and matters came to a head when the meeting at Ratabari was held.²⁷

The managers and planters interviewed by the Enquiry Committee underplayed the economic sluggishness of the industry arguing that the concessions offered more than compensated for it. The political meetings and the interference in the garden *hats* by the non co-operators were of particular concern to them, and a very common refrain of the managers would sound something like, 'it was only after the non cooperators came, did trouble begin at my garden.' Managers on certain gardens in Chargola valley who 'lost' *coolies* during the time of the exodus, interpreted this as a new and big move on the part of non-co-operation agitators, ordinary strikes on other gardens having failed.²⁸ Gunnery, the manager of the Chargola division establishing the role of the non-co-operators clearly confirms to the meeting-exodus chronology where he "loses" his *coolies* on the very next morning of Ratabari meeting:

In the exodus I lost 900 to 950 working *coolies*, of whom 750 left the garden on the morning of May 3rd –the morning after the second non-co-operation meeting held at Ratabari close to my garden.²⁹

The managers of other gardens of Chargola valley, like Bidyanagar, Singlacherra and Mukamcherra interestingly seem to speaking the same language with only the difference in numbers!

There were no signs of disturbance in my garden until political agitators came, that is until the Ratabari meetings of May 1921...³⁰

²⁷ *Evidence, ALECR, 1921-22, p.61.*

²⁸ WRP Gunnery, Manager, Chargola Division, *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22, p. 57.*

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ R Hunter, Manager, Bidyanagar Tea Estate. *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22, pp.54-55.*

I lost about 521 workers and 120 dependants out of a population of 1,019. They left as a result of the meetings of Ratabari...before the meeting there was no unrest in my garden...³¹

At the time of the exodus, I lost 740 *coolies* from Mukamcherra and the out garden Damcherra. I am of opinion that this was the result of Ratabari meeting. I do not think that *coolies* had grievances....³²

The immediacy of the exodus is sought to be established here, by showing that it was not the “objective” conditions which deemed such a response, but that it was the manipulation of the *Ghandiwallahs* spreading poison through the meetings, that provoked a reaction which no one had any inkling of, least the dumb *coolies*!

A poem written by an ex Manager of an Assam plantation written in this period explicitly articulates such sentiments

*In memory of a murder, and in memory of a man,
Who faced a howling cooly mob and never turned or ran,
But the Swaraj Politicians said he got his deserts there,
When they hacked him into pieces and laid his body bare.*

*In memory of a murder, yes, a filthy deed,
Incited by an Indian “Saint” who spoke of India freed,
Who stirred plebian masses against the white man’s rule
But wasn’t smart enough to see it was he who was the fool*

*He spoke of high ambitions and honour in the land,
He spoke of vile oppression, but he didn’t understand
That once the mob tastes power ‘tis out of all control
And murder, lust and pillage is its very natural toll.*

*In memory of a Murder, it may happen any day,
And you and I may have the same stern penalty to pay,
But I’d rather be the murdered man, aye, gladly anytime,
Than be the honour’d Indian “Saint” inciting men to crime.³³*

³¹ HA Wray, Manager, Singlacherra Tea Estate. *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22*, pp. 55-56.

³² NH Macleod, Manager, Mukamcherra Tea Estate. *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22*, p. 61.

³³ Maurice P Hanley, *Tales and Songs from an Assam Tea Garden* (Calcutta: Thacker, Sphinx & Co, 1928) and the poem is titled ‘*In Memory of a Murder*’, pp. 90-91.

Here the two agents are embodied in the figure of the Manager and Gandhi upholding 'good' and 'evil' characteristics respectively. The very act of murder of the manager, who bravely stood up to the howling lot of *coolies*, invests it the positive attribute thus desired; simultaneously implicating the inciting party i.e. Gandhi and his lot, into an act of crime. The *coolies*, in the entire scheme, lack agency and act only when incited by the Indian Saint for reasons which are purely motivated and eventually go out of control leading to murder, lust, and pillage. But a loss of control over the lives and actions of the *coolies* on which the Manager-*coolie* relationship was premised is uneasily articulated, for the *coolies* in this narrative turn against the manager killing him. Though assaults on managers were always a feature of the plantation life but significantly very few cases of murder can be illustrated, especially in this period. Nonetheless, the very act of defying the paramount authority of the manager by stopping work and leaving the garden in body, which was on a sharp rise in the period, were described as of being the same order as to murdering him, going by the harsh disciplinary standards demanded in the colonial plantation set-up. However, the innate docility of the *coolies* is sought to be reinscribed by suggesting agency to an external factor and his volatile nature.

The Anglo-Indian press, which acted as the mouthpiece of the colonial regime was in the period engaged in a 'verbal' battle against the non-cooperators and their "ringleader" Gandhi. The middle class public opinion were sought to be impressed upon about the malicious intent of these people who were of late gaining a lot of attention and popularity. The *Englishman* writes in this tone:

Events in East Bengal, as in other parts of India, are now trending in precisely the direction in which it has been forecast would go unless the Government took steps to combat the cancer of non co-operation...Agents were employed to spread those sections of the population who were most likely to be infected ...there are, for instance, a great many tea districts where

the labour has not yet been exploited by the agitators to the extent that the people in the Chargola valley have suffered.³⁴

In a similar vein the Statesman of 1921 writes:

Upon those heedless and malicious agitators who fooled these poor people rests the terrible responsibility for all their sufferings.³⁵

These accounts in order to establish the “true” nature of Congress activity and the non- co-operation movement, which was nothing, but a party of extremists fomenting trouble on religious and racial lines were using the stereotype of ignorant *coolies* falling prey to motivated objectives of the wily politicians. They particularly read these strikes as “manufactured” and as a ready “weapon” against Europeans and the Government.³⁶

Awakened coolie

Chargola Valley, located in the district of Sylhet, which was linguistically a Bengali majority population, transferred to Assam when it was made a Chief Commissionership in 1874. However, it was only a year back that the Sylhet People’s Association submitted a memorandum, signed by more than two thousand people to the Government of Bengal claiming that since Sylhet formed an integral part of lower Bengal and was governed under the same principles, rules and forms it should not be

³⁴*The Englishman*, 9th June 1921.

³⁵ *The Statesman*, 7th June, 1921.

³⁶ J.H. Broomfield in his study of “elite” politics in twentieth century Bengal a work in the ‘high traditions’ of the Cambridge school claims that the a group of Congressmen from Calcutta moved into the tea gardens areas of Assam and started an agitation for higher wages. However on the refusal of the planters to concede to these demands the *coolies* accepted the offer of non-cooperators to arrange for transport back home. However stranded in Chandpur the *coolies* realised that the scheming politicians took them for a ride. J.H. Broomfield, J.H., *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth-Century Bengal* (Bombay, 1968), pp.215-16.

transferred to the new province of Assam. The decision to club Sylhet with Assam remained an issue of great controversy and debate. Throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth century the local native intelligentsia cried hoarse of being attached to a backward province purely due to commercial reasons with which they did not share any linguistic or cultural affiliations. However, this decision to club could not define the trajectories that the “nascent” nationalist movement was taking shape in Assam proper and Sylhet district. Assam Association, which was slowly emerging, as the major platform of middle class nationalist politics in Assam valley was largely absent and Sylhet sent its representatives to the Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee in accordance with the Congress policy of linguistic provinces, adopted at the Calcutta session, in 1917.³⁷

Surma Valley Association emerged as one of the main agencies of nationalist politics and was particularly active in the Non co-operation period along with the Muhammedan Conference articulating the Khilafat sentiments of a substantial Muslim population. In the wake of the special Calcutta session of Congress in 1920, where the programme of non-co-operation was ratified, the Surma Valley Association summoned a special session of the Surma Valley Political Conference, on 19th and 20th September 1920 held in Sylhet with Abdul Karim in the chair. The Conference endorsing the Congress programme adopted the following resolution:

In view of the fact that the European merchants and planters of Surma valley have systematically opposed the national aspirations and legitimate claims of the people, and in view of the fact that the said merchants and planters of this valley have frequently oppressed and tyrannised the Indian employees under them and have more than once trifled with their lives...this conference is of the

³⁷ Santanu Dutta, 'The Surma Valley Associations and the Nationalist Upsurge', in Arun Bhuyan (ed.) *Nationalist Upsurge in Assam* (Guwahati, 2000), p.125.

opinion that complete non-violent, non co-operation is the only effective measure to guard against the continuance of such actions.³⁸

The recommended plan of action was a refusal to serve under European planters and merchants; gradual withdrawal of those who are already in such service; non-acceptance of briefs by lawyers and non-official Europeans; refusal on the part of the people to grant or renew leases of land to them; immediate withdrawal from any kind of association with them and abstention from all gatherings in which they are invited. It is very apparent from the resolutions and the demands that it had a very distinctive 'middle-class' tinge and appeal. But in the whole process of 'nationalising' the *coolie* exodus, this particular meeting is described to be very significant where an 'anti-planter' stand was taken, having a lasting impression on the *coolie* mind. A nationalist account unambiguously draws up this connection:

The impact of the programme, of the Association, was felt in the British tea gardens of the valley and the tea garden labourers, in Chargola valley and Longai valley, of Karimganj, were encouraged to leave enmasse, their gardens, in 1921.³⁹

Ironically, in the accounts of the local officials this conference was considered equally significant as the fountainhead of the "evil" spread in the gardens of Assam. The nationalist accounts take a similar path from here on but only attaching positive liberating qualities. The meetings and speeches of non-cooperators/emissaries and the visit of a prominent nationalist leader CR Das who spoke at a number of public meetings held in March 1921 in Surma valley was especially highlighted as to spreading the message of non-co-operation among the tea-*coolies* of Assam. The 'Non-co-operation'/'nationalist' education reached its culmination in the public

³⁸ Sanat Bose, *Capital and Labour in the Indian Tea Industry*, (Bombay, 1954), p. 99

³⁹ Santanu Dutta, *op cit.*, p.130-31.

meetings, held on May 1st and 2nd May in the Ratabari area, in which many *coolies* were said to have attended, inducing them to demand a wage hike leading to the immediate *coolie* response by 'striking' the very next day and thereby sparking the chain of events after that.

The nationalist press of Calcutta, which was closely watching the turn of events especially after the Chandpur incident, saw in the exodus of *coolies* as a confirmation of the awakening impact of the non co-operation movement. They comprehended the situation as an evidence of the *coolie* finally breaking his chains of servitude and ending the long years of exploitation joining his fellow countrymen to the road to freedom. The enormity of the 'moment' can be summed in the words of a contemporary newspaper:

The strike of the *coolies* of the tea gardens of Assam is really a revolt against the age-old tyranny and exploitations to which they have been the most hapless victims. From the time the *coolie* falls into the hands of the artful recruiter, the arkatti...till he finds his resting-place in his grave away from his native home, his life is one long drawn-out misery. And not only men but women and children have the same old story...the helpless *coolie* passed into the gardens it was felt that he was lost to civilization and humanity. He had fallen into conditions from which it seemed to earthly power could rescue him...But his redemption has at last come...he is determined to break the shackles for ever or die in the attempt.⁴⁰

The system of recruiting (*arkattis*) and settlement (indenture) ensured these conditions of extreme oppression in which the *coolie* was a helpless victim only waiting to die to redeem him/herself. But now in this moment of salvation (Non-Cooperation Movement), s/he at last finds the courage to challenge the age-old oppression and emancipate him/herself from a historical burden.

⁴⁰ *Amrit Bazaar Patrika*, 20th May 1921.

In one stroke not only is the specificity and novelty of the situation flattened out but also the entire history of resistance of *coolies* is obliterated and said to have been utterly a manifestation of the nationalist freedom struggle—a legacy of the Non Co-operation movement. The passive apolitical stereotype of the *coolie* comes in very handy in these accounts to animate it with nationalist sentiments. *Liberty*, a newspaper of Calcutta writes in its 23rd May 1921 issue:

The non co-operation movement caught the fancy of poor *coolies* even and they have emigrated from the land of hard ships. The exploiters tried to keep them under subjection but they could not prevail upon the ignorant this time.⁴¹

Interestingly, similar docile images of the *coolie* are evoked to suggest an upsurge of nationalist feelings, which finally empowered him/her to resist the oppression in the tea gardens and end his days of subjection. The use of terms like ‘awakening’, ‘catching the fancy’ etc to assess the impact of the nationalist ideas like in the official/planter accounts denies agency to the *coolies* and suggests an acute passivity in negotiating with these ideas. *Servant*, another Calcutta paper writes in the 19th May 1921 issue:

Reports that on their way to Karimganj uttered an exclamation wishing victory to Mahatma Gandhi...unconsciously imbibed the spirit of Non-Co-operation.⁴²

It was not simply just a case of representing the poor *coolies* but being the voice of the voiceless and in the final analysis his last and only resort. Like in the official-planter narratives that sought to protect it from the scheming politicians and his evil designs, a case is being made in these narratives to launch a struggle on behalf of the

⁴¹ *Report on the Native Newspaper of Bengal for the week ending 21st May 1921*

⁴² *ibid.*

coolies who innately lack the faculty to comprehend his/her interests and fight for them.

A '*cooly song*' published in Amrit Bazaar Patrika supposedly rendered by the *coolies* stranded in Chandpur is particularly illustrative:

*O save us from the cooly's lot!
For made of providence we ask not
Poverty, misery and all the rot
Enough there was in Assam.*

*The Burra Sahib and his folk
Had oppressed the 'cooly log'
And kicked as many a rogue!
And called us sala, bloody damn.*

*The "Englishman" may have his say
That we're there very happy and gay,
But starved we were from day to day
And God knows how like dogs we stayed.*

*Our daughter's izzat was not safe,
Small fine was all in case of rape
In midst of Julum we did chafe
Like a bird in cage whose wings are clipped*

*At Chandpur tho' we stranded be,
Still have joy as we are free
From planter's clutches, tooth and claw
And their rapacious maw*

*Shout 'Gandhi jai' and cheer up
March on, brothers, with freedom call.⁴³*

⁴³ Amrit Bazaar Patrika, 21st June

Gandhi, again in these narratives emerges as the agent but with positive emancipatory attributes acting as the stimulant invigorating the *coolies* out of their perpetual slumber. Gandhi comes to embody the aspirations of the ignorant oppressed *coolie* made evident from their cries of *Mahatma Gandhi ki jai* and claiming to act under *Gandhi ka hookum*.

Vishwamitra, a Calcutta daily writes:

Though not directly involved, Mr. Gandhi has by giving a severe shock awakened those who were asleep. If Mr. Gandhi's efforts had not created a consciousness in the country, the *coolie* would not have found their sufferings unbearable and given up their work.⁴⁴

Such ideas are reinforced by the eyewitness account of the close associate of Gandhi CF Andrews who was particularly "championing" the interests of the *coolies* stranded in Chandpur:

In their destitution, they [*coolies* stranded in Chandpur] were miserable beyond description. Misery was the spur, which had goaded them forward on their journey. They had one hope left, to which they clung with a pathos that was as great as their suffering itself. It was the hope that through Mahatma Gandhi, deliverance would come from all their burden of sorrow and affliction. Mahatma Gandhi has set his face firmly against any religious cult being originated in his name. But his devotee, which we all witnessed at Chandpur among those poor refugees, was rather the devotion to an idea than to a person. He was the embodiment to them of their ultimate deliverance from oppression. The countless millions of the poor in India are coming forth out of their long dark night of ignorance and oppression. They have symbolised their yearning for deliverance in the person of Mahatma Gandhi.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ *Report on the Native Newspaper of Bengal for the week ending 21st May 1921*

⁴⁵ CF Andrews, *Oppression of the poor*, published in the July edition of *Modern Review*.

In Andrews account the *coolies* of Chandpur epitomises the 'poor' in India, seeped in ignorance and oppression and seeking liberation in the person of Gandhi! Very stereotyped images are invoked in the account to stress home the argument of an 'awakening' of not just the *coolies*, but by logic of extension—the people of India.

Chargola in History

KK Dutta's '*Landmarks of freedom movement in Assam*', a classic text in the nationalist genre of history writing seeks to establish the contribution of Assam in the freedom struggle of India. The established chronology of the significant Congress led movements becomes the framework of discussion showing how the Assamese people furthered it in their province. The non-cooperation movement in Assam was said to be occasioned by a very enthusiastic response to Gandhi's call in which even the *coolies* from tea gardens joined in. The entire episode is uncritically homogenised and appropriated in the annals of the Indian national movement:

One of the noticeable effects of the movement was the awakening it caused amongst the labour population working in the tea gardens and other industrial concerns in Assam. *The labourers began to feel an urge for emancipation from the exploitation to which their employers subjected them. Gandhiji's name cast a spell over them and it became the starting point of a new labour movement in Assam.*⁴⁶

Again in a book of the similar genre entitled '*Nationalist upsurge in Assam*', sponsored by the Government of Assam, the episode stands as a testimony of the messianic powers of Gandhi who comes to Assam to deliver the *coolies* from their 'age-old bondage':

⁴⁶ KN Dutt (ed.), *Landmarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam*, (Gauhati:, 1958). Emphasis mine.

To the simple, poor people, Gandhiji was an avatar and they fondly believed that he had come to Assam to deliver them from their age-old bondage. Gandhiji's visit to Assam gave the tea workers an opportunity to take part in the Congress programmes. In May 1921, the historic labour exodus from Chargola and Longai valleys of Cachar district began when thousands of labourers of thirteen tea gardens left their gardens, shouting Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai.⁴⁷

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

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Sanat Bose's treatment of the event in his book '*Capital and Labour in Indian Tea industry*' printed under the aegis of All India Trade Union Congress (A.I.T.U.C), is extremely sensitive to the nuances of the economic downside and the general political condition. Specific examples of gardens from where the *coolies* left during the time of the exodus are closely analysed to show how the wages and remuneration provided on gardens fell far short of what should have been a minimum living wage. The economic conditions argues Bose, induced the *coolies* now charged with the spirit of the times to launch a struggle against conditions of oppression. However the element of passivity in the 'trickle down' paradigm is emphasised to the reception of the ideas (Socialist/Nationalist), to explain the general unrest of the plantation workers in the period:

It [anti imperialist sentiments and success of the Russian revolution leading to the creation of the first socialist state] gradually spread and ultimately touched

⁴⁷ Shrutidevi Goswami, 'The Nationalist upsurge: Its impact on peasants and tea garden workers', in Arun Bhuyan (ed.) *Nationalist Upsurge in Assam* (Guwahati, 2000), p.194. For similar writings see Sujit Kumar Ghosh, 'Labour Strike in the Surma Valley Tea Gardens' in *Proceedings of North East India History Association*, 7th Session, Pasighat, 1986-87.

even the distant borders of the country in the province of Assam and awakened the downtrodden tea garden labourer from his age-old slumber.⁴⁸

In his final analysis the lack of organisation of the *coolies* against highly organised planter lobbies and the failure of the leading political party, Congress to lead their struggles made their attempts a “failure”.

However the speech of the EW Hobson, Chairman of Surma valley Branch of the ITA, to an extremely tense and nervous body of planters in their annual meeting belies such confidence in face of concerted action and the necessity felt by planters to organise and unite:

...As we are all going to have trouble with our *coolies* [in the future], and I appeal to you to unite against this very real danger and to remember that united we may stand but divided a great number of us are certainly going to fall. I am quite certain that we shall have less trouble if the *coolies* see that the planters are combined and determined, so far as possible, to help one another to stop this most unsatisfactory state of affairs.⁴⁹

Sukomal Sen in his study of the '*Working class of India*', saw this event as a new moment in the progressive hierarchy of struggles of the plantation workers:

Development of trade union consciousness and organisation among the tea plantation workers was a comparatively delayed phenomenon. Horrid isolation far from their homes, their ignorance, want of education, and difficulty of contact with the outside political and trade union workers, added with sharp vigil and revengeful attitude of the employers against any attempt for combination were factors responsible for the delayed process. *Yet their elementary passion for resistance against exploitation, humiliation, physical torture, and many other sorts of sadism committed by the British planters*

⁴⁸ Sanat Kumar Bose, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

⁴⁹ *Minutes of the Annual General Meeting of the Surma Valley Branch of the Indian Tea Association, held at the Amusement Club, Silchar on Wednesday, the 8th March, 1922.* Annual Report of Surma valley Branch of ITA, 1922. (See Appendix V)

*matured in gradual course into a higher consciousness to safeguard their interests collectively. Their collective abstention from work and their determined decision to abandon the tea gardens as happened in May 1921 actually climaxed the manifestation of this consciousness.*⁵⁰

The transition from elementary passions in the early days in the plantations to higher forms of collective bargaining as witnessed in Chargola, is analysed as the “maturity” of the forms of protest. The delay in Sen’s analysis is ascribed to the late development of trade union consciousness and associations among the tea workers of Assam. Protest and its modes are situated in an ahistorical teleological hierarchy where it only matures with the advent/contact of “higher” forms of ideology like socialism and nationalism. This is very symptomatic of Guha’s reading, where he analysed the exodus as a ‘...a primitive rebel action against legitimised condition of serfdom- a product of an interaction between the Gandhian impact on primitive minds and the incipient class militancy.’⁵¹ Here the militancy of class and Gandhian impact is contrasted and kept separate with an action that is ‘rebellious’ and minds that are ‘primitive’. The distinction is not just terminological but shares a fundamental sense of evolutionary logic.

The ‘nationalist’ and ‘working class’ histories, therefore, have failed to address to the stereotypes that the contemporary writings perpetuate. The *coolies* unproblematically assume the identity of a labourer in conflict with capital or a nationalist resisting the forces of imperialism in these renditions. Passivity again comes out as the hallmark of the *coolie* action where these ‘larger processes’ and ‘deeper ideologies’ somehow have an undeniable sense of inevitability- a defined process of history. This is in no way to suggest that ‘pure autonomy’ to be a

⁵⁰ Sukomal Sen, *Working Class of India* (Calcutta, 1977), pp.60-61. Emphasis mine.

⁵¹ Amalendu Guha, ‘Formation of a Working Class in Assam Plantations: A Study in Retrospect in North East India’ in *Problems of tea industry in North East India*, (Calcutta, 1981), p. 94

characteristic of *coolie* consciousness and action, but to forcefully make the point that it was neither predetermined.

Chapterisation

Chargola exodus with its intersection with the 'national' non-cooperation movement confirming to its 'importance' has been an interesting entry point. However my engagement with the problem is not restricted to just the wider reception of the *coolie* action in Chargola, which I argue has been animated by the docile apolitical stereotype of the *coolie* serving different purposes in different accounts. A closer reading of the incident attempted in the later part of the last chapter, primarily based on the report and evidence presented by the Labour Enquiry Committee of 1921-22, questions not just the assumptions in the various narratives and the lack of fit with the non-cooperation movement, but alludes to the possibility and dynamics of 'popular' action in the plantation set-up.

But the larger problem posed would not just demand an exclusive focus on the contingent factors but factors that are more 'historical' will be probed. Such an exercise would require a more closer look into the area of "turmoil", which is attempted in the first chapter, informing us about the specificities about the development of tea plantations in the Sylhet region, bearing in mind it's two critical "ingredients"—land and labour.

The preference for an immigrant labour force as was the case in the Assam tea plantations, 'recruited' and 'settled' under the penal-contract system gave rise to the reputation of Assam as a land of '*phatak*' or imprisonment.⁵² Tales of missing people, broken families, female and child runaways were a part of the local lore in regions

⁵² Confidential note by Chief Commissioner of Assam dated 28th April 1904, Revenue A, 77-117, August 1904, ASA.

from where people went to labour in Assam. Accounts of misrepresentations, deception, harassment and torture, which almost epitomised the modus operandi of the wily recruiters- arkattis and the brutal planters, were also much in circulation. 'Assam has a bad name with people; they say that if you go to Assam you do not know how to get out', claimed a missionary from Ranchi-headquarters to a region which populated almost half of the workforce in Assam tea gardens, before an Enquiry Commission.⁵³

Couple of songs composed or perhaps compiled, by one Uday Karmakar of Manbhum, sometime in the late nineteenth century, expresses some of the 'popular' notions about the place and the experience of going and working there.⁵⁴ In the first song, the *coolie* in a lamenting note accuses the recruiter-Shyam, of presenting a very 'sanitized' picture of the life in Assam, which is sharply contradicted by her/his experience during transit and work in the plantations.⁵⁵

*Paka khatai lekhaeli nam
re lampatiya shyam
fhankidiey bandhu chalali assam
depughare maritari
uttaiele terene kari
hoogly sahare dekholi akash
mane kare assam jab
jora pankha tanab
sahab dil kodaleri kam
dina udaya bhane*

⁵³ Rev Father Hoffman of Ranchi, *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee of 1906*, p.181

⁵⁴ It could be very insightful enterprise to interrogate the notions, cultural/social inertias and experiences associated with Assam for the thousands of people travelling to work in the tea plantations. Marina Carter in a recent study has tried to use sources like letters, deposition and petitions to "deconstruct", the official version of the system of indenture in Mauritius. Such an enquiry in our case is impeded by the sources, mainly official, which are selective and at best fragmentary. The use of popular myths, songs etc. could in that case be of great value. However there still remains a problem of mediation wherever we encounter the 'voices' and attempts to make the 'subaltern speak' remains an ambitious task. Marina Carter, *Voices from Indenture: Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire*. (Leicester, 1996).

⁵⁵ PP Mahto, 'Worldview of the Assam tea garden labourers from Jharkhand' in S. Karomtemprel and B.D. Roy (ed.) *Tea Garden Labourers of North East India* (Shillong, 1990).

*akale peter tane
tipki tipki parhe gham.*⁵⁶

Again in another song, the *coolie* laments that the *bidesiya* Shyam has indulged in *phanki* (deception) to send him/her under conditions of extreme oppression.

*Sardar bole kam kam
babu bole dhari an
sahab bole lib pither cham
re bideshi shyam
phanki diye anilo Assam.*⁵⁷

But were these descriptions the “facts” of travelling and working in Assam tea gardens? Were the oppression of the planter and the deception of the *arkatti* an unqualified state of things?

A chronologically deferred and geographically specific nature of the human and social geography as was the case in the Sylhet district, induced different strategies of labour recruitment and settlement. Chapter two would go into the details as to why unassisted *Sardari* recruiting and *coolies* ‘indentured’ under Act XIII as was the case in the Surma valley especially the valley of Chargola, makes a case for a ‘rethinking’ of the system of indenture in Assam. Being outside the dominant framework of indenture law did not ensure the ‘freedom’ of the *coolies* but revealed the limitations of the state and planters to police them. Attempts were made outside this framework, mobilising other discourses and practices of supervision and control. At the same time

⁵⁶ Taking a written assent from us

Shyam (the recruiter) deceived us and sent to Assam

We were manhandled at the *coolie* depot

We first saw the sky in Hoogly town

We thought that we would be engaged to draw fans in Assam but the *sahibs* gave us hoeing tasks

We sweat while working, Poor Uday composed this.

⁵⁷ Sardar asks for more work,

the *babu* abuses and *Sahib* threatens to peel the skin off the back

Alas Shyam! you sent me to Assam by deceiving

the shifts in governmental policy would reveal the various pressures and interests at work.

Bearing in mind this context, the third chapter would not just make an attempt to explain the exodus in Chargola, but seek to analyse the 'moments' of collective action in the tea plantations of Assam. Such an exercise assumes an specific relevance of not just questioning the docile, submissive stereotypes of the *coolie* and the teleological and evolutionary premises of the various histories but particularly interrogate the arguments made in other plantation context of labourers choosing accommodation and individual acts of passive resistance as a 'strategy', appreciating the 'realities' of the plantation system and structures of power in the larger colonial society.⁵⁸ We in turn without creating a false distinction and hierarchy between the two will argue that such strategies of survival do not seem to be particularly applicable in our case. Authority and the colonial context had a bearing on the modes of articulation of protest but it could never be completely deterred or rendered exclusively personal and passive.

⁵⁸ See Brij V. Lal, "Nonresistance" on Fiji Plantations : The Fiji Indian Experience, 1879-1920 in Brij V Lal and Dough Munro (ed.) *Plantation Workers, Resistance and Accomodation* (Honolulu,1996)

CHAPTER I

TEA PLANTATIONS OF SYLHET IN ASSAM IN THE LATE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY: LAND AND LABOUR.

Tea in the classic colonial representations symbolised the transformation of a jungle-ridden 'backward' province of 'waste', through the colonisation of British enterprise and capital. The order and precision of the 'gardens' of tea stood in utter contrast to the wildness of the 'jungles' of Assam – a most illustrative contrast of the chaos and violence of nature, and the tranquillity, prosperity and control that the pioneering endeavours, the white man had engineered.¹

The introduction of tea in the early part of the nineteenth century in Assam was actualised by the active support and backing of the colonial state. Under the benevolent disposition of the 'Planter-Raj', the industry riding over the initial hiccups, made rapid strides mostly clearly revealed in the displacement of China, as the principal exporter of tea to Britain, by the turn of the century.² Commercial cultivation of tea in the province was undertaken in the valley of Brahmaputra or the Assam valley and Surma Valley. There were significant differences in the development of the industry in the two valleys showing the different trajectories that they took.³

¹ The British annexed Assam in 1825 after the conclusion of the Anglo-Burmese War. It was part of the presidency of Bengal till the year 1874, and was under the local jurisdiction of the Agent to the Governor-General on the North-East Frontier. For the early history of British presence in Assam, Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, (Guwahati, 1924, reprint 2001); HK Barpujari, *Assam In The Days Of The Company*, (Shillong, reprint 1996),

² In 1866, 96% of tea imported into Britain came from China and only 4% from India. But by 1903, the share of Indian exports increased to 59% while the Chinese contributed only 10% of the total imports. Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, (Guwahati, 1924, reprint 2001), p.409.

³ The cultivation of tea in the valley of Brahmaputra or Assam valley was carried out in the districts of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Nowgong, Darrang and Kamrup while in the Surma valley the districts of Cachar and Sylhet in Surma valley was involved in the production of tea.

Introduction of tea in Assam

In the early part of the nineteenth century, political troubles with the Chinese government over the 'opium issue', and the abrogation of the trade monopoly of the East India Company, made it imperative to seek new areas where tea could be profitably produced.⁴ In spite of the initial scepticism of the success of such an enterprise in India, the government of William Bentinck appointed a committee in January 1834, to consider the available possibilities of tea cultivation using Chinese seeds and methods. Opinions were sought from people in different parts of the country showing interest in the issue. In their initial 'Mapping of the Empire', using strong reason and analogy from the Chinese experience, the committee considered the Himalayan region most suited to fulfil that role. Assam, which had recently come under the control of the company, was curiously shown neglect from the botanical authorities in Calcutta, where reports from local officers, of the plant being 'indigenous' and cultivated by the Singpho tribe was coming from the early parts of the century. It was only in the late 1834 did the Tea committee finally acknowledge to this 'fact'. In a letter to the Government of India, the Committee in a very optimistic note described this as 'to be by far the most important discovery that has been made in matters connected with the agricultural and commercial resources of this Empire.'⁵ A Scientific expedition headed by distinguished botanists and Geologists proceeded

⁴ Tea was a very important 'economic' and 'social' commodity in British life from the eighteenth century. While the production of this commodity was monopolised by the Chinese, its lucrative trade was an East India Company's preserve being a major source of its annual revenue. The 1833 Charter Act took away the monopoly of the East India Company in trade of Chinese tea.

⁵ *Letter from the Tea Committee to the Government of India dated 24th December, 1834*. Cited in the article 'Tea Industry in North-East India', by Harold H Mann (originally printed in *Bengal Economic Journal*, Vol II, 1918 and reprinted in Daniel Thorner (ed.) *The Social Frame work of Agriculture* (Bombay: Vora & Co. Publishers Pvt Ltd), p.406. Apart from Mann's article, the early history of the Assam tea industry is detailed in P Griffiths, *History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967); H.T. Antrobus, *A History of the Assam Company* (Edinburgh, 1957).

Assam and more than anything else committed the Government to go ahead in a definite effort to introduce tea cultivation in Assam.

The feasibility of cultivation of the indigenous variety, in respect both of quality and outturn achieved in experimental stations set up by the government and the favourable response to early 'specimens' of Assam tea in the markets of Calcutta and London interested investors and capitalists. A more positive step in this direction was taken with the almost simultaneous formation of the Bengal Tea Company in Calcutta and the Assam Company in London in 1839, both looking to take-over the plantations of the East India Company and exclusively produce and market the tea produced. Competition at this nascent stage was not something that would have excited the investors and shareholders of the companies, and their eventual merger to form the Assam Company appeared almost as a foregone conclusion.⁶

Governmental help did not come only in the form of the transfer of almost two-third of the experimental tea gardens to the new company but also made available, land. Jungles were designated as 'Wastelands' and given out at very favourable terms. The period from 1840 to 1856 could be described as the 'pioneering' days of the tea industry in Assam associated largely with the fortunes of Assam Company restricted in the valley of Assam and Cachar.⁷ It was only from the late 1850s, that cultivation of tea in Assam was generally acknowledged as a profitable enterprise, inducing companies to be floated and luring speculators to search for tea in the virgin terrains of the province.⁸

⁶ KK, Sircar, 'A Tale of Two Boards: Some Early Management Problems of Assam Company Limited, 1839-64', *EPW*, Vol. XXI, Nos 10 & 11, 8-15th March, 1986.

⁷ By the year 1847, just into the seventh year of its inception everything seemed to be going wrong for the company. Dividends were declared without any real profits to keep up the morale of the investors.

⁸ Between 1862 and 1865, the period of 'tea-mania', 38 tea companies were registered in India and 25 in England. Behal p.20

Tea in Surma Valley

Soon districts of Cachar and Sylhet were increasingly beginning to be seen as a potential field of opportunity for speculators investing money in tea gardens in Assam. The districts of Sylhet and Cachar lie south to the Assam valley separated by the Barail range. The two valleys differed considerably in physical features and development of the industry. The Surma Valley was distinguished by its low hills or *tilas*, on which the earliest tea gardens were opened out. It was soon discovered, however, that tea planted on up-land plateau gave a better outturn, and later still low flats were drained and formed into what are known as *bhil* gardens, which yielded a heavy outturn of tea but of an inferior quality.⁹

The possibility of cultivation of tea in Cachar was explored by Captain Fisher, the Superintendent of the district, under the behest of the Tea Committee in 1834, attesting to its feasibility. But it was only in the 1850s, when a judge from Sylhet, F Skipwith came up with 'empirical evidence' showing the presence of a plant 'identical to the tea plant of Assam'. Captain Verner, the Superintendent writing in August 1855; though talked about the uniqueness of the tea found in Cachar, highlighted to the excellent access afforded by River Burah.¹⁰ By October of that year, three parties had commenced work, and six other European speculators have applied for tea lands. Old Assam Rules were applied to the District in 1856.

⁹*The Report of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1906* Reprinted in the *Labour movements in India: 1850-90*, Edited by S.D Punekar and R Variachakyal (ICHR, New Delhi, 1989). pp. 66-69.

¹⁰ The means of communication was very rudimentary. One of the advantages of Cachar compared with Assam was that the time taken to get there from Calcutta. It would be a month to six weeks to travel from Calcutta to Cachar compared with two months to Assam. H.T. Antrobus, *A History of the Assam Company* (Edinburgh, 1957).

The possibility of cultivation of tea in Cachar interested speculators in Sylhet.¹¹

Early in 1856, S.A. Glover, the officiating Collector of Sylhet, reported:

Ever since the discovery of tea in Cachar, it has been surmised by those best qualified to form an opinion, that the plant would be found in this district, and 'prospectors' had for some time been employed by the Magistrate, Mr Larkins, in searching the neighbourhood of the hilly part of the eastern side of the district. In December last, the first discovery was made, and ever since then, reports of fresh successes have come in daily.¹²

The first garden was opened in Malnicherra in the year 1857. However the progress of industry in comparison to Assam valley and Cachar was relatively sluggish. Unlike the other tea districts of Assam, Sylhet was densely populated with petty landlords presiding over a large population indulged in agriculture. Therefore the opening of new gardens had a very high probability of intruding into the land meant for cultivation or pasturage of cattle.¹³ This had a critical bearing on the plantations in the district, as land was a critical determinant of costs and profitability. This also makes the colonial state's policy of designating land as 'waste' and giving

¹¹ Sylhet passed into the hands of British in 1765, together with the rest of Bengal. The territory of the Raja of Jaintia was confiscated in 1835, in consequence of his complicity in the forcible seizure of certain British subjects. The plain portions extending from the foot of the Hills to the Surma River, was annexed to the Sylhet district. The tracts were surveyed by Lieutenant Thuillier (1838-40), and found an area of 581 square miles, of which little more than one-sixth was then under cultivation. The native government is described as 'pure despotism'. The revenue was received by the Raja partly in produce and partly in labour, and all tenures were voidable at his will. No class of persons had any recognised rights in the land, but the more substantial cultivators called themselves *mirasdars* (equivalent to zamindars). *A Statistical Account of Assam, Volume II* by W.W. Hunter (Trunbner & Co., London, 1879) Reprinted.

¹² P Griffiths, *History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967), p.92

¹³ Assam valley though three times the size of Surma valley, supported a smaller population and density of the district varied from 68 per mile in Nowgong to 153 in Kamrup. Sylhet remained the largest town in terms of population with around 14,000 people living there while Gauhati's population was around 11,500. *Imperial gazetteer of India. Vol.6*, p.37

out to the planters at extremely favourable terms intelligible. But a simple continuation of such a policy in Sylhet offered practical difficulties. Special orders were therefore issued in the district and in particular the densely populated Karimganj subdivision, that no application for wasteland was to be accepted till a satisfactory assessment was made that it did not negatively impact the surrounding population. Also an upper ceiling of 600 acres was fixed for the grants to be made.¹⁴ However these measures could not entirely ensure 'peace' between the planters and the surrounding rural population and collisions between them were quite frequent. The Subdivisional officer in the 1886 report writes:

The amount of land available for cultivation by ryots in the south of this subdivision has been seriously trenched on by the tea garden extension on *bil* lands, and much heart-burning on the part of intending settlers has been the result.¹⁵

Also the fact that a large area within the district was permanently settled added further complications for the prospective planters. The settlement holders were in many cases willing to lease their land for tea cultivation, but the planters wanted, not a lease, but the fee simple of his garden land. HC Sutherland, the collector of Sylhet in his report dated 13th January 1873, to the Commissioner of Dacca writes

In a permanently settled district like Sylhet it is hardly expected that wastelands can be found in a great extent. Such lands can only be procured through the *zamindars* who hold these estates or from government in case of *khas mehals*. But I feel sure that if tea planter would only open gardens as investments of private capital for their own profit, and not with an eye to future speculation in the shape of a company, and if they would only give up their cherished fiction of estates in fee simple and deal directly with the *zamindars*, or take a Government estate under present liberal settlement rules, they would

¹⁴ *Annual report on the Labour Immigration in Assam for years 1883 and 1886.*

¹⁵ *Annual report on the Labour Immigration in Assam for the year 1886.*

not fail to reap a substantial profit on their investments... Whatever the faults of the indigo system in Bengal, the planters in their generation tried to secure lands from *zamindars* as much as possible. An indigo factory with their own *putni* or *zamindari* or *izaradari* lands was always a profitable investment. In those days there was not so much talk about fee-simple.¹⁶

There were however, certain areas in Sylhet not covered by the permanent settlement. It was to such areas that the planter directed his attention. The figures of a few years later show that two-thirds of the tea lands in Sylhet were held on lease from the Government under the old Assam rules; only between 15-20% were held on leases from the zamindars. These lands were primarily the *tilas* on which the earliest gardens were opened.

However the development of Sylhet as a major tea-producing district vis-à-vis the other tea districts of Assam valley actualised only in the later decades of the nineteenth century which is evident from the acreage and production statistics.

Table 2.1] ¹⁷

| YEAR | ACRES UNDER CROP | OUTTURN IN POUNDS |
|------|------------------|-------------------|
| 1868 | 2,050 | 251,000 |
| 1873 | 3,240 | 324,186 |
| 1875 | 4,716 | 470,748 |
| 1878 | 54,140 | 1,366,144 |
| 1879 | 74,843 | 2,161,391 |
| 1884 | — | 5,561,000 |
| 1891 | — | 17,005,843 |
| 1900 | — | 35,042,000 |
| 1904 | — | 38,838,365 |

¹⁶ *Papers regarding Tea Industry in Bengal*, p.156

¹⁷ *Assam District Gazetteers, Sylhet District* by B.C. Allen (Calcutta, 1905); *A Statistical Account of Assam, Volume II* by W.W. Hunter (Trunbner & Co., London, 1879) Reprinted; Annual report on the Labour Immigration in Assam, 1879, p.16; Census of 1891 p. 69; P Griffiths, *History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967), p.95.

By the year 1895 Sylhet was the largest tea-producing district and at the turn of the century almost produced 4,000,000 pounds more than any other district of the province. The tea production by then had almost increased by seventy five times of what it was in the middle of 1870s.¹⁸

Excellent Junglee coolie, Diseased upcountry coolie

'Labour', the other major determinant remained a major concern in the tea gardens of Assam. The scarcity and reluctance of the native was given out as a major premise for the planters to resort to an immigrant labour force recruited through the agency of arkattis.

Sylhet with a relatively dense population could not have had the problems of scarcity of working hands but the problems of the native being expensive and given to his own ways persisted. R.C. Bell, the manager of the Sylhet division of the Sylhet and Cachar Tea company highlighting the problem in a letter dated 12th March, 1868 writes:

At certain times of the year local labour is available, but it is rather expensive, and not to be depended on, as the men will only come to work in the garden when they have no cultivation going on. Rs 8 a month is now asked for.¹⁹

Immigrant labour was worked with coming from Chotanagpur, Beerbhoom and Midnapore; with a few numbers being provided by North West Provinces (NWP) and Behar.²⁰ However the 'upcountry coolies' from NWP and Behar from the

¹⁸ J.B. Bhattacharjee, *Cachar under British Rule in North-East India* (New Delhi, 1977), pp.199-200 and Assam District Gazetteers, Sylhet District, p.136.

¹⁹ *Papers regarding Tea Industry in Bengal*, p.cxxvii.

²⁰ *Papers regarding Tea Industry in Bengal*, p.155

middle of the 1870s sharply exceeded the ones coming from Bengal districts and Chotanagpur.²¹ In the year 1888 for example out of 45,000 coolies from NWP and Behar in Assam tea plantations, around 35,000 were in the valley of Surma. By 1891 more than 57,000 coolies came from NWP and more than half were in the district of Sylhet.²²

The Sylhet District Gazetteers published in the year 1905 showed an overwhelming majority of coolies from UP²³, mostly from Ghazipur and Azamgarh, accounting for almost 28% of the total labour force unlike the Assam Valley plantations, which showed a preponderance of coolies coming from Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas. Nearly one half of these coolies lived in the Karimganj Subdivision in which the Chargola valley was situated and most of the remainder were in South Sylhet area.

[Table 2.2]²⁴

| NATIONALITY | NUMBER | PERCENTAGE |
|-----------------------|--------|------------|
| Chotanagpur | 22,745 | 16 |
| Other parts of Bengal | 22,067 | 15 |
| United Provinces | 41,169 | 28 |
| Central Provinces | 12,681 | 9 |
| Madras | 10,079 | 7 |

The North-Westerners or the 'up-country coolie' interestingly had over a period of time earned a notorious reputation in the Assam of being very weak in constitution

²¹ *Annual report on the Labour Immigration in Assam, 1877*, writes that in Sylhet more than half the total number of Act VII labourers imported during the year came from NWP and Behar while in the previous year there was a similar preponderance of Bengalis. p.14

²² *Special Report On the Working Act I of 1882 in the Province of Assam During Years 1886-89*. p.214 and *1891 Census*.

²³ North Western Provinces was renamed as United Provinces in 1901. I will retain the usage of NWP during this discussion.

²⁴ *Assam District Gazetteers, Sylhet District* by B.C. Allen (Calcutta, 1905) p.137

showing high mortality rates and in general poor labouring abilities. They were particularly said to be 'afflicted' by an irresistible propensity to desert to find almost a mandatory mention in the annual Labour reports. The coolies from NWP in this racialised discourse of labour undoubtedly stood on the other extreme of the spectrum of the characteristics that made an ideal coolie; the one almost perfectly epitomised by the *Jungles*.

With respect to the quality of the various nationalities recruited the general opinion, seems unanimous that the best class of coolies in respect of work, as well as adaptability to the Assam climate are junglies i.e. Chotanagpuris and Sonthals...while it is generally admitted that coolies from NWP, Behar and Oudh, are worst in both respects.

In mid 1870s there was this question raised of putting a blanket ban on 'up-country' emigrants in the Assam valley plantations in light of the excessive mortality observed from the labour returns.²⁵

...death rate among labourers from NWP is lamentably high, and would lead to the inference that up-country coolies are less able to withstand the climate of Assam ...experience has certainly proved that in newly-opened jungle gardens 'up-country' labourers are all but useless, and the Chief Commissioner is more strongly than ever of the opinion that a clause is necessary, empowering the local administration to close a garden to any particular class of Act VII labourers.²⁶

As a consequence of this the Chief Commissioner called for an inclusion of a special clause, empowering the local administration to close a garden to any particular class of labour.²⁷ This was materialised through a government notification whereby

²⁵ There was a lot of ambiguity regarding upcountry emigrants but taken to be generally the ones coming from beyond the Rajmehal Hills. Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch, A Proceedings, May 1875, Nos 18-20 and Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch, B Proceedings, May 1877, Nos 8-11. NAI.

²⁶ *Assam Labour Report of 1875*, NAI.

²⁷ Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch, A Proceeding,, May 1877, Nos 2-4. NAI.

the operation of Chapter 13 of Act VII was extended in Assam in such a manner as to give the Chief Commissioner the powers to close a garden to any particular class of labourer, if the death rate among that class attains excessive proportions.²⁸

Ironically these very terms of criticism for the NWP coolies were reversed in the Surma valley especially the Chargola valley area and they in turn stood as a confirmation for their suitability as *coolies*.

In case of Chargola valley...contrary to the general opinion elsewhere, *NWP coolies are considered the best available, both in regards to work and ability to stand the Sylhet climate...coolies of this nationality formed a striking contrast to those found in other parts of the province (Assam).*²⁹

There has been a fair evidence of a 'catchment area' as a source as a source of labour supply for the overseas plantation declining simultaneously with an increase in labour immigration to some inland destination. Chotanagpur region which supplied 40-50% of colonial emigrants during the 1840s and 50s became an important source of labour supply to Assam in the following decades. A similar trend was observable in the labour supplying districts of Azamgarh, Ballia, Ghazipur and Jaunpur of NWP, where there was a decline in supply of indentured labourers to the overseas plantation in the last decades of nineteenth century.³⁰ Mauritius, a major destination of labour from the 'Eastern Catchment Area' was already meeting its demands from the settled labour force.³¹ A part of this supply got diverted towards the jute mills of Calcutta, the agricultural farms of East Bengal and the tea gardens of Assam. One can clearly locate a switch from a predominantly Bengali labour force to

²⁸ Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch, B Proceeding,, April 1877, Nos 1, NAI.

²⁹ *Special Report On the Working Act I of 1882 in the Province of Assam During Years 1886-89*, p. 17 (emphasis mine.)

³⁰ Pradipta Chaudhury, 'Labour Migration from United Provinces, 1881-1911', *Studies in History*, 1992 (8,1), pp.13-14; Gyanendra Pandey, *Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (New Delhi, 1990), p.77.

³¹ Lalitha Chakravathy., *Emergence of an Industrial Force in a Dual Economy-British India, 1880-1920*, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 1978 (15,3), p.253.

one coming from NWP and Behar in the jute mills of Calcutta from the 1890s.³² Surma valley plantations especially the plantations of Sylhet, which was coming up most rapidly during this period, drew upon this source of supply. In the period 1881-1890, almost 71,950 coolies were recruited for the Sylhet tea gardens, which doubled on the next decade with 141,650.³³ The emigration statistics from North Western Provinces collated from the census of various years would be instructive in this regard.

[Table 2.3]³⁴

| NO OF PERSONS BORN IN U.P. | 1881 | 1891 | 1901 | 1911 |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|----------------|--------------|----------------|
| Assam(province) | 29,722 (41) ^A | 57,851 (37) | 108,900 (40) | 97,944 |
| Surma Valley | 17,833(approx) | 34,711(approx) | 71,320 | 58,766(approx) |

There was an almost threefold increase in the number of persons born North west Provinces enumerated in Assam in 1881-1901 period. Almost 70% of this population resided in the valley of Surma mostly in the district of Sylhet.

The tendency of coolies coming from a particular catchment area; going to different destinations in the plantations of Assam, can be illustrated from the migration patterns of Chotanagpur and North West provinces in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

³² Ranajit Dasgupta, 'Factory Labour in Eastern India: Sources of Supply' in *Labour and Working Class in Eastern India: Studies in Colonial History* (Calcutta, 1994). p. 18

³³ *Assam District Gazetteers, Sylhet District, Supplement to Vol II* (Shillong, 1905) p. 70

³⁴ *Census of India, 1881, Vol 17, Pt 1, p. 87; Census of India, 1901, Vol 16, Pt 1, p. 59; Census of India, 1911, Vol 15, Pt 1, p. 102; Ranajit Dasgupta, Labour and Working Class in Eastern India: Studies in Colonial History* (Calcutta, 1994), Table 3, p. 290.

^A Figures in brackets represent percentage of females among immigrants.

[Table 2.4] ³⁵

| YEAR | ASSAM VALLEY | SURMA VALLEY | CHOTANAGPUR AND SANTHAL PARGANAS | NWP/UNITED PROVINCES |
|------|--------------|--------------|----------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1891 | 32,439 | 17,469 | 16,557 | 10,524 |
| 1892 | 36,134 | 19,916 | 17,910 | 9,196 |
| 1893 | 33,778 | 16,897 | 17,837 | 6,188 |
| 1894 | 30,321 | 16,209 | 17,833 | 6,954 |
| 1895 | 35,041 | 37,796 | 18,369 | 18,957 |
| 1896 | 42,384 | 38,731 | 16,122 | 19,135 |
| 1897 | 66,952 | 28,979 | 28,078 | 9,391 |
| 1898 | 33,762 | 15,407 | 18,594 | 4,565 |
| 1899 | 24,449 | 7,459 | 11,192 | 1,960 |

The years 1895 and 1896, which show a sharp increase in the labour recruitment drive in Surma Valley is matched by a concurrent rise in the labour coming from NWP. These two years interestingly showed the highest numbers to be recruited in Sylhet with 26,450 and 27,080.³⁶ The pattern is repeated in the year 1899 when a fall in the number of immigrants into Surma Valley Plantations is matched by a fall in labour coming from that region. The immigrating labour figures for Assam valley showed a steady pattern, only experiencing a steep rise in the year 1897 showing a corresponding rise in the labour coming from Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas, its principal recruiting ground.

So the two valleys drew upon different sources of labour supply-the *Jungles* of Chotanagpur primarily going to the tea plantations of the Assam valley while the 'upcountry coolies' of North West Provinces and Bihar to the valley of Surma.

Kaushik Ghosh shows in a different context the ambiguities on the colonial definition of Chotanagpur *Jungle* with the transition from pacification attempts in the region to the development of the global plantation capitalist discourse:

Within the space of less than a decade, a global plantation capitalist discourse developed and naturalised an image of docility for the hill-men of Chotanagpur that was quite opposite of the fierce, raiding image that had

³⁵ *The Report of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee*, 1906 pp. 12-14

³⁶ *Assam District Gazetteers, Sylhet District, Supplement to Vol II* (Shillong, 1905), p. 137

animated the colonial state's pacification attempts at the turn of the 19th century.³⁷

Again the contradictions became all the more apparent when the suitable labour for coal industry developing in the Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas was explicated:

Santhali and bauri...like most aboriginals prefer to idle when they have earned enough to satisfy their immediate wants...having no competition in the labour market, they have hitherto been able to dictate terms.³⁸

Here the ascriptions which were inscribed in the very race of the coolie on closer scrutiny hints at this unease with the local labour and the preference for the immigrants in the colonial enterprises, like the tea plantations in Assam and the coal mines in the Chotanagpur Area.³⁹ The logic of colonial plantation of low wages coupled with a strict working regime could not lure the local labour, which had sufficient bargaining powers to be settled in such circumstances.⁴⁰

³⁷ Kaushik Ghosh, A Market for Aboriginality: Primitivism and Race Classification in the Indentured Labour Market of Colonial India, *Subaltern studies* Vol VII. p.22-23.

³⁸ Quoted in Kaushik Ghosh, A Market for Aboriginality: Primitivism and Race Classification in the Indentured Labour Market of Colonial India, *Subaltern studies*. p.22-23. In this apparent anomaly, the aboriginal labourer became the embodiment of all the problems of labour that he himself was solution to in the Assam Tea plantations.

³⁹ For a more closer analysis of the supply of labour from Chotanagpur, look at Prabhu Mohapatra, Coolies and Colliers: A Study of the Agrarian Context of Labour Migration from Chotanagpur, 1880-1920, *Studies in History*, Vol. 1, No.2.

⁴⁰ This becomes even more interesting if one looks at earlier experiences of the tea planters operating in Assam. The whole rhetoric of the insufficiency and innate laziness of local labour is contradicted by the early history of the plantation. Kachari labour from Lakhimpur, Nowgong provided much of the labour for the company's gardens. However the fact that it often resorted to 'strikes' and 'mass movement' out of plantation, was an evidence of the capabilities of the local labour vis-à-vis their employers. This was most detrimental to an industry, which was labour-intensive, and where profits were primarily determined by the existence of the continued supply of cheap and compliant labour-force. KK Sircar, Labour and Management: First Twenty Years of Assam Company Limited (1839-59), *EPW*, Vol. XXI, No. 22, 31st May, 1986. The Land-Revenue increases to depeasantise the Assamese were also not very successful to these ends. M..A..B Siddique, says that between 1839/40 and 1868/69, the rates of revenue of rice land in the tea districts of Lakhimpur and Sibsagar had already been increased by 200% .in 'The Labour Market and the Growth of the Tea Industry in India: 1840-1900, *South Asia*, Vol. XVIII, no. 1(1995), p.86

The changing discourse in the plantations of Assam could be located in the fact that the late development of plantations in the Surma valley coincided with the development of upcountry provinces as major suppliers of labour to inland destinations. The accessibility and better facilities of communication in the valley were able to “attract” new sources of labour supply. The presence of up-country coolies in the valley found a resonance in the planter discourse. The Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1906 makes a note of this anomaly:

In Surma Valley UP labour flourishes on many gardens and is generally highly spoken of by the employers....Assam valley planter does not think much of the United Provinces labourer... Individual planters express such opposite opinions as to the merits of different classes of labour, that it would seem that preferences are formed for some classes more because the planter is familiar with them than because others are really inferior⁴¹

Also the nature of production in Surma valley producing low priced tea meant that the fetishized *Junglee* labour could not be afforded due to the high price it commanded in the market.

[Table 2.5]

| CLASS OF COOLIES | PRICE |
|---|----------------------|
| For pure aborigines or <i>junglis</i> | Rs. 115 |
| For good hardy coolies (semi aborigines, Central provinces coolies) | Rs. 100 |
| For Coolies suitable for healthy gardens in the Brahmaputra valley | Rs. 90 |
| For NWP coolies suitable for healthy gardens in Surma valley | Rs. 60 ⁴² |

⁴¹ *The Report of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1906, pp. 69-75*

⁴² *The Report of the Labour Enquiry Commission, 1896 Reprinted in the Labour movements in India: 1850-90, Edited by S.D Punekar and R Variachakyal (ICHR, New Delhi, 1989)*

A price inscribed in the very race of the coolie justifying his utility in the market was not entirely divorced from actual market transactions. The NWP coolies for gardens in Sylhet were largely recruited through *sardars* outside the Act (Assam Emigration Act), which was relatively much cheaper than the *arkatti coolies*, who had to go through a series of official formalities and middlemen having a bearing on the price.

The gardens in the Chargola Valley in Sylhet are supplied almost without any recourse to the Act, and the main source of supply is the Ghazipur district in the North-western Provinces ... emigrate there freely for periods of three years...Garden sardars are sent down annually to bring up labour, and a system of "free emigration" in its fullest extent prevails. The coolies not only emigrate most willingly, but at a minimum cost to the employer, viz., Rs. 18 to Rs. 20.⁴³

So there were important differences in procedure both as regards the mode of recruitment followed and the form and period of the contract under which the labourer was placed in the two valleys. The pattern of labour recruitment through the agency of sardars in the Surma valley was most characteristic of the Chargola valley.

When I came to Adamitila (Sylhet district) in 1880, I recollect well that coolies were coming up to Chargola valley at Rs. 9 a head all the way from Buxar... Coolies used to come in country boats from Goalundo and crowds died from cholera on the way. This is why we allowed Rs 17 from 1880 to 1889, as sardars were paid for coolies landed on garden.⁴⁴

The table published in the Special report shows the sharp variance of prices of coolies arising out of different recruitment methods, which interestingly gets racially defined.⁴⁵

⁴³ *ibid.* pp. 35-37

⁴⁴ Revenue A, Aug 1904, 77-117, ASA.

⁴⁵ *Special Report On the Working Act I of 1882 in the Province of Assam During Years 1886-89.* p.19

[Table 2.6]

| COST | METHOD OF RECRUITMENT ACCORDING TO CHEAPNESS | NATIONALITY OF COOLIES IMPORTED ACCORDING TO CHEAPNESS |
|--------------------|---|--|
| Rs.17-Rs. 50 (1-3) | 1. FREE SIRDARI, {the sirdar working independently} | 1. NWP, including Behar and Oudh and CP coolies |
| | 2. FREE SIRDARI {under the control of an agent} | 2. Bengalis, including Uriyas and Ganjamese |
| | 3. ACT SIRDARI | 3. Junglies, Chotanagpuris and Sonthals |
| Rs.50-Rs100 (4-5) | 4. MIXED SIRDARI | |
| | 5. CONTRACTOR | |

The interesting point to note is that the different catchment areas were characterised by the preference of a particular type of labour recruitment strategy, which costed differently to the employer. The sardar working outside the Act almost typical of the coolies coming from North west Provinces to the Surma valley, being the cheapest mode of recruitment, while the contractor or sardars working under the ambit of the legal and official procedures procuring coolies at the higher rates.

[Table 2.7]

| YEARS | ADAMTILLA GARDEN (ALL NON ACT) | CHARGOLA GARDEN (ALL NON ACT) INCLUDES SARDAR'S COMMISSION, COST OF GOING TO AND RETURNING FROM GARDEN. COOLIES USED TO COME UP IN COUNTRY BOATS. |
|-----------|--|---|
| 1880-84 | Rs.25(Madras/ Sardari) Rs.25(Chotanagpur/ Sardari) | Rs. 17 per adult |
| 1885-89 | Rs. 25 (Madras/ Sardari) Rs. 20 (Chotanagpur/ Sardari) | Rs. 17 per adult |
| 1890-94 | Rs. 25 (Madras/ Sardari) Rs. 30 (Chotanagpur /Sardari) Rs. 18 (NWP /Sardari) | Rs. 17 per adult |
| 1895-99 | Rs 25 (Madras/ Sardari) Rs.35(Chotanagpur /Sardari) Rs. 25 (NWP /Sardari) Rs. 35-90 (CP /Depot) Rs. 48 (CP /Sardari) | Rs. 22 per adult |
| 1900-1903 | Rs. 70 (Chotanagpur/ Sardari) Rs. 35 (CP /Depot) | Rs. 25 per adult |

The specific characteristic of coolies recruited through the agency of sardar was that it ensured a certain degree of continuous family life among the new immigrants, a

larger number of married couples and families being imported, and a smaller number of solitary men and women.

A coolie does not come up to an utterly strange place (in Sylhet district), with no friends and relatives near. He does not come into exile. He comes, as it were, in a part of Ghazipur planted in the Sylhet district, for all the large concerns in the valley recruit on the same principle and from the same locality. There is no doubt that the average North Wester is very subject to home sickness. In the Chargola valley this is not the case.⁴⁶

This to an extent explains the differential rates of desertion of NorthWesters in the two valleys. In the Assam valley the upcountry coolies were mainly isolated men and women with no family or other acquaintances recruited through unlicensed contractors, unlike the Sardari recruitment in Surma valley, which to an extent ensured family immigration and settlement.

Conclusions

The plantation industry in the province and the valley has to be located in the specific set of determinants which had a bearing not just on the production and nature of tea produced but also the coolies who worked in these areas. Coolies from 'upcountry' utterly despised in the tea gardens of Assam valley formed the bulk of the population in the Sylhet tea plantations especially in the Chargola valley area. The modes of recruitment showed certain specificities where coolies were recruited through the agency of sardars working outside the Act. This not only meant that the prices were lower but inculcated a degree of 'community sense' among the coolie population most clearly revealed by the differential rates of desertion among the 'upcountry coolies'. However specific modes of mobilisation would mean specific

⁴⁶ *Special Report On the Working Act I of 1882 in the Province of Assam During Years 1886-89.*

modes of settlement and Act XIII— a much-debated legislation in the colonial history of Assam tea plantation would step in to play that role.

CHAPTER II

TEA PLANTATIONS OF SYLHET IN ASSAM IN THE LATE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY: MODES OF RECRUITMENT AND FORMS OF SETTLEMENT.

The 'civilising mission of tea' in the province was not up against just the vagaries of nature and the diseased climate, but the 'native' was said to be a strong impediment. Being depicted as conservative, lazy and given to smoking opium 'he' was condemned as being innately inefficient to cope up with the requirements and rhythms of a 'modern' industry.¹ A labour, which was immigrant, soon became the universal preference of the planters of Assam. The early attempts to recruit the expert Chinese labour for the gardens of the Assam Company was however deemed as a failure, and more 'local' sources of 'immigrant' labour supply was undertaken.²

The ignorant *coolie* and the *Coolie* Acts

At the same time *Coolie* with all its attendant stereotypes, which was being fashioned in the overseas colonial plantation in the post-slavery period 1830s and 1840s, was being increasingly mobilised by the tea planters of Assam. The

¹ In this gendered discourse of the stereotypes, the 'native' and '*coolie*' is always addressed as a male figure. The 'absence' becomes all the more striking when women constituted more than half of the work-force and were the exclusively employed in the labour-intensive task of plucking of tea leaves.

² At first the recruiting operations were confined to the lower districts of Bengal, and those chiefly on the river route to Assam. But gradually the *Junglee* or *Dhangars* from the Chotanagpur region, who had worked in the sugar plantations of Mauritius in the post-slavery period, were becoming the most sought after 'class of *coolie*'. The 'upcountry' men from North western Provinces and Bihar though labelled to be unsuited to the wet climate and jungle tracts of Assam, constituted a substantial number by the late nineteenth century especially in the Surma Valley. Central Provinces and the Ganjam tracts of Madras Presidency were the other principal areas from where *coolie* travelled to work in the tea gardens of Assam.

appropriateness of the immigrant *coolie* as ideal labour for tea gardens, was most explicitly expressed in the racialized sociology of labour, where the *coolie* stood for docility and capability for hard manual labour against the intractability and laziness of the native.³

But the *coolie* was said to have his/her own set of peculiarities. S/he was depicted to be perpetually entrapped in his self-sufficient village economy; resisted by caste and social taboos; and the remote Assam was said to fall beyond his mental and physical domain. Immobility and ignorance emanated from his very basic nature and condition of existence. To mobilise this immobile class of labourers, planters had to operate through the agency of 'labour contractors' who depended upon a class of 'coolie catchers'-the infamous *arkattis*, to induce this reluctant class of people to go to Assam. These *coolies* were initially brought from their native districts to Calcutta; from where they were despatched to Assam by steamer and Cachar by boat. The 'ignorant' *coolie* was however found susceptible to the guiles of the *arkattis*, and the uncertainties of a long and tortuous journey under extreme conditions of extreme insanitation.⁴

The Special Committee appointed by Government of Bengal in 1862 to enquire into the state of affairs, evoked similar sentiments, where the early operations of the *arkattis* to the tea gardens in Assam were described as a harrowing saga of deception, desertion and death. There was no doubt that *coolie* needed protection and

³ There was a strong collusion of material interests in the discursive strategies of the stereotype of the 'native' and the 'immigrant' *coolie*. See Chapter 1, for a more detailed analysis on the colonial racialized sociology of labour

⁴ Between December 1859 and November 1861, out of 2272 labourers transported for the Assam Company from Calcutta, 250 or 11% died enroute; and between April 1861 and February 1862, out of 2569 labourers as many as 135 died or drowned and 133 absconded. M.A.B Siddique, 'The Labour Market and the Growth of the Tea Industry in India: 1840-1900, *South Asia*, Vol. XVIII, and No. 1 (1995) pp.93-94

governmental intervention was deemed necessary. This becomes all the more interesting when the predominant common-sense of the time was the non-interference of state in matters of capital.

On the recommendations of the committee, Transport of Native Labourers Act III was passed in 1863. Recruiting and transit was licensed. Emigrants had to be registered before the Magistrate of the district, and placed on contract not exceeding five years to be executed in presence of the Superintendent of Emigration. By this legislation, described sometimes as the first labour legislation in an Indian organised industry, the recruitment and transit of *coolies* was brought under governmental vision and control.⁵

But what about the life of *coolies* within the gardens? Was he to be left completely at the disposal of the planters? Act VI of 1865 was premised on such anxieties where wages were fixed, contract reduced to three years and “protectors” of labourers appointed and empowered to cancel contracts under circumstances which they deemed oppressive.⁶

These Acts with periodic revision, formed the broad comprehensive grid regulating the recruitment, transit and settlement of *coolie* under the ‘benevolent’ protection of the government. A planter describing the degree of ‘protection’ offered to the *coolie* by the government writes:

From the moment the simple ryot evinced the slightest inclination to leave his country and subject himself to the tender mercies of the brutal planter, he has been taken possession of by a benevolent government, hedged about by Acts and laws and regulations and tabulated forms, the object of their tender solicitude. His clothing and diet have been legislated for, and all his motions

⁵ *Report of the Royal Commission of Labour in India* (Calcutta, 1931, reprint 1987)

⁶ Wages were fixed as Rs. 5 a month for a man, Rs. 4 a month for woman and Rs. 3 a month for child. But Act II of 1870 omitted all mention of minimum wage, which was again introduced by the 1882 legislation. *The Report of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee*, 1906.

regulated by Act of Bengal Council; to him the powerful protector pays annual visits to give heed to his little complaints and guard him from all harm.⁷

But, at same time, it was argued that as the *coolie* was not immigrating voluntarily and the planter was spending a 'fortune' to recruit him, it is only natural for him to expect value for his money. Contract was seen as a way out. *Coolies* were obliged to work for a specific period of time for a particular employer in return for the wages and other provisions provided.⁸ But this was to be no ordinary civil contract, having strict penal provisions. It was argued that the 'modern' notion of contract was incomprehensible to the 'primitive' *coolie* and s/he had to be deterred by strong penal provisions with small doses of coercion and violence –a language that they best understood.⁹ This stereotype of the ignorant *coolie* at a total loss in controlling his life and labour and requiring protection had strong material interests at work. The plantation regime where profits were alienated from a skewed labour market and intensified labour process was rationalised on such otherised/primitive notions of the native labour. 'Civilisation' ironically had to draw upon primitiveness as the justification of the exceptional.

The 'legal' rights power to private arrest bestowed to the planters by the Act VI of 1865 for the 'absconding' *coolie* justified in the words of a Chief Commissioner as 'something more for the cost he [the planter] incurs, the inferior article he has to

⁷ Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch, B Proceedings, Nos 7-8, January 1881, NAI.

⁸ M.R. Anderson, *Work Construed: Ideological Origins of Labour Law in British India to 1918* in Peter Robb (ed.) *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India* (New Delhi, 1993).

⁹ That the *coolie* worked on a primitive, natural notion of time was most clearly revealed in the shift of governmental policy of determination of wages from time to task. 1865 Act fixed a minimum wage for the *coolie* subject to the completion of 9 hour daily and 6 days work in a week. But the Act I of 1882 made the payment of wage subject to the completion of a daily task.

put up with, and the consequent risks he runs in losing by death or desertion the *coolie* he has paid for.'¹⁰

The rights to private arrest has been argued to have inaugurated the system of indenture or the penal-contract system in Assam, conditioning the operations of the labour market and nature of the labour process. Depression and stagnancy of wages, coercion and physical torture at the workplace and extremely authoritarian systems of control were said to be inherent to the system.¹¹

Indenture, as a system regulating the relationship between 'labour and capital' has been a subject of historical enquiry and interest. Hugh Tinker's seminal work has interested a whole range of literature locating it as a 'new form of slavery'.¹² It has been argued that in the wake of the abolition of the system of slavery and problems of supply of labour to the colonial plantations, there was a collusion between the capitalist and colonial interests to devise a system akin to it. Not only was the labour procured under active patronage of the colonial state, using corrupt means and practices, but the labour process was also characterised by the unrestrained powers bestowed on the planters through legislative enactments.

Revisionists have generally argued along the 'escape route theory'-that it opened up possibilities for the low-caste landless labourers and small peasants from

¹⁰ Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch, A Proceedings, Nos 3-11, April 1893, NAI.

¹¹ RP Behal, *Some aspects of the Growth of the Tea Plantation Labour Force and Labour Movements in Assam Valley Districts*, unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru university, 1983; Rana P. Behal and Prabhu P. Mohapatra, 'Tea and Money versus Human Life': The Rise and Fall of the Indenture System in the Assam Tea Plantations 1840-1908 in *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, special edition, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1992, 19(3&4). Sanat Kumar Bose, *Capital and Labour in the Indian Tea Industry*, (Bombay, AITUC, 1954)

¹² Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery* (London, 1974)

their wretched existence in the overpopulated native districts.¹³ Some recent studies have emphasised the fact that mobilisation of the workforce and settlement in the plantations did not necessarily entail deception, coercion and oppression; at some levels the *coolie* out of the prolonged exposure and 'knowledge' of the system made voluntary and informed choices.¹⁴

However, regardless of the revisionist assaults, the element of 'unfreedom' characterised the labour markets and labour processes of the indenture system.¹⁵ Unfree labour regimes, as imposed upon by the penal contracts, though contradictory to the notion of freedom of wage labour is not by implication 'precapitalist', arising under specific conditions of colonial imperialism.¹⁶ Nonetheless, the feature of

¹³ PC Emmer(ed.), *Colonialism and Migration: Indentured Labour Before and after Slavery* (Dordrecht, 1986)

¹⁴ Marina Carter, Strategies of Labour Mobilisation in Colonial India: The recruitment of Indentured Workers for Mauritius in *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, special edition, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1992, 19(3&4).

¹⁵ For an excellent discussion on Unfreedom and various processes of deproletarianisation refer to the Tom Brass and Bernstein's introduction of *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, special edition, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1992, 19(3&4). Also see Tom Brass, Some Observations on Unfree Labour, Capitalist Restructuring, and Deproletarianization, *International Review Of Social History*, 1994, 39; J Mohan Rao, Freedom, equality, Property and Bentham: The Debate over Unfree Labour, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1999(27, 1) and Paul E Baak, About Enslaved Ex-Slaves, Uncaptured Contract *Coolie* and Unfreed Freedman: Some notes about 'Free' and 'Unfree' Labour in the context of Plantation Development in Southwest India, Early 16th – mid 1990s, *Modern Asian Studies*, 1999 (33,1).

¹⁶ Brass and Bernstein explain the assaults by capital on the freedom of wage labour i.e. the ability of workers to enter and withdraw from particular labour markets and labour processes, as a general feature of capitalism. This is process of Deproletarianisation, as they call it, refute the assumptions of Dipesh Chakrabarty who argues that capital, the production relations of a bourgeois society, necessarily implies the presence of formal freedom for the labour and so long as 'pre-capitalist', 'particularistic' ties made up and typify the relations of production, as Marx understood was not yet capital. Colonial imperialism, according to Brass & Bernstein, provides capital with reasons and opportunities for waging this particular kind of class struggle against labour. Introduction of *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, special edition, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1992, 19(3&4). Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History* (Princeton, 1989) ,reprint (Delhi,1996).

unfreedom can neither be overemphasised nor be taken as the destined nature of capital-labour relation under conditions of colonial capitalism.

Focussing on the Assam tea plantations, especially the valley of Surma, I would like to qualify the picture and make an attempt to show the lack of fit between 'theory' and 'practice'. That even in its heydays, the Assam Emigration Acts, encoding the harsh penal-contract system could not entirely dislodge the application of Workmen's Breach of Contract Act, the Act XIII of 1859 to a large number of *coolies*. The Act was extended to the labour districts, except Sylhet, in the sixties, before the first of the *coolie* Acts were passed.¹⁷ It was predominantly used to reengage time expired and local *coolies*, but gradually found an almost general acceptance among the labour force in the Surma valley. By the year 1904-05, less than 2% of the *coolie* in the valley were under the Assam Emigrant Act, contracted mostly under the Act XIII.¹⁸

The 'number' has significance beyond its strict statistical value- that the *coolie* could not always be 'Act-ed' upon, as claimed by the wider stereotypes and relationships of power in which s/he was embedded. That the *coolies* at times were less 'ignorant' of the situation and were capable of making choices and bargained for better conditions of life and work. But this point cannot be overstated because the legal status of *coolie* as 'Non Act' was not always acts of 'resistance'- a resultant of a "conscious" struggle on the part of workers for a more 'freer' status. The "freedom" at times was more relative than absolute.¹⁹

¹⁷ It was extended to the districts of Cachar, Lakhimpur and Sibsagar by Bengal Notification dated 2nd January 1863 and to Kamrup, Darrang, and Nowgong by Bengal notification dated 16th May 1864. Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch, B Proceedings, 13th May, 1875, NAI.

¹⁸ *The Report of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee*, 1906.

¹⁹ I will use the term Act coolie to describe the coolies under Assam emigrant Act and Non Act to define *coolie* under Act XIII, though it was also meant to include *coolie* under section 492 of IPC and 'free immigrants'

Generally, my attempt, would try to overcome this binary of 'freedom-unfreedom' and specific meanings that it conveys; and show how the strategies of control drew upon various stereotypes, discourses and practices, operating in a terrain which was both dynamic and contested. Also the homogeneity of the 'capitalist class' and its collusive drives with the state in the classic 'Planter-Raj', will be put to test, to show how at times the concerns and interests did not necessarily converge, but very overtly contradicted each other.

Coolie Acts and Act XIII coolies

But before anything, we need to ask the question as to how Act XIII was different from the *coolie acts*? Was in any sense the *coolie* more 'free'?

The application of Act XIII did not imply the freedom of *coolie* in the strict theoretical sense. The *coolies* were 'indentured' to their employers by signing a contract after taking advances in the form of bonus amount. Breach of the contract could invite the intervention of the magistrate, who was empowered to order the person having taken advance to complete the contract, and to punish him/her with imprisonment if s/he declined to carry out this order.²⁰ The planters prolifically used the legislation to 'bind' the time-expired *coolie* and retard the growth of an 'incipient' labour market. Also, the original premise of introducing the Act was itself to curb the 'striking tendencies' of the local Kachari labour, working in the Company's

²⁰ Patrick Peebles in the book, "*The Plantation Tamils of Ceylon* explores a similar process of the application of criminal breach of contract laws in Ceylon for Indian labourers who were "free" or not under indenture. In fact the Government of Ceylon passed a series of laws intended to prevent them from returning to India. The laws were based on British "Master and servant" laws, which were no longer enforced in England and originated in the 14th Century as a means of dealing with the labour shortages caused by the Black Death. (Communicated personally by the author.)

gardens.²¹ This position is made explicit in the Chief Commissioner Keatinge's address to the planters reported in the *Englishman* dated 30th June 1874:

You tell me, gentlemen [the planters], that you foresee that you may have difficulties to contend with in consequence of the removal of time-expired *coolies* from the restraints as well as from the special protection afforded by the Emigration act. I do not myself think you have much to fear on this score...I need hardly remind you that the freer the labourer is the greater the difficulty of adjusting his claim is. Free labour is causing the same complications in England as it must one day cause here. I have good hope that your industry may weather the storm. But I may remind you that you have the expedient of making contracts under advances with your labourers, and thus bringing them within the scope of Act XIII of 1859.

But being a general contractual Act not framed particularly for the Assam plantations, the power and authority of the authorities were circumscribed and deeply ambiguous vis-à-vis the Assam Emigration Acts.²² The planters could neither exercise the rights to private arrest nor force the *coolie* to stay for a long period of time under oppressive circumstances, as the contracts were generally for a period of not more than a year. Also imprisonment for 'breach' of the contract had to be established by

²¹ KK Sircar, *Labour and Management: First Twenty Years of Assam Company Limited (1839-59)*, *EPW*, Vol XXI, No. 22, 31st May, 1986. Amalendu Guha, *Formation of a Working Class in Assam Plantations: A Study in Retrospect* in North East India Council for Social Science Research (ed.), *Problems of tea industry in North East India*, (Calcutta, 1981). p.78. See footnote 1 of Chapter III for more details.

²² The Act was initially passed at the instance of the Master Wardens and Members of the Calcutta trades association, who memorialised Government setting forth the losses they sustained owing to breaches of contract or desertion of service by workmen or servants, and asking that summary punishment and summary remedies should be provided by application to a Magistrate. The scope of the Act was first limited to the Presidency Towns, but at the instance of the Government of Madras a provision was inserted in the Bill authorising the Governor General or the Executive Government of any Presidency or place to extend the act to any place within their respective jurisdiction. The Act empowered a magistrate to order a man who had taken an advance of money on account of work to be done by him, to complete his contract, and to punish him with imprisonment if he declined to carry out this order. See Appendix I for a reproduction of the Act XIII.

no less an authority than the magistrate, who had to ascertain the act to be 'wilful'. Arrest automatically entailed its termination while the *coolie* under the Emigration Acts had the period of conviction added to their terms of contract.

From the very outset, however, grave doubts were expressed regarding the appropriateness of the Act XIII, to the engagement of tea-garden labour, when special 'coolie acts' had already been framed for the purpose. Also, the nature of *coolie* work being classified as 'unskilled', was said to fall outside the purview of the Act. Most crucially the officials believed that the absence of the "protective clauses" exposed the *coolie* to the guile of the wily *arkatti* and the brutality of the planter, defeating the whole purpose of the act for *coolies*.²³

In the 1880s, the Chief Commissioner of the province Charles Elliot made a proposal to withdraw the Act from the province. Such anxieties and concerns informed the Government of India despatch on the subject, dated 17th July 1886, to the Secretary of State. The despatch read:

...Provisions (in Act XIII) were not less severe than those which attach to a contract under Act I, while they fall very much short of that act in the safeguards which they furnish for the due understanding and execution of his engagement by the labourer, and in their omission to require from the employer any compensatory advantages in the provision of cheap and suitable food, good lodging, maintenance when sick and reasonable wages, such as secured to the labourer by the Labour Emigration Act.²⁴

The Secretary of State concurred with the Home Government about the doubtful legality of the application of Act XIII to tea *coolies* and welcomed the proposal of the

²³ Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch, A Proceedings, Nos 18-20, May 1875, NAI.

²⁴ *The Report of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee*, 1906.

Home government to consult the Chief Commissioner of province in taking steps for its repeal.²⁵

But in an surprising volte-face, the Home government, in a despatch dated 5th October 1891 to the Secretary of State, came round to the view that though being objectionable only in principle, the Act had been “harmless and even beneficial” in its actual operation. A case was made of it being employed, not as an instrument for exacting unreasonable contracts, but as a “more lenient and popular penal contract law, from the labourer’s point of view, than the Act I of 1882.” It was seen as serving the long avowed objective of the government of being a “transitional stage between strict penal contracts and a system of civil contract under the ordinary law”, for the tea plantations of Assam.²⁶

What made the government take such a such a favourable opinion now; when only a few years back it was most determined to do away with what it described as a “harsher Act than Act I.”? Apparently this striking change in the official perception was conditioned to a large extent by the enquiries of the successive Chief Commissioners of the province, who were quite appreciative of its “positive” value, favouring its retention.

One of Chief Commissioners, W.E. Ward, had gone to the extent of describing the *coolie* under Act (Assam Emigration Act) as practically a ‘slave’, who had no choice but to serve out his/her terms of contract regardless of the conditions of the garden or the treatment meted out to him/her by the planter. Act XIII *coolie*, in contrast, was seen to have this ‘freedom’ of leaving the gardens if treated badly by the planters. The planters were said have no “satisfaction” in putting them behind bars for

²⁵ In a letter dated 4th November 1886 from the Secretary of State for India to Government of India., Working of Inland Emigration Act, 1882.

²⁶ *The Report of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee*, 1906

three months (the punishment for breach of contract), after which the *coolie* could legally refuse to return to the garden.²⁷

Again, Chief Commissioner Quinton in a special report for the working of Act I in the years 1886-89 drawing a long list of the “benefits”, argued that there were less deaths, less desertions, less judicial punishment among Act XIII *coolie*, and also the wages earned were higher than their Act I counterparts. He was quite unequivocal in his statement that

It [Act XIII] places the *coolie* in a position of considerably greater independence and enables him to exact his own terms more easily than his fellow labourer bound by contract under Act I of 1882.²⁸

Now, why would officials as highly ranked as the Chief Commissioners describe an Act without protective clauses as stimulating a freer, well-paid workforce; while the specially carved out “official” Emigration Act, with all the elaborate provisions backed by an efficient official machinery, as to perpetuating slavery!

One of the striking features that came out through these enquiries was that the Act XIII was the more “preferred” system of engagement of *coolie* in Surma valley. The special report on Working of Act I of 1882, particularly observed the significant impetus Act XIII has had on the free and unassisted immigration into Surma valley; holding out to the planter come security ‘above the ordinary law’ for the expenses incurred, but at the same time putting the *coolie* in a far better bargaining position. The district level officials of the valley had always expressed this opinion in their annual labour reports, that the Act was very “popular” both among planters and *coolie* and any moves to take them away would meet with the sharpest opposition.

²⁷ Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration A, 1-5/26/459, 1888, NAI.

²⁸ *Special Report on the Working of Act I of 1882 in The Province of Assam during the years 1886-1889* p.156

Such concerns were confirmed when the resolutions passed in a public meeting of Cachar tea planters, held in Silchar in May 1887, most emphatically protested against the anticipated repeal of Act XIII. The Chairman of Indian Tea Association, Aitchinson addressing the gathering attacked the moves of government to interfere with Act XIII, arguing that it suited the employer and the employed much better than Act I.²⁹

The most obvious irony of the entire state of affairs was that, here, the planters were craving for the retention of an ambiguous Act, which neither gave the employer the “legal” right to private arrest nor the luxury of a long-term contract. Didn’t the use of a more stringent penal-contract make more “sense”- where the labour process could have been intensified by economic and extra-economic means and the “labourer” more effectively and efficiently ‘deproletarianised’?

The planters of Surma Valley would have been seen to be doing the obvious when, between 1882 and 1885, they sought to increase the labour serving under the Emigrant Act, resulting in a rise from 15% to 34% of the total workforce. Many time-expired labourers as well as those serving under Act XIII were put under the 1882 Act.³⁰ However from 1885-86, the number of *coolies* serving under the Act steadily declined, amounting to only 3% of the workforce over the 1892-1901 period. Much of the official explanation, for this “decision” on the part of managers and planters was their realisation of complications and expenses arising out of Act recruiting. It was said to cost more because of the delays and formalities required. Also the obligation to attend certain fixed places were said to offer the *coolies* the opportunity to be

²⁹ *Indian Tea Association Report 1888*, pp.64-70.

³⁰ About 1,900 *coolie* under the Act were imported in the district of Sylhet in 1885. Out of these 1,150 went to the subdivision of South Sylhet, where the South Sylhet Tea Company was opening out their new gardens. *Annual report on the Labour Immigration in Assam, 1886*.

“enticed” away by contractors or other recruiters.³¹ These explanations sound inadequate, and would be equally applicable to the other valley of Assam, where the recruitment under the Act during the 1886-88, period was as high as 88%.³²

This brings into clear relief, the specific geographical and social terrain of the Surma valley, which attracted certain “natural” streams of labour that the valley of Assam was perpetually deprived of. The superior accessibility and networks of communication of the valley opened space for certain “informal” modes of labour recruitment. Also a fair amount of agriculture and human concentration in the valley meant that there were other inducements for the migrant in taking a decision to move into these regions. Managers of the valley, especially in the Sylhet district, had over a period of time found a fair degree of success in procuring *coolie* by sending a number of *sardars* every year to their native districts. The *sardars* who received certain advances; recruited through their social and familial networks and arranging for their conveyance to the gardens without any governmental interference and outside the provisions of the Act. These *coolies* generally contracted themselves under the Act XIII in the gardens, receiving the ‘bonus’ amount on signing the contract. The Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet and the Sub-divisional officer of South Sylhet even talked of cases where *coolie* in the Chargola valley region of Sylhet, recruited through *sardars* refunding the cost of their importation out of their wages or otherwise, and staying on a purely free basis. The Subdivisional officer of Karimganj estimated that out of 19,000 *coolie* in his subdivision, around 4,000 were entirely free from any kind of contract and that in two large concerns in the Chargola valley, the whole labour population was entirely free.³³

³¹ *Special Report on the Working of Act I of 1882 in The Province of Assam during the years 1886-1889* p.13.

³² *ibid.* p.21.

³³ *Special Report on the Working of Act I of 1882 in The Province of Assam during the years 1886-1889* pp.12, 102-03

The *coolie* in this advantageous circumstance could not have been forced into entering a stringent law. The attempts were met with a 'resistance' wherein there was a perceptible rise in the number of desertions; overall some 10% of workers absconded and in the district of Sylhet, 15% of Act labour escaped during the 1882-1885 period.³⁴ Describing the increase in desertion of *coolie* a contemporary official of the district remarked, 'that it is not at all a matter of regret'. It shows that 'tea garden *coolie* have learnt to sell their labour power in the most profitable market, and are not mere *adscripti glebae* of the garden for which they were imported'.³⁵ This bears out the "bargaining" capabilities of the labouring population in a region that was geographically well connected and where migration was happening through the garden *sardars* operating outside the legal institutional framework, mobilising ties of family and local society and networks of kinship. Also, in the ability of the *coolie* to 'desert' it is important to appreciate differences in terrain of the two valleys. In the jungle tracts of the Assam valley with the large isolated gardens, the *coolie* was more likely to be "hunted" down, than in the comparatively crowded district of Sylhet and Cachar. The Deputy Commissioners of both, Sylhet and Cachar considered that there was very little difficulty in a *coolie* getting away if he wanted to.³⁶ The *arkatti* batches of Assam valley were not necessarily from the same social/familial background being a haphazard and random assortment of individuals. Here the Act with its powers of private arrest, was viewed as extremely necessary tool to deter them to desert and bind them to the plantations, even if that meant a higher price. It

³⁴ Rana P. Behal and Prabhu P. Mohapatra, 'Tea and Money versus Human Life': The Rise and Fall of the Indenture System in the Assam Tea Plantations 1840-1908, in *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, special edition, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1992, 19(3&4). p. 163

³⁵ The Subdivisional officer of Karimganj subdivision cited in the *Annual report on the Labour Immigration in Assam, 1883*.

³⁶ *Annual report on the Labour Immigration in Assam, 1886*

was not out of place for the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur in Assam valley to observe among managers to employ Act I to bachelors and unsettled people, while family men and women were placed under Act XIII.³⁷

Stevenson, the DC of Sylhet giving reasons for the dislike of the Act in his district argued that the *coolie* had a “decided preference” for Act XIII. They detested the inspection and verification to which they were subjected to as required by the Act. Along with this, the prosecutions under Act were more numerous with the powers to private arrest of deserting *coolies*. The *coolie* were said to have had a vague idea that under the Act they may be let in for a longer term of service than they bargained for and also if they contracted under Act XIII, they would receive an advance.³⁸

Colonial policy was therefore never working in abstraction and on the whims and fancies of the planters and officials but was formulated out of a continuous process of negotiation and contestation. It also reveals that perceptions and stereotypes were subject to persistent challenges and resistance.

Acting on Non-Acts: State and Act XIII coolies

But did this consent to the application of Act XIII to the *coolies* imply that the state had done away with the stereotype of the ‘ignorant’ *coolie* requiring their protection? Did it mean that the planters did not have to adhere to the norms relating to *coolie* life and condition and their ‘undivided sovereignty’ was ‘comparable to that which a strong *zemindar* has over his *ryots* in backward parts of Bengal’?³⁹

A very important part of governmental supervision and inspection in the tea gardens was return of statistics of *coolie* employed, which formed the basis of the

³⁷ *Special Report on the Working of Act I of 1882 in The Province of Assam during the years 1886-1889*, p.109.

³⁸ *Annual report on the Labour Immigration in Assam, 1886*

³⁹ *The Report of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1906* p. 69-75

immigration and labour reports. Such reports illustrated the well-being among the various 'classes of labour' employed and policy decisions were taken based on them. Fairly detailed information regarding *coolie* under Act were ascertained on a periodical basis. 'Non Act' *coolie* did not fall in the purview of such statistical drives strictly going by the provisions of law. In 1870s there was a demand from the central government that law be amended so that all employers be required to furnish statistics of labourers on their gardens regardless of being under the Act or not. It was argued that Act XIII operated with still 'greater stringency against the labourer than the provisions of Act VII, being devoid of any particular clauses which the latter included'. It was therefore more necessary to provide, in the case of labourers subject to Act XIII, 'such degree of protection at least as statistics may furnish in indicating where the interference of the state may be required.'⁴⁰ The claims of 'knowledge' by the state could not live upto the legal distinction of the *coolie* and was informed by the general perceptions of the *coolie* requiring governmental protection in conditions, which demanded proactive gestures.

A suggestion was made to the Chief Commissioner that if necessary, a Regulation should be passed making returns compulsory from gardens where no labourers under the Act are employed. Chief Commissioner was inclined to agree that section 100 to 103 of the Act already met the difficulty. It made it mandatory to the managers to furnish half-yearly returns of the number of all labourers employed together with the returns of sickness and mortality. The refusal was to be met with a fine. However the problem arose in the definition of 'employer' and 'labourer'. 'Labourer' as defined by the *Coolie* Act was any emigrant who has been conveyed to a labour district under certain Bengal acts. Therefore a person employing time-expired *coolie*, or *coolie* not engaged under any of these Acts, would not be an 'employer' in the legal sense. Non Act *coolie* going by the definition were not 'labourers' and the managers putting them to work were not 'employers'. There was a call for this

⁴⁰ Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch, A Proceedings, Nos 14-15, Sept. 1879.

“rectification” whenever Act VII of 1873 was to be amended because the ‘basis of governmental interference was the assumption that in all transactions touched by law, the *coolie* is the weaker party and needs special protection.’

From the late 1880s, a broader definition of labourer was employed by the state with respect to tea *coolies* of Assam. In the case of one Mr. William Aitchinson, a tea planter of Cachar, a fine was imposed on him by the Deputy Commissioner for his refusal to submit returns of ‘Non-Act labourers’. Mr Aitchinson argued that the government did not compensate for the trouble and expenses for making returns of free labourers, ‘but needlessly interferes and does harm amongst the labour force of tea gardens’. The point of contention was whether the Non-Act *coolie* were to be supervised and inspected as elicited in the *coolie* acts. It was now argued that labourer is not used in the Act merely with reference to emigrant natives of India, imported into a labour district under the Act but included non-acts as well.⁴¹

The application of this classificatory schema of healthy and unhealthy gardens again brought to question the state’s right to exercise its legal procedures and obligations over Non-Act *coolie* and therefore spawned a lot of controversy. One, Denis Fitzpatrick dwelling on the subject of ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’ gardens came to the conclusion that if the mortality in a garden exceeded seven per cent, was to be declared as unhealthy.⁴² The Chief Commissioner of Assam was of the opinion that the Government would act illegally if it took action under section 132, and closed a garden, taking into consideration the mortality of Non-act *coolie* in arriving at the mortality figures of the individual gardens. The central government refuting this position argued that they would treat as unhealthy, for purposes of report and inspections, all gardens in which the mortality among the total labouring population,

⁴¹ *Indian Tea Association Report 1888*, pp.29-35

⁴² Previous to passing of Act II of 1870, when serious sickness occurred in a garden, the local officer was delegated the power to undertake a on the spot enquiry but was not vested with powers to declare it as unfit for human habitation. Section 119 of Act VII of 1870 vested such powers to the inspecting authorities

or among the Act or Non-Act population taken separately exceeds 7%. It argued that “[the] Act recognises a general responsibility on the part of Government and it’s officers to afford protection under the ordinary law to all persons employed on estates.”⁴³

Coolie catchers and sardari coolies

Until the passing of Act II of 1870, the *sardari* system had no legal sanction and the recruitment was organised and conducted by contractors based in Calcutta. The contractors generally operated through the *arkattis* who conducted their recruiting operations in market places and *hats* in a village or a group of villages inducing people to go to Assam. This system is argued to have operated in an organised cartel like arrangement depriving ‘freedom’ to the *coolies* to bargain terms in the labour market.⁴⁴

Act II recognised two classes of *sardar*, those authorised to recruit more than twenty labourers and those not so authorised. The former had to follow all the procedures of licensed contractors while the latter could put their *coolie* on contract in the district of recruitment or in Calcutta and could take them to gardens by what route they preferred. Act II of 1873, labourers could be brought to Assam and engaged on a one-year contract. The Non-Act *sardari* system was practised in the valley where the

⁴³ Revenue A, 163-67, 1893, ASA. The inspection report of the Salgai tea garden for the year 1895 brought this issue to the forefront. Salgai was a tea garden located in the Karimganj subdivision of Sylhet district with a resident *coolie* population of roughly 700, entirely outside the Act. The inspection reports of June and December 1895 revealed that the mortality was consistently around 14%, which the Government of Assam believed endorsed by the position taken by Government of India, was a satisfactory ground within the terms of section 492 of the IPC and section 2 of Act XIII, for refusal of a non-Act *coolie* to fulfil his contract for excessive unhealthiness. Revenue A, 1-5, April 1896, ASA

⁴⁴ Suranjan Chatterjee and Ratan DasGupta, Tea Labour in Assam: Recruitment and Government policy, 1840-80, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Special number, November, 1981, pp.1863-1867. Ranajit Dasgupta, Structure of the Labour in Colonial India, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Special number, November, 1981, pp.1781-1803.

sardars. In the year 1878, an association was formed in Calcutta by most of the leading tea firms and called the Tea District Labour Supply Association (TDLSA). Agencies were established in the principal recruiting districts, through which most of the *sardari* recruitment for the tea gardens was conducted. The *sardari* method was common in Assam valley in which *sardars* were given certificates in lieu of security given in money or cattle. They then received a small advance and sent to the managing agents in Calcutta, who forwarded them to a local agent in the recruiting district who may either be a local agent working under the Act or merely the representative of the Calcutta agent. The mixed *sardari* system under which *sardars* were consigned to the care of contractors also prevailed to a certain extent.

In the Surma valley the *sardars* were active even before the system was given the legal status and worked independently without any supervision. Assam valley due to its remoteness was not very successful in terms of 'unassisted *sardari*' system, which was almost peculiar to Surma valley districts and the *coolies* were generally recruited through professional contractors.⁴⁵ The comparatively short and easy journey to the valley of Surma was also crucial. The *sardars* brought *coolies* from home by train till Goalundo—a port at the confluence of the Brahmaputra and the Ganges situated in the Bengal district of Faridpur. Here the immigrants were not registered as those from Assam valley were registered in Dhubri, and were carried on their forward journey on the numerous unlicensed country boats plying on the river.

Act I of 1882 and the maladies of 'free' recruitment

It is in this context that the legislation of 1882 clearly revealed the contradictory pressures and perceptions at work with respect to the recruitment and settlement of

⁴⁵ Though the managers in this valley preferred the *Sardari coolie* against the depot *coolie* of the *arkattis*, but they were unable to meet the requirements completely. The average number brought did not exceed five recruits per *sardar* in a recruiting season. Also the immense competition for labour in the valley meant that Act was indiscriminately used *Special Report on the Working of Act I of 1882 in The Province of Assam during the years 1886-1889*, pp.20 &.23.

coolies in the tea gardens of Assam. The tea pressure groups pushed forward their demands for a fresh legislation premised on two interrelated counts. That the recruitment process be 'liberalised' with a minimal governmental intervention and the labour process to be 'intensified' by harsher and longer penal-contracts. These changes have been located in the wider global export economy in which the Indian tea was competing.⁴⁶

Government responded favourably by increasing the length of the contract from three to five years. The most remarkable feature was the introduction of 'free emigration' authorising execution of contracts in tea districts. Goalpara was made a labour district and Acts could be executed in Dhubri.

Dhubri system was soon beset with scandals and controversies. Local level officials especially brought to notice that instead of stimulating a genuine 'free' emigration, what one found was that *sardars* and contractors were bringing in their recruits as free emigrants evading the provisions of law.⁴⁷ The point made was that without the operations of the supervisions and controls of the Emigrant Act, the system was doomed to be plagued with corruption and abuses. Talking about the "two distinct abuses" of the working of Act I, a contemporary official writes

[first] the conveyance of labourers to Assam without any assurance that they are really willing to emigrate on terms they have ultimately to accept, and their passage through Bengal in large bodies without sanitary control. Each of these is an immediate and continuing evil, the first furnishing the occasion for

⁴⁶ A very representative of these moves could be located in the growing contribution of Indian tea to the British imports. In 1866, 96% of tea came from China and 4% from India. In 1886, Chinese supplied 59% and India 38%. In 1903, Indian exports accounted for 59% and Chinese 10%, which was less than Ceylon tea, which accounted for 31%. Edward Gait, *A History of Assam* (Guwahati, 1924, reprint 2001).p.409.

⁴⁷ *Annual report on the Labour Immigration in Assam, 1883.*

constant succession of complaints of the use of force and fraud, the second being the chronic cause of cholera.⁴⁸

Cases of misrepresentations, kidnapping and use of coercion in the operations of recruiters were brought to official notice. The native opinion, which had been an “active” participant to the debates leading to the passing of the Act I of 1882, saw this as the confirmation of their fears. They had vociferously argued that under an unregulated system the “ignorant *coolie*” would be easy meat for the *arkattis*, and therefore the government should not relinquish its obligations towards the *coolie* of Assam.⁴⁹

But the valley of Surma where the unassisted sardars mobilised along kinship, caste lines such cases of fraud constituted a minuscule amount if not entirely absent. The Special report on the working of Act I made this observation:

[that] a very large annual immigration outside the Act takes place from the NWP to the Surma valley, and to the best of Chief Commissioner’s knowledge no complaints have been made by the government of the NWP of the existence of malpractices to any serious extent in connection with this immigration, which is conducted almost entirely through the medium of non-certified garden *sirdars*.⁵⁰

However the ‘nationalist’ press of Calcutta in the 1880s and 90s was swamped by such reports of the deceptive and corrupt means that the *arkattis* were indulging in,

⁴⁸ P Nolan Secretary to Government of Bengal in a letter to Secretary Government of India, Revenue and Agriculture department, Emigration Branch A, Nos 26 of 1888 and 5 of 1889, February 1889. NAI.

⁴⁹ The ‘ignorant *coolie*’ becomes typical of the ‘voiceless millions’ which the Bengali intelligentsia of the late nineteenth century and the nationalist leaders of the twentieth century come to represent. Such descriptions are perpetually animated by the stereotyped figure of a weak, helpless *coolie* wronged by the native recruiters and planters. See Appendix II, for a representative memorial by the Indian Association in wake of the 1882 legislation.

⁵⁰ *Special Report on the Working of Act I of 1882 in The Province of Assam during the years 1886-1889*, pp.56-57.

to recruit the hapless *coolie*.⁵¹ There was particular interest in the numerous cases of abduction of women and minors, taken to the tea gardens of Assam. This became one of the major scandals of the 'free recruitment' system, resulting in a massive 'media-campaign' against it.⁵²

Assam tea garden was not a new avenue for the employment of women's labour and women constituted almost half of the workforce. The work in plantation had very neatly spelt out gender-specific domains; where the crucial labour-intensive task of plucking tea leaves was said to be quintessentially feminine, requiring nimble fingers. The preference for 'families' in gardens of Assam was most clearly premised on the payment of what was called as the 'family wage', ensuring not just a body of cheap reproducing workforce but also effecting controls over the labour and sexuality of the large number women *coolie* under the patriarchal structures of the family.⁵³

However, the possibilities of single, uprooted and rejected women finding their way to Assam under the free recruitment system fuelled into larger social anxieties about the norms of breakdown of the ideal family and the loss of patriarchal controls over women's labour and sexuality. The provincial administration was extremely concerned by the criticisms levelled against it, made evident from the Chief Commissioner's position explicated in an annual labour immigration report:

the increased facilities for emigration have led to *kidnapping* or fraudulent recruitment, and have loosened family and domestic ties, enabling wives and

⁵¹ Dwarkanath Ganguly, *Slavery in British Dominion* (Calcutta, 1972).

⁵² *Report of the Native Newspaper of Bengal, 1882-90*. Amalendu De, *The Plight of the Assam Tea Garden Coolie and the Reaction of the Bengali Intelligentsia* in S. Karomtemprel and B.D. Roy (ed.) *Tea Garden Labourers of North East India* (Shillong, 1990).

⁵³ Samita Sen, *Questions of Consent: Women's recruitment for Assam's Tea gardens, 1859-1900*, *Studies in History*, 2002, (18,2) and Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry* (Cambridge, 1999).

minors to *desert* their lawful guardians... [and] any such loosening of ties is to be regretted, but it is not easy to see how such emigration is to be prevented.⁵⁴

Special officers were deputed to investigate into cases in the labour districts and detailed reports were submitted. These reports documented several instances of kidnapping and misrepresentation but also talked about cases of, “wives who have quarrelled with their husbands, or women who led astray by an illicit passion, or young people who are discontented with parental rule, [who did] occasionally take advantage of the facilities offered by the emigration system.”⁵⁵

The Deputy Collector of Manbhum reported fifty-one cases of abduction of women from his district. Three of these ‘abducted women’ were found in a tea estate in South Sylhet. During the course of the enquiries by the Extra Assistant Commissioner of the district, they stated that they had entered into the agreement on their own free will and eventually did not return to their homes. The Deputy Commissioner of Singhbhum reported of six complaints regarding abduction of married women. In three cases the women were ‘recovered’, but no evidence could be procured against any person in connection with their abduction, and the women themselves insisted that they had ‘voluntarily left the protection of their husbands owing to bickering and disputes.’⁵⁶

JG Grant, the Superintendent of Emigration talking about the ambiguities in clearly defining cases as ‘abduction’ or ‘kidnapping says:

[that it is] Impossible to ascertain how many of the uninvestigated cases now put forward as instances of abduction would if enquired into turn out to be merely cases in which people have emigrated against the wishes of their relatives...again, the people of the recruiting districts, particularly those classes

⁵⁴ Chief Commissioner of Assam in the *Annual report on the Labour Immigration in Assam, 1884*.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Working of the Inland Emigration act for the year 1886*.

of landholders whose opinion is likely to influence the district officers, are violently opposed to any form of emigration, on the ground that it takes away from the district large number of the landless castes, and thus tends to raise the wages of agricultural labourers.⁵⁷

But with increasing criticisms from the missionaries, native intelligentsia and a wider public opinion the state could not have been just a mute spectator and tried to take into cognisance social mores and hierarchies while addressing to the concerns of the powerful planter lobbies.

The rising incidence of cholera was seen as another example of what the absence of state regulation could do. Cholera was always a major scourge of the immigrating *coolie* and sanitary regulations imposed from the earliest of the Emigrant Acts revealed the governmental desire to bring it under control.⁵⁸ But the official consent to free emigration was reported to create a situation where the sanitary provisions were eluded by the unscrupulous recruiters making their journey violently cholera prone. Apart from the concerns about the profitability of the industry being jeopardised by the high rates of mortality of the *coolie*, humanitarian issues and governmental responsibility towards the subject population were at stake.⁵⁹

The state's drive towards control and standardisation in the last decades of the century found a perfect *alibi* in the changing medical discourse on the disease. Charles De Renzy, the first sanitary Commissioner of Assam, challenged the

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Coolie* transit to Assam showed n high rates of mortality, which was six times more than what was observed in the case of *coolie*, bound for colonies. Ralph Sholomowitz and Lance Brennan, 'Mortality and migrant labour en route to Assam, 1863-1924', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 27,3,1990.

⁵⁹ *Sanitary Report for Assam for 1877.*

prevailing atmospheric and racial theories of the disease.⁶⁰ He empirically verified that the native population and immigrants subject to the same atmospheric condition showed differential rates of mortality from cholera. Also during epidemics on steamers, native crews of the steamers, who lived in the closest contact with the *coolie* hardly ever suffered from the disease.⁶¹

Emphasising on Snow's water-borne theory he demonstrated that the consumption of the contaminated river water by the *coolie*, was the causative agent of the disease. He went on to show the positive results in terms of lowered mortality among the *coolies* enroute Assam Valley plantation with a sustained supply of clean water in the steamers.⁶²

However the application of DeRenzy's proposals required a more interventionist role of the state in matters of sanitary standards and precautions. It became all the more difficult in the Surma valley because *coolies* "traditionally" being unassisted *sardari*, made their own arrangements of travel mostly on country boats. These journeys were shown to be time consuming and extremely hazardous showing high

⁶⁰ The atmospheric/ miasmatic theory of the disease explained it in terms of the vitiated atmosphere, conditioned by the local meteorological situation. Particular period of the year was said to be cholera prone and therefore a closed system of recruiting was demanded. Analysing the incidence of cholera in steamers carrying *coolie* from 1874 to 1878, Dr Richards in the *Inland emigration Report of Bengal, 1879*, showed a direct correlation with the number of *Junglis* from Chotanagpur on board. He argued that every instance in which the mortality from cholera has been large there has been a considerably larger proportion of *Junglee coolie* on board.' He talks about the death rate among them was 3.97 percent compared with 1.10 percent amongst other classes. He was particularly critical of the scale of food on steamers, which he believed was too "liberal" and the *Junglee coolie* were given to "gorging" themselves and 'become amenable to the cholera producing agent.'

⁶¹ DeRenzy was a persistent critic of Bryden's localist/ atmospheric theory of cholera and favoured Snow's waterborne theory. He was transferred to Assam for his convictions, which were not amenable to the sanitary authorities of the home government. He conducted his investigations on the tea *coolies* of Assam showing the fallacies of the miasmatic theories.

⁶² *Assam Sanitary report for the year 1878*.

rates of mortality from the disease. In 1883, for example the voyages on country boats from Goalundo to Cachar took on an average 32 days and a death ratio of 49 per mile. While on the river Brahmaputra, where steamers with pure water supply were involved in the transit of *coolie*, the mortality was significantly lower at 6.6 per mile.⁶³ Sometimes the entire journey from the major recruiting districts in the upper India to the tea gardens in the Surma valley were carried out on these country boats without any regulation or supervision. The boat voyage took nearly three months while the *coolie* “costed not more than Rs. 9 per head”.⁶⁴

The attempts to regulate the enforcement of safe drinking water in these cholera-prone boat journeys, had legal complications; as according to section 87 of Act I, these country boats as long as they carried less than twenty people needed no license and were not subject to any interference. Government’s attempts to discourage journeys by boats manifested in the introduction of a subsidised steamer service in 1885 between Narainganj and Silchar to enable *coolie* to make the journey to Silchar from Goalundo in maximum eight days.⁶⁵ But the cost effectiveness of boat journeys, and their general suitability to the process of recruitment could not ensure the success of such proposals.

Also *coolie* travelling by country boats rarely went through the “official” depots, making not just the sanitary supervision tentative but statistical returns highly superficial. The immigration report for the year 1886, while describing the depots to be a “success” in Assam valley says that it ‘to a great extent has failed in Surma valley.’ While in the valley of Assam, the arrival of steamer was notified to the officer in charge of the depot, who would immediately ensure that all *coolies* were examined

⁶³ *Annual report on the Labour Immigration in Assam, 1883 and Assam Sanitary Report for 1883.*

⁶⁴ *Annual report on the Labour Immigration in Assam, 1883.*

⁶⁵ *Annual report on the Labour Immigration in Assam, 1886*

and entered in his registers before they left for their respective gardens. In Surma valley the *coolies* travelling in small boats not following any particular schedule of arrival and departure often eluded the depot officials. Moreover, instead of them being landed at a depot or official ports of debarkations, *coolies* were often put on shore at the point, which the *sardar* felt was nearest to the garden. In Sylhet particularly, there were innumerable small rivers and *khals* (streams), which communicated with the various groups of gardens, and *coolies* travelling up these streams could not have been properly supervised. For example in the year 1881, only 506 people were returned as passing the station while the numbers shown by tea planters as imported were 1,855.⁶⁶ Again in the year 1885, out of the 9,412 *coolie* immigrating into Sylhet only 3,401 passed through one of the five depots in the district, while in Cachar only 4,578 out of 8,656 immigrants went through the depots. The figures of *coolie* passing the depots in Assam valley were around 90% of the total imported.⁶⁷

The provincial government proposed certain remedial measures to exercise better control over the situation for the Surma valley immigrants.⁶⁸ The role of the Superintendent of Emigration at Goalundo was proposed to be redefined on the lines of his colleague in Dhubri; bestowing him with greater powers to supervise the garden *sardar* recruits and free emigrants. There was a recommendation for the establishment of a river police under section 192 of Act 1 of 1882. The river police was delegated powers to monitor whether proper sanitary precautions are carried out on the boats, even on those carrying less than 20 passengers.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ *Annual report on the Labour Immigration in Assam, 1881.*

⁶⁷ *Annual report on the Labour Immigration in Assam, 1886*

⁶⁸ The Chief Commissioner Elliot's visit to the districts of Cachar and Sylhet in March- April 1883 brought this issue into the limelight.

⁶⁹ *Letter from E. Stack, Officiating Secretary to Chief Commissioner of Assam to Secretary Government of India. Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch, A Proceedings, October 1884, Nos 9-10, NAI.*

These proposed measures meant a straining of the law, which made a wide distinction between boats carrying over twenty passengers and less than twenty but the provincial government argued that it was to be 'carried out by an executive order, as a matter of sanitary precaution.'⁷⁰ Bengal government making objections to this proposal argued that the whole principle of the Act must undergo a comprehensive change if that detailed and systematic control over all boats containing emigrants were desired. Any exception to this they argued 'would be an interference by the executive in a manner wholly unwarranted by law with the liberty of individuals.'

Inland Emigrant's Health Act I [Bengal Council (BC)] of 1889 was crucial in bestowing the administrative machinery with the sanitary controls for free immigrants and gave the 'sanitary edge' to standardise, control and regulate the *coolie* transit. In a letter dated 5th February 1890, the Assam government sought permission of the Governor General in Council to the extension under section 5 of the scheduled districts Act XIV of 1874, of the Inland Emigrant's Health Act I (BC) of 1889 to Assam. This application was made as a result of the general enquiry into the working of Act I of 1882. The administration found itself unable to provide sanitary controls for Surma valley immigrants, as they were not authorised within the parameters of Act I to interfere with the *coolie* coming outside the Act. However they argued that the immigration though free was chiefly assisted immigration, and therefore could be controlled by provisions of Act I (BC) of 1889.⁷¹

⁷⁰ In 'extraordinary' circumstances as in cholera outbreak in the year 1888, the authorities realised their inadequacy in monitoring the Non act as no laws and rules applied to them. Orders were issued to the Commissioners of Burdawn, Rajashahye and Chotanagpur to "correct any gross sanitary defect, which may tend to spread the disease taking advantage of any municipal rules or provisions of the general law which may be applicable." Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch, A Proceeding, April 1888, Nos 1-3 1/2 . NAI.

⁷¹ Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch, A Proceedings, April 1890, Nos 23-24. NAI.

The private depots of Surma valley, which primarily catered to Non Acts, not being under the supervision of the medical or civil authorities, were now seen with scepticism and attempted to be brought under control.⁷² The Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet citing the case of Fenchuganj private depots argued that as both Act and free *coolies* passed through these depots, and therefore a consolidated notification under both the Acts i.e., Act I of 1882 and Act I (B.C.) of 1889 could be provided. This, he believed, would legitimise the interference of the authorities to ensure that sanitary regulation and precautions are carefully observed—a major cause of concern in the earlier state of affairs.

To obtain more accurate statistics of mortality on steamers in transit to the Surma valley, a suggestion was made for the introduction of embarkation registers. This was specifically put forward to obtain statistical information of *coolie* who were not covered by the Emigrant Act.⁷³

The last decade of the nineteenth century saw a more proactive role from the colonial state backed up by ‘medical advances’ in the form of cholera vaccine requiring individual inoculation, and also ‘s earching’ reports from officials.

In the 1890s, the provincial government of Assam deputed Surgeon Campbell to investigate the river routes, which the *coolies* took to come to Assam. Lieutenant Governor of Bengal also placed Surgeon-Captain Vaughan on special duty to inspect the sanitary arrangements of the emigrant routes to Assam. The investigations of these officials on the emigrant routes, which resulted in the publication of an elaborate report, lent weight to the view that the disease did not originate on the steamers but at some earlier stage of the journey. The Sanitary Commissioners of Assam had laboured this point in their annual reports in the 1880s, but now it found an “empirical” basis.

⁷² Letter no 233J-dated Sylhet, Nov 1897 from P.H. O'Brien, DC of Sylhet.to the Secty to the Chief Commissioner of Assam . Revenue A, May 1898, 6-15, ASA.

⁷³ Revenue A, 136-37, Aug 1898, ASA

This placed the onus on the civil and sanitary administration to maintain a close vigil on the immigrating *coolie* irrespective of their legal status to prevent the outbreak of the dreaded disease. The reports themselves called for more standardisation—that only port Goalundo be allowed for embarkation, and that the emigrants be allowed to proceed from the recruiting districts to Goalundo only by one route, viz., that via Naihati.⁷⁴ These measures were said to make the sanitary policing more comprehensive, than what was the case when several routes were allowed to operate.

The amplified traffic of *coolie* from Central Provinces in 1896-97 due to the famine conditions prevailing in these districts made these moves all the more justified. There were also demands of inoculation of a cholera vaccine which Haffkine, a bacteriologist, had shown to be very effective, before they embarked on the journey to Assam.⁷⁵

1901 Act and the control regime

The passing of a new legislation in 1901 was particularly concerned with control of recruitment, which it believed was grossly abused under the free-recruitment drive. The decoying of women, which in many ways epitomised the corruptions that had beset the system, and drew some of the sharpest attacks, were set to be “rectified”.

⁷⁴ *ITA Report* 1898, pp.102-123

⁷⁵ Haffkine was bacteriologist who had formulated a cholera vaccine, which was presented in 1892 at the Biological Society of Paris. However to assess its efficacy it had to be transferred from experimental laboratory procedures to a human population. The Indian government showed a positive response when he came to India in 1893 and gave him the green signal to conduct his experiments. Haffkine spent his first year in India travelling along the Ganges plain north-west of Delhi, but in the total absence of epidemic cholera along his route was unable to formulate any scientific conclusions. However, that opportunity came in Calcutta in 1894, when he inoculated 116 of 200 people in a suburb. He turned his attention to the tea gardens of Assam in the years 1894-95. He faced tremendous difficulties there; the inoculation produced a day reaction during which labour was impossible. In addition, the labourers formed a highly mobile population, unused to having their movements tracked, which made the collection of results extremely difficult. Nevertheless, Haffkine ultimately tested almost 20,000 subjects. A colleague's report on seven tea gardens showed that mortality among the uninoculated ranged from 22 to 45.4%, whereas the highest rate among the inoculated was about 2%. http://www.asmus.org/mbrsrc/archive/pdfs/530787_p366.pdf

Special provisions were made for the registration of single women to Assam reinforcing the patriarchal controls over the family and legalising the marginalisation of women's labour.⁷⁶

Section 34 (3) and (4) of the Act stated:

(3) Where any women is produced before a registering officer...the registering officer shall, after such inquiry as may be necessary to satisfy him of the identity of her husband or lawful guardian as the case may be...place on record in writing under his own signature that such husband or lawful guardian has consented to her entering a labour contract, and such record shall also be subscribed by the husband or lawful guardian with his signature.

(4) In the case of any women who is alleged to be a widow or an unmarried woman who is stated to have no lawful guardian living, the Registering officer shall, satisfy himself by the evidence of at least one witness that her husband is dead or that she has no lawful guardian, as the case may be, and shall record such evidence in writing under his own signature.⁷⁷

At the same time the action of recruiters were brought under the purview of state's knowledge and control. Under section 3 of the Act VI of 1901, the local government was empowered to close any area to recruitment except in accordance with the provisions of the Act for the control of licensed contractors and certified garden *sardars*. Section 90 of the Act specially dealt with the Non-Act *Sardari* system bringing it under greater regulation and supervision. The application of depot and transit rules designed to check abuses of the *arkatti* system of recruitment had a deterrent effect on the *sardari* recruitment. Free *Arkatti* recruiting was stopped for areas contributing over 80% of the Assam valley and 73% of Surma valley labour force. For four recruiting season free *sardari* recruiting was prohibited for areas

⁷⁶ Samita Sen, *Unsettling the Household: Act VI (of 1901) and the Regulation of Women Migrants in Colonial Bengal*, *International Review of Social History*, 1996, 41.

⁷⁷ *The Report of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee*, 1906.

contributing 32% of Assam valley and 44% of the Surma valley labour force. When the prohibitions was removed, the *sardars* had lost touch.⁷⁸ The average number of *coolie* recruited by *sardars* fell to as low as 1.8 in 1901 and 1.3 in 1902-03.⁷⁹ Table [3.1] clearly shows this fall in number of coolies going to the gardens of Assam in the wake of 1901 legislation.

[Table 3.1]⁸⁰

| YEAR | ASSAM VALLEY | SURMA VALLEY |
|-----------------|--------------|--------------|
| 1892-94 | 75,915 | 38,736 |
| 1895-97 | 106,157 | 77,883 |
| 1902/03-1904-05 | 46,371 | 10,647 |

It is clear from the figures that the valley of Surma was more deeply affected. The labour force in Sylhet district for example fell from 104,342 in 1901 to 79,397 in 1904. The fall in the Karimganj subdivision was about 30% to 24,126 by 1904.⁸¹

The planters and tea lobbies of the Surma valley grew extremely anxious of the changed state of affairs. F Sutterby, the manager of Hunganjia division in the district of Sylhet related before the enquiry committee of 1906:

I used to recruit through *sardars* upto 1897 in the NWP, but after that too many obstacles were put in their way. I refer to the plague inspection, etc...If I sent *sardars* again I would not send them to any agent; the *sardar* would go to his country and bring up his friends.⁸²

Cathcart, the manager of Amrail Tea Estate of Sylhet district made similar observations:

⁷⁸ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1906, p.217*

⁷⁹ *Note by Chief Commissioner of Assam in Rev A, 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA*

⁸⁰ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1906, p.217*

⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁸² *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1906, p.142*

I should like to see contractor's recruiting stopped in UP and only uncontrolled *sardari* recruiting allowed there. I believe that the Surma valley gardens could get a sufficient supply of labour in this way...Until Act VI came into force you could always get N-W labour though it was becoming increasingly difficult.⁸³

The report of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee concurred with these views:

Of recent years, however, recruitment through *sardars* has been singularly unsuccessful, while the spontaneous migration has practically ceased. The Surma Valley planters have attributed their want of success mainly to the working of Act VI. It must be borne in mind that Section 90 was extended to one of the chief recruiting grounds, the United Provinces only last year. Having been accustomed for so many years to free recruitment, it is not improbable that *sardars*, especially those of the better class, viewed the procedure under a controlled system with dislike. It is said that *sardars* now refuse to go down to recruit for they fear the numerous pitfalls by the way, and the garden managers complain of the restrictions on the movement of labourers who have returned to their country and wish to come back to the garden with their friends.⁸⁴

The end of penal-contract system in Surma Valley

By the turn of the century, the penal-contract system of Assam tea gardens was coming under a lot of flak from the native press. Cases of collisions now widely reported in the press, between the planter and *coolie*, were seen as an outcome of this 'legalised slave system'. The Home government under increased pressure and

⁸³ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1906*, p. 145.

⁸⁴ *The Report of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1906*.

criticism issued special instructions to assess the dimensions of the problem.⁸⁵ In 1899, on the basis of such reports enquired the Chief Commissioner of Assam as to the causes of friction and also to the possibility of suggesting a remedy. The Secretary to the Chief Commissioner in response argued that the issue has been “exaggerated” by the increased public attention drawn through the medium of public press; while in the earlier times it was only “officially” brought to the notice of Government of India, in the appropriate chapter in the Annual Report on Labour Immigration in Assam. He considered, if anything the increase of the strength of the labour, which had almost doubled in the last ten years, to be critical:

It can hardly be expected that, with such an enormous population of *absolutely uneducated, and in many cases, semi-savage labourers*, occasional instances of friction and collision with their employers should not occur.⁸⁶

The bottomline was that the case did not warrant any “corrective measures” but the authorities needed to maintain an attitude of perpetual vigilance.

However the 1900 labour report by Cotton was a strong departure from both the positions held by provincial government and the “optimistic” moods of the earlier labour reports. Cotton cited specific instances of low wages and state of indebtedness of *coolies* in the gardens. He showed the inefficacy of the garden inspections and the depressing effect of hard work on birth rate. In cases of friction between the managers and *coolie*, Cotton argued that the magistrates had often proven themselves for giving biased verdicts. He was very sceptical of the penal-contract system, recommending strong consideration for its withdrawal.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Cases of collision between Managers and *coolie* on tea gardens in Assam occurring previous to the year 1898 were not regularly reported. The order prescribing the report of such cases were issued in 1897. Home A, 86-87, Dec 1897, ASA.

⁸⁶ *Letter from the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, dated September 4th 1899.* Home A, 33-34, September 1899, ASA. Emphasis mine.

⁸⁷ *The Report of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1906.*

The Indian Tea association lodged a strong protest to the Government of India arguing that Cotton's case was not 'warranted by facts'. Government of India sympathising with Cotton's case admitted to the irregularities of the system but were not keen in undertaking any sweeping changes of the system.

However the allegations from men in high official position virtually opened a Pandora's box, where every instance of manager-*coolie* collision was seen with increased scepticism as a commentary on the system as a whole.

The riots in the tea gardens of Assam in 1903, provoked a fresh round of enquiries by the Home government.⁸⁸ Assam administration in response deputed J.C. Arbuthnott to make a comparative investigation of the systems upon which *coolies* were engaged and controlled by the management of tea-gardens, in the tea districts of Duars, Madras and Ceylon.⁸⁹ The most striking feature that Arbuthnott came across in these regions was that the recruiter—*sardar, maistry, or kangany* obtained his gang from villages with which he had personal connection, and that relationship continued on the garden. He blamed the 'breakdown of *sardari* system' to the operations of the Assam immigrant acts where the recruiter became the sole supplier of labour. He proposed that in light of the improved communication, Sylhet and Cachar be removed from labour districts to be worked out only by Act XIII.⁹⁰

Assam administration in light of such reports and in consultation with the Bengal government believed that the root cause of difficulty was the unpopularity of service in Assam was its 'peculiar' system, which has kept recruitment costs prohibitively high. The unpopularity was attributed to recruiting abuses, the system of direct management, and most of all the limitations of the *coolie's* freedom involved in the

⁸⁸ Rev A, 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA

⁸⁹ It is interesting to note that Arbuthnott was made the President of the Labour Enquiry Committee of 1921-22, constituted in the wake of 'troubles' in the tea gardens of Assam especially the exodus in Chargola.

⁹⁰ Rev A, 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA

penal-contract and the rights to private arrest. At the same time they highlighted the almost negligent use of the Act in the Surma valley districts and Kamrup.

[Table 3.2] ⁹¹

| DISTRICT | TOTAL ADULT LABOUR FORCE | ADULTS CONTRACTED UNDER ACT VI | PERCENTAGE OF THE TOTAL |
|-----------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Cachar | 71,573 | 896 | 1.2 |
| Sylhet | 82,785 | 1,503 | 1.8 |
| Kamrup | 2,243 | 77 | 3.4 |
| Darrang | 48,487 | 18,491 | 38.1 |
| Nowgong | 12,062 | 5,101 | 42.3 |
| Sibsagar | 89,704 | 27,559 | 30.7 |
| Lakhimpur | 94,043 | 39,651 | 42.1 |

In light of these observations, they proposed to withdraw from the operation of Act VI with exception of sections 122 and 123 relating to inspection and submission of returns, the districts of Sylhet and Cachar, and Kamrup and sections 195 and 196 codifying the rights to private arrest.⁹²

The proposal to withdraw the penal-contract system was not novel idea and the desirability of “exceptional legislation”, atleast in the Surma Valley were debated from the late 1870s. The Immigration Report of the province for 1878 observed that “free immigration” was largely in force in Sylhet, and to a less extent in Cachar and Kamrup. It drew the conclusion that ‘in the more accessible districts the time is rapidly arriving when the planters will not want any special protection beyond that which the ordinary rule of contract offers.’⁹³ The District Magistrates and local level officials of Sylhet and Cachar repeatedly brought this fact to governmental notice, showing the negligent use of the Act in their districts. Bengal government in the 1890 again made a strong case for the freedom of labour in Assam and particularly in the

⁹¹ Confidential note of the Chief Commissioner of Assam dated 28th April, 1904. Rev A, 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA

⁹² *ibid.*

⁹³ Assam Emigration Report for 1878 Emigration A, Nov 1879, Nos 20-23. NAI.

districts of Cachar and Sylhet where it believed taking such a step would not amount to “injury to the tea interests”.⁹⁴ The Labour Enquiry Commission of 1896 also brought to notice the negligent use of Act in Sylhet district especially in Chargola valley. They made the suggestion, ‘that Act I of 1882 be cancelled as far as the districts of Sylhet and Cachar are concerned certain additions being made to Act XIII of 1859’ believing that the, ‘trade of the *arkattis* would be a failure all over the districts as it had proved to be in the Chargola valley tea gardens.’⁹⁵

But why did the government take more than thirty years to acknowledge this “fact” and take concrete measures to that end?

A major reason for not being able to do away with the penal-contract system selectively, were the pressures applied by certain influential sections of tea-planter lobbies. In particular, the Indian Tea Association and the Assam Branch of the association representing primarily the interests of the planters of the Assam valley, labelled such moves as being inimical to the “larger” interests of tea in the province. They were instead extremely wary of a situation where the relaxation of the penal-contract system in the more accessible of the tea-producing districts would make their attempts to mobilise labour more difficult and expensive. These reasons to a large extent determined the assimilation of Sylhet and Cachar in Assam when it was made a Chief Commissionership in 1874, which had a predominant Bengali population.⁹⁶ In 1873, when Assam was still a part of Bengal; the Government of Bengal considered a proposal to divide the tea districts into two whereby Sylhet and Cachar would form a

⁹⁴ Rev A, 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA

⁹⁵ *The Report of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee*, 1906, p. 130

⁹⁶ Bengali was very much the common vernacular of the Surma Valley used by 87% of the population *Imperial Gazetteer of India* Volume VI, p.43.

separate tea district and to permit the planters of Cachar the free recruitment of tea labourers. The planters of Assam valley and their sympathisers scuttled such moves.⁹⁷

Again the recommendations of the Labour Enquiry Commission was challenged by the Indian Tea Association and its Assam branch in the almost hackneyed explanation of 'the time has not still not come.' The ITA premised their claims of refusal at that time citing certain new gardens in Sylhet, which had to depend on Act recruitment to recruit "first-class" labour. They in turn made a case for a centralised recruiting agency for the supply of labour funded proportionately by the planters.

However the ill effects of the Act in general and Act VI in particular, was being severely felt by the planters of the Surma valley. By middle of 1904, in memorial submitted by the proprietors and representatives of tea estates in the Sylhet and Cachar districts, welcomed the moves of government.⁹⁸ They appreciated the understanding of the government to the different needs of the two valleys and free the migration of *coolie* from other parts of India to the Surma valley. They however made a demand for a short Contract Act in lieu of the Act XIII of 1859, which gave the proprietors of the gardens giving out bonus some degree of protection. Chief Commissioner Fuller while ruling out the possibility of amending Act XIII which applied to whole of India, suggested to the evolving of a "common-sense practice" for the interpretations of it's provisions.⁹⁹ This had a favourable reception both from district officers and local branch of Indian Tea Association, the members of the latter only asking a penalty against enticement should be added to Act XIII, an assurance

⁹⁷ *Hindu Patriot*, 18th august 1873. Quoted in J.B. Bhattacharjee, *Cachar under British Rule in North-East India* (New Delhi, 1977). p.198

⁹⁸ They represented than more 66% of the total area under tea cultivation in the districts dated 29th July 1904.

⁹⁹ *Indian Tea Association Report 1905* 5th Sep 1904

given that the cost of importing labourers might be considered as an advance under the Act, and that *arkatti recruiting* to be closed for Surma valley.¹⁰⁰

However the response of the Chairman of the Assam Branch of Indian Tea Association to the proposed changes revealed symptomatic concerns and regrets. He argued that the right to arrest without warrants existed in the colonial enactments and cannot logically be made the reason of difficulties in Assam. Also the withdrawal of the Act from Sylhet and Cachar was seen with scepticism because it will place the valley in considerable disadvantage when the other valley will be entitled to recruit without any restrictions. He strongly protested the moves of withdrawal of Act from any district of the province, until it can safely be done for the province as a whole.¹⁰¹ The Indian tea Association articulating similar sentiments proposed the Chief Commissioner to investigate the whole question of emigration to Upper Assam in light to proposed changes, to safeguard against a possible “labour famine” in the Assam valley.¹⁰²

However the Labour enquiry Commission report of 1906 firmly reaffirmed the proposals made by the government and in 1908, by means of a notification, the provisions relating to indentured labour contained in the Assam Labour and Emigration Act (Act VI of 1901), were withdrawn from Surma valley.

¹⁰⁰ *Indian Tea Association Report 1905*, p.100

¹⁰¹ *ibid.* p.132

¹⁰² *ibid.* p.140

Conclusions

Our discussion has coursed through how the framing of the *coolie* Acts drew upon various anxieties and stereotypes as its strong legitimising strategies. The strict penal-contract system that was its “defining” feature could do little to mask the strong material interests at work. The plantation regime where the profitability was accomplished by the intensification of the labour process, was grounded on such discourses and practices of ‘unfreedom’ and legalised coercion.

However the ‘deproletarianisation’ in the labour market and the labour process was a dynamic process and not a harsh “reality” of the plantation regime. Focussing on the valley of Surma and the large body of *coolies* outside the ambit of the *coolie* acts; an attempt was made to qualify the picture. At the same the binary ‘freedom-unfreedom’ was not found to be an useful analytical exercise in appreciating a situation, where a range of other discourses and practices operated in a contested terrain.

The application of the Workman Breach of Contract Act or the Act XIII questioned the dominant perceptions of the *coolie* and the necessity for ‘acting’ upon them. A shift in the colonial policy, regarding the applicability of Act XIII to the tea *coolie*, was located in context of its widespread use in the Surma valley, being preferred both by the planters and the *coolie*. The planters themselves were shown to do away with the application of the stringent law, in certain circumstances where the *coolie* was in a much better bargaining position. This in turn had a significant bearing on the labour process where wages and better conditions of life rather than coercion and threat to arrest could stabilise the workforce.

This was especially true for the region of South Sylhet where the superior communications and general conditions of life were an ample inducement for “unassisted migration”, using informal and personal modes of recruitment. The endeavour of the planters here to put the *coolie* under the harsher Act met with a

rising rate of desertion and violence. The colonial policy was not always out of volition and choices made by the planters and state in pursuit of their narrow immediate interests, but had the undeniable imprint of the pressures and struggles from below.

The distinction in the legal status, however, did not always mean that the “benevolence” of the state was not to be extended to the Act XIII or Non Act *coolie*. Here the rights of state to knowledge and prerogative to intervene in situations, which deemed proactive gestures, challenged the exclusive claims of the planters over the Non Act *coolie*.

The legislation of 1881 was seen as an important stage in the articulation and magnification of contradictory claims and controls over the *coolie* of Assam. The capitalist overdrive for unprecedented levels of production in a period of falling tea prices, pushed forward demands for a cheap and pliant workforce, achieved through an unregulated mode of recruitment and intensified mode of employment.

The government’s approbation to these demands, mostly potently expressed in the inauguration of the ‘Dhubri system’, met with bitter resistance from the native Bengali intelligentsia which was increasingly becoming interested in the ‘*coolie*-question’. Drawing upon reports of irregularities and coercion made by the officials at the local level, the native associations and newspapers made a trenchant attack on the state for sanctifying a system where the *coolie* pitiable and ignorant as they are, were left “unprotected” from the sinister designs of the recruiter. The abduction of women and children formed one of the most enduring scandals of the ‘free recruitment’ system, provoking the larger social anxieties about the loss of patriarchal control of labour and sexuality of the women and lower classes.

The 'diseased' system could not have been more aptly expressed through the high incidence of cholera. This was extremely detrimental for an industry, which relied upon an economical and unrelenting supply of labour. State's attempts to control were complemented by the changing medical discourse of the disease and the ascendancy of the 'water-borne' theory, which demanded a more interventionist role. But where *coolie* travelled primarily by primitive country boats dodging the official depots there was little one could "legally" do. This was very much the state of affairs in the Surma valley where the recruitment through *sardars* outside the Act formed a predominant majority.

Sanitary concerns became the new language of intervention, and the passing of the Inland Emigrant Health Act particularly stemmed from such anxieties. The searching reports of the emigrant routes by specially deputed officers in the last decade of the nineteenth century, further lent weight to the view that cholera was "imported" into the province and therefore the entire system was sought to be standardised and more effectively and efficiently controlled.

The Act VI of 1901 was particularly geared to address the various concerns of the free recruitment system. The single woman no longer could work in the tea gardens of Assam without the consent of their "lawful" guardians-male father or husband. State stepped in to validate the patriarchal authority and at the same time castigating the women to the private domain of the family, delegitimising their labour. At the same time the amplified controls of the state to check the "abuses" of the recruitment process, proved counterproductive especially in the Surma valley, where the planters were finding that the unassisted *sardari* system best suited to their requirements facing unparalleled pressures.

At the same time the penal-contract system was coming under increased attack from various quarters depicted as the reason for its unpopularity. The proposals made by the Assam administration in response to the concerns raised by the Home government and conclusions arrived by various investigations and reports amounted to the withdrawal of the rights to private arrest in the province as a whole and the working of the Act in the Surma valley districts. This was characteristically attacked by the tea interests in the Assam valley, which had to depend upon a more “formal” mode of *coolie* recruitment, settled through a coercive regime. While the Surma valley planters now associated and more capable of articulating their “different” concerns welcomed such moves. With the assent and approbation from the Labour enquiry commission of 1906, the Assam emigrant Act was withdrawn from Surma valley in 1908, with Act XIII remaining as the only law regulating the relationship between ‘labour’ and ‘capital’.

CHAPTER III

CHARGOLA EXODUS AND COLLECTIVE ACTION IN THE ASSAM TEA PLANTATIONS

The plantation regime and the system of penal contracts have at times been not just seen as curbing the labour market but said to have deterred the capacity of *coolie* to involve in confrontational or collective modes of protest.¹ Desertion or protests of

¹ Some recent studies have brought to light the collective modes of bargaining for the early history of tea plantations in Assam. *Kacharis* who came from the districts of Darrang and Nowgong populated much of the gardens of the Assam Company. Because of the proximity of the plantations to their home districts and the absence of the penal-contracts curbing their freedom/movement they showed signs of collective bargaining and action. In 1846, around 250 *Kacharis* absconded the garden of Assam Company at Satsoeah for being discriminated on payments being paid lower wages than the *Bengalees*. A more organised 'strike' took place in the year 1848, when the *Kachari* refused to receive one month's pay, which was nearly three months in arrears. Interestingly they did not abscond and trek back to the native districts, but struck work for the recovery of wages. They finally returned to work not only after a promise of payment within 14 days but obtained a written agreement from the authorities of payment in future within 15 days of the due date. The switch to a migrant labour force and the introduction of Workman Breach Contract Act [Act XIII] and the more elaborate system of penal-contracts [Assam Emigrant Act] have often been argued to be fallout of such bargaining instincts shown by the local labour [See Chapter I and II for more details]. It is to this period that we wish to focus delineating the trends and nature of protest action. For the early history of plantation labour protest in Assam, see Kalyan K Sircar, *Labour and Management: First Twenty Years of Assam Company Limited (1839-59)*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXI, No. 22, 31st May, 1986. Also see, Rana Behal, *Some Aspects of the growth of the Plantation Labour Force and Labour Movements in Assam Valley Districts, 1900-1947*, Unpublished Ph.d thesis (JNU, 1983), Rana Behal, 'Forms of Labour protest in Assam Valley Tea Plantations, 1900-1930', *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. XX, No.4, Jan 26 1985; Amalendu Guha: 'Formation of a Working Class in Assam Plantations: A Study in Retrospect' in *Problems of tea industry in North East India*, (Calcutta, 1981) and Rana Behal and Prabhu P Mohapatra, 'Tea and Money versus Human Life': The Rise and Fall of the Indenture System in the Assam Tea Plantations 1840-1908 in *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, special edition, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1992, 19(3&4).

the individual avoidance type to have constituted the norm in tea plantations.² The exodus in Chargola in the 1920s, is seen at times as symptomatic of that change from individual to collective modes of protest—as a maturity in its form. Such a transitory model not just situates protest and its modes in an ahistorical teleology but locates its maturity with the advent/ contact of “higher” forms of ideology.³

However, do such conclusions conform to the evidence we have? Do we have instances of collective protest in the period of our enquiry? And what were the modes of association and forms of articulation of such actions? Does Chargola in that sense represent a new stage in the modes of protest of the *coolies* in the tea plantations of Assam?

However before engaging with these lines of enquiry, two points of qualification are in order. First, this exercise in no way attempts to create a false hierarchy between the confrontational collective /non-confrontational individualised modes of protest, valorising in effect the ‘flashes of outbursts’ in neglect to the ‘everyday forms of protest’.⁴ The primary concerns that motivates such an engagement, is to question the

² See Brij V. Lal, “Nonresistance” on Fiji Plantations : The Fiji Indian Experience, 1879-1920 in Brij V Lal and Dough Munro (ed.) *Plantation Workers, Resistance and Accomodation* (Honolulu,1996) p. 188 and Martin J. Murray, ‘White Gold’ or ‘White Blood’?: The Rubber Plantations of Colonial Indochina, 1910-40, pp.56-59; P. Ramasamy, Labour Control and Labour Resistance in the Plantations of Colonial Malaya, pp.97-104, both articles in *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, special edition, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1992, 19(3&4).

³ See the Introduction for a detailed summing up and criticisms of such views.

⁴ Desertion for example has been argued to be a very prevalent avenue of escaping the harsh life in the plantations. The right to private arrest as empowered by the Act VI of 1865 and the elaborate system of policing and tracking down the ‘absconders’ could not deter the rates of desertion. There were 2584 desertions in 1877, 9855 in 1884, 6432 in 1897 and 10,244 in 1900. Rana Behal, ‘Forms of Labour protest in Assam Valley Tea Plantations, 1900-1930’, *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. XX, No.4, Jan 26 1985, PE-20. See chapter II for the geographical considerations in the ability and success of the coolies in deserting. For more on the literature on avoidance protest, Michael Adas, *From Avoidance to Confrontation: Peasant Protest in Precolonial and Colonial Southeast Asia*, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1981.

glaring absence and then a dramatic entry that such collective modes of protest are subject to, in most of the literary corpus.

Secondly, in emphasising the decontextualised ‘moments’, the oppression and torture that the *coolies* bound by penal-contracts had to go through can neither be denied nor said to be always suitably ‘resisted’. Flash points in that case though a crucial commentary on the relationship, masks the deeper processes and anxieties at work. The relatively better documented exodus in Chargola stands as a crucial “corrective” in such a “selective” approach, and listening to the rumours of Gandhi in circulation gives us an insight, which had been eluding us all along—of the *coolies*.

The authority of the *Sahib*

The system of penal-contracts to a large extent had a bearing in the formation and articulation of the authority structure within the plantations in Assam. Authority within the tea gardens headed by the manager constituted an elaborate hierarchy of European employees and native staff. This authority structure has been at times seen to be exclusively premised on a strong element of physical violence and coercion backed by legal ‘rights’ like that of private arrest. Such views fail to appreciate the normalising strategies that went into the making of these relationships of authority, and gives a selective view of them, operating in an exclusively conflictual domain. The perpetuation of the relationships of authority was not premised just on coercive technologies of control but also by invoking the cultural/social idioms of authority. However in emphasising the relational aspect the point one wants to make is that the project was from complete.

Authority within the plantation showing strong paternalistic inclinations was seen to be invested in the person of the manager (*the Burra Sahib*). It was therefore of

no surprise that a particular garden was often identified with its manager and the discharge of wage and non-wage benefits on it was seen to be his prerogative and obligation. A book meant to better acquaint the managers with his *coolie* population describes the 'ideal *sahib*', as fulfilling such roles:

...[the] attractiveness of the Estate [for the *coolies*] lies, not so much in the offer of material amenities but in a *feeling of confidence and faith in the management, in brief, the personality of the manager*...the *sahib* who can speak to the labourer in his own language...who understands that leave is essential at certain festivals...who is aware that three or four days off each year are necessary to perform "sradh" ceremonies for deceased parents and relatives, and does not jeer and laugh when an application is made year after year beginning with the formula 'my father is dead'; who does not insist on a Dom and Kurmi living cheek by jowl in perfectly appointed barracks, but will grant a location to a group of caste fellows and let them construct their own bastis...such a *sahib* is an epitome of the attractiveness of an estate where it is possible to live and work in comfort and without peril to soul.⁵

The fulfilment of such responsibilities and obligations was not just a part of the job of the manager but crucially the basis of his legitimacy.

Dustoor: Negotiating the customary

The year 1896 was marked by a change in the management in the gardens of Jellupur (Cachar), Bhagaicherra (Sylhet) and Barjan (Sibsagar).⁶ Within few days, not only were there cases of assaults and organised attacks on the new set of authority but in one instance, the bungalow of the new manager- the most visible manifestation of his authority was burnt down. In a very interesting case reported from Madhabpur

⁵ *Handbook of Caste and Tribes employed on Tea-Estates in North-East India* (Calcutta, 1924), p.5.

⁶ In this section the broad patterns of collective action and protest in the tea plantations of Assam (both the valleys) would be traced from mid 1880s to 1920. My main source is the 'List of serious cases of Assault on tea gardens of Assam', Rev A, 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA. All cases/incidents are cited from this source unless otherwise mentioned.

garden (Sylhet, 1902)⁷, *coolies* made an organised attack on the manager who had come to the lines to collect the hoes from the *coolies*. The *coolies*, who had been in the habit of retaining the hoes, resented this new move. A more violent and glaring case of the “reaction” to a new practice introduced by the management was seen in the Rowmari tea garden (Lakhimpur, 1903), which formed the immediate context for the enquiry into the “deteriorating” relationship between the *coolies* and managers. *Coolies* in the garden traditionally used umbrellas while working in the rain but were now compelled to use *Jhampis* (a kind of wide brimmed hat). The *coolies* protested and made assaults on the manager, the assistant manager, and the head clerk of the garden. About two hundred of the *coolies* then went in to Dibrugarh, where they assembled in front of the *kutcherry* ventilating their grievance.

P.G. Meltius, the Commissioner of Assam valley districts reflecting on the incidence of collisions between employers and *coolies* made in the wake of the Rowmari incident, though highly unrealistic about its nature and degree made a very interesting observation:

...*Coolies* know little of the rules, but round the rules certain local practices or *dustoors*, varying from garden to garden and on particular points possibly even conflicting with rules, have grown up, with the details of which they are intimately acquainted, and *it is the departure from dustoors in a direction unfavourable to them which they really resent.*⁸

Again during the enquiries of Chargola exodus, the Superintendent of Police of Sylhet Ballantine, raised concerns regarding dissent arising out of the changing custom/*dustoor* in gardens:

...whatever way it[rates of wages paid by the employers] may be decided to alter or add to the earnings of the *coolie*, it should be devised as not to upset existing *dustoor.*⁹

⁷ The format used is (district in which garden in discussion is located, year of the incident). This mode of identification would be retained during the course of this discussion.

⁸ *Letter from P.G. Meltius, Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam. Dated 6th May, 1904, Rev A, 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.* Emphasis mine

⁹ WJ Ballantine, Superintendent of Police. *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22, p.30.*

The evidence that we have cited fits perfectly with the statements. The *coolies* used to a particular manager, a particular practice (using umbrellas, retaining the hoes) or broadly to a particular custom */dustoor* were resenting changes to it. However while retaining the usage of custom/*dustoor*, I will refrain from using it in this narrow sense, arguing instead that it did not necessarily mean the expectation of a continuation of practice/task/wage, but a sort of collective belief that an expected standard of ‘material’ and ‘cultural’ well being was respected and ensured. What was considered as expected/just/legitimate was the subject of bargaining and struggle between managers and *coolies*.¹⁰ The idea does not make a claim where each and every act of outrage/oppression was necessarily resisted collectively, but simply argues that it was not as if everything went unchallenged. To cite a letter from the Subdivisional officer of South Sylhet to Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet explaining the reasons behind ‘serious disturbances’ (read collective action) in the tea gardens:

Provocation (for unrest) may be supplied by the idea (well founded or otherwise) that wages are too low, the introduction of some new *dustoor* or some indiscretion on the part of the manager. Some act of the manager may in itself be sufficient cause for the disturbance, but it is generally not sufficient in itself to account for the serious disturbance that sometimes occur, in which the majority of a labour force take part.¹¹

¹⁰ I am using customary in the sense the Genoveses have pointed out, which they argue represented “a compromise hammered out in real class struggle”:

To speak of custom means to identify the range of activity, called privileges by the masters, assumed as rights by the slaves...which flowed from the master’s knowledge that the violation of norms would carry an unacceptable level of risk.

Elizabeth Fox Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York, 1983), cited in Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History* (Delhi, 1996), p.180.

¹¹ HL Thomas, *Subdivisional officer, South Sylhet to the Deputy Commissioner, Sylhet. Dated 23rd January 1904. Rev A, 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA.*

This clearly indicates that a simple cause-effect, ringleader/malcontent explanation is not sufficient enough explanation for collective action within the plantations. An elucidation of the term 'collective' in that case would be in order. Here, 'collective' is not used as a short hand for an 'undifferentiated *coolie* community' residing in the garden and also not necessarily for the 'pre-existing' solidarities of ethnicity/caste/religion within them. Collective at these times of mobilisation was defined by and drew upon various anxieties¹² and legitimising strategies.¹³ That the collective could cut across not just the 'primordial loyalties' of the *coolies* but at times the strict confines of the 'colonial enclaves' as in Chargola, not just affirms to wider anxieties but deeper processes and idioms of legitimacy.¹⁴

The *coolies* apart from the work in the gardens indulged in small-scale agriculture in lands which the management rented out or as small tenants or sub-tenants in the nearby government lands. This was encouraged by the management as a part of the cost of reproduction of the workforce borne in the agricultural sector and thereby make a below subsistence wage and a flexible workforce possible. But in the peak season of the tea crop, when the demand for working hands was greatest, the *coolie's* involvement in her/his own agrarian practices was resented and the management indulged in various coercive and non-coercive means to make them work on the gardens. The seizure of hoeing tools provided by the gardens, which the *coolies* would have also been using for their own agriculture, is made intelligible in this light.

¹² Anxiety could be the outrage of the cultural/religious/caste norm, harsh treatment on an individual, payment of short wages or the stoppage of non-wage benefits like the rice advances and land for cultivation. At times it was considered as illegitimate to outrage the modesty of a woman as to pay short wages or arbitrarily increase the tasks.

¹³ I am not using strategy as strictly as a conscious plan of action

¹⁴ This point would be detailed in the later part of this chapter.

However the *coolies* used to this practice for long, could not come to terms with its legitimacy and reasonableness, protesting the move.

In the case of Rowmari incident investigations showed that the garden, of late, was showing signs of strict discipline and production speedups. Unlike the broad rimmed hat, which allowed both the hands of the *coolie* to be used for plucking leaves, the umbrella had to be held with one hand which affected the efficiency of plucking and the reluctance to this change could have been a 'form of resistance to the speed-up of production demanded by the garden.'¹⁵ A riot reported from Joyhing tea garden (Lakhimpur, 1896) where the managerial authorities were forcing the *coolies* to work on Sundays can also be appreciated in this light.

Changes in the management were often resented because it brought in its wake new patterns of work and management of labour. A very illustrative riot reported from Tehapara garden (Sylhet, 1916) clearly indicates to this. *Coolies* of this particular garden, were for some time, gravely dissatisfied with certain rules and the harsh practices of labour control introduced by the new manager. Provoked by an incident of assault by the person in question, the whole *coolie* population of the garden consisting of hundreds of men, women and children collected near the dispensary and confined him and his assistant alongwith the head *babu*, native doctor and a *sardar* in a stable. Bricks and bamboo sticks were relentlessly pelted on the detained party.¹⁶

Apart from the wages given by the gardens, non-wage benefits like land for cultivation and grazing, rice and cloth advances and loans at times of need formed a substantial part of the entire package. There was no standardised pattern of such 'benefits' and it varied from district to district and even from one garden to the other.

¹⁵ Rana Behal Rana and Prabhu P. Mohapatra: 'Tea and Money versus Human Life': The Rise and Fall of the Indenture System in the Assam Tea Plantations 1840-1908 in *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, special edition. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1992, 19(3&4), pp.165-166.

¹⁶ *Letter from BC Allen Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to Secretary to Government of India*. Home Department, Police Branch, March 1916, No 103, Part B. NAI.

Changes and withdrawals at times drew deep resentment, expressed at times collectively. When the rice advances were stopped by the management of the Bardeobam tea garden (Lakhimpur, 1900), *coolies* made a collective demonstration and refused to work. A more violent reaction was observed in Kharbon garden (Lakhimpur, 1904) where the usual custom of giving women under Act agreement 6 seers of rice a week at Rs. 3 a maund was reduced to 5 seers:

On 19th June 1901, Mr. Macindoe [the manager] paid rice to the *coolies*, but the *coolies* raised hue and cry at the reduced rate...[he] took refuge in his office with some of his men, but the *coolies* burst open the door and threw bricks and bamboos at them.

Such discrimination was often felt by the newer *coolies* who were generally placed at the bottom of the priority list in such allocations. Some new recruits of the Bordubi garden (Lakhimpur, 1902) alleged that they were not given enough rice and refused to work. When the manager forcibly attempted to turn them to work, he was attacked by the aggrieved party, and had to protect himself by using a revolver.

That these 'benefits' were not just seen as 'customary' in the sense that it was not open to change, for at times the *coolies* did not merely resent to the stoppage or discrimination on the concessions but expected the garden management to respond to the situations of want and scarcity. In a very representative case, *coolies* of Towkok garden (Sibsagar, 1894) came in a body and demanded rice from the garden *godown* on a day which was the not the usual day of issue. However, the refusal on this account could not calm the agitated *coolies* who made a collective attack on the *godown* and the men protecting it.

Religious festivals and social occasions were often the sites where such negotiations and 'what was legitimate' was tested and contested. The *coolies* of Barjuli garden (Darrang, 1891), showed great reluctance in getting back to work on a

day immediately after an important religious festival— *Karampuja*.¹⁷ The Assistant manager, who was on his usual rounds of the lines to turn the *coolies* out for work did not pay any heed to such calls forcing some *coolies* and assaulting a resisting *sardar*. The incensed *coolies* made a collective offensive on the Assistant manager chasing him out of the *coolie lines*. In a similar case reported from the Holonguri garden (Sibsagar, 1900), the Santhal *coolies* demanded a holiday on the occasion of *Kalipuja*. When the manager refused such calls and went down the lines on a horseback to induce them to work, an army of *coolies* surrounded him with sticks in hands. Again when the manager of Kellyden garden (Nowgong, 1898) and his assistant, attempted to turn the *coolies* out to work, after three days' holiday given for the *Holi*, they encountered opposition; and on the attempt of the assistant to hold a woman by the hand to induce her to go to work, a number of *coolies* attacked him and the manager with sticks.

***Ki Katri Maike Marile*¹⁸: Coolie women and communal izzat**

In a case reported from Alinagar garden (Sylhet, 1900), the *coolies* had struck work. When the assistant manager came to make enquiries, he was attacked and severely beaten by some of the *coolies*. The official report on the incident read:

¹⁷Festivals like *Karampuja* seem to have had strains of communitarian solidarity. In our fieldwork in the Duars plantation region (May-June 2000) we found that this is a festival practised by most of the labour population of the tea gardens. In this yearly ritual the branch of the tree *karam* is buried. This is further circulated throughout the labour line stopping at each quarter in which vermilion (this act of application of *sindur* is symbolic of the transfer of the evil spirits in the vicinity into the branch) was applied to the branch. Subsequently it is taken to a nearby river or stream where it was immersed. Samrat Chaudhury and Nitin Varma, Between Gods/Goddesses/ Demons and 'Science': Perceptions of Health and Medicine among Plantation Labourers in Jalpaiguri District, Bengal, *Social Scientist*, Vol.30, Nos 5-6, May-June 2002, p.32.

¹⁸ Literally translated as 'Why did you beat up the girl' (Sadani language) was the question posed by one Gambhir to the manager of Koliapani garden after he manhandled a girl Durgi. Home Department, Police Branch, July 1914, No 67, Part B, NAI.

The case appears to have originated in some violence on the part of the assistant manager of the estate, who as the accused said took their *izzat* from them.

What was this *izzat* that the *coolies* complained that was taken from them? Often it signified the *coolie* women; seen as the repository of *izzat*/honour that became the sites on which such constestations of legitimacy/honour were undertaken. The manager of Nadua tea garden (Lakhimpur, 1899) was severely assaulted by the *coolies* for an attempt to 'outrage' a *coolie* girl. In another case reported from Hatikuri Tea Estate (Cachar, 1913), a collective assault was made on the Engineer Assistant who continued despite objections of inspecting the leaves plucked by the women *coolies* collected in clothes worn round their waists. Six *coolies* were charged and arrested for rioting and assault. The legitimacy of the act of assault on the official, and the communal approval to it was more clearly revealed when an attack was made on the arresting party by the other *coolies* of the garden and the arrested men forcibly released. On further enquiries of the incident it was found that the *coolies* were for sometime gravely dissatisfied with this mode of examination of leaves and had made several complaints to the head writer of the garden.¹⁹

However it was not just the cases of sexual exploitation/outrage of women, but their oppression at the workplace often led to a collective sense of illegitimacy of such acts, provoking communal action. On the assault of a *coolie* woman for disobedience of orders by the manager, forty *coolies* of Silghat tea garden (Nowgong, 1890) severely handled him. In a similar case reported from Suramcherra garden (Sylhet, 1899), five *coolies* came with *daos* into the manager's bungalow on his assistant striking a *coolie* woman for doing bad work. Again when the *coolie* women of

¹⁹ Letter from WJ Reid to Secretary to Government of India, Home Department Home Department, Police Branch, July 1914, No 67, Part B, NAI.

Sapakati garden (Sibsagar, 1892) engaged in plucking tasks were put on hoeing work as a punishment by the manager, who felt that they had turned out late for their usual task, a number of *coolies* set upon him and beat him severely.

In a case reported from Koliapani garden (Sibsagar, 1905), one can more clearly understand the dynamics of how a “small” act of assault on a *coolie* girl could provoke communal anxieties of their honour being threatened and snowball into a major act of collective action. The manager of the garden in question, a Mr. Mangin, on his daily inspection of the pruning tasks took a *coolie* girl Durgi by her ear to a place where he felt that she should have been working. Four or five men working nearby immediately came rushing up to him and one among them Gambhir in a very agitated mood questioned the manager, “*Ki katri maike marile?*” [Why did you beat up the girl?]. Soon around thirty men joined them, from where they had been working, and an assault on the manager by clods and *lathis* ensued. The fleeing manager was subjected to a siege by about one hundred fifty *coolies* in his bungalow and missiles like pieces of wood were thrown. Later in the day all the Koliapani *coolies*, men and women numbering around two hundred reached Jorhat—the subdivisional headquarters, and made complains to the Deputy Commissioner that the sahib threatened their *izzat*.²⁰

The violence of protest, the protest of violence

A very crucial feature of the resistance/protest of the *coolies* was the strong element of physical violence. Apart from physical attack, assault by appliances used in the plantation work like hoes, *kodalis*, sticks and *daos* became weapons at these

²⁰ *Case 22 G.R. of 1905, PC Mangin versus Tulsi Kairi, Kamal Kairi, Ramcharan Ganju, Arjun Goala, Bhandari Ganju, Jagua Bhumiz, Lachman Muchi, Sibchoran.; Sections 147, 148 IPC, Home Department, Police Branch, July 1905, Nos 105-107, Part B. NAI*

moments of confrontational protests. It needs to be emphasised that physical abuse and torture was an integral part of the disciplining process of the authority structure of the plantations and so the challenge to it led to an inversion and recasting of the violence/ abusive behaviour manifested often on the managers, on whom such an authority was invested.²¹

Such a process is most clearly revealed in the cases of assaults on individuals, which at times was deemed 'excessive' and met with organised opposition. On the caning of a *coolie* in one the gardens of Lakhimpur district in 1884, by the new manager the other *coolies* retaliated and beat him severely. In another case from the same district in 1889, some Kacharies were convicted for 'uniting and threatening a manager who had, while pointing out to them the way in which some work should be done, "tapped" one of them with a cane.' On the public caning of a *coolie* from Bokel tea garden (Lakhimpur, 1893), the *coolies* attacked the manager on whose orders such an act was perpetrated. An aggravated assault with hoes was committed by a number of *coolies* of Laskarpur (Sylhet, 1897) on the manager who had given three strokes with a stick to one of the *coolies* in punishment for assaulting a *sardar*. A *coolie* in the Apin tea garden (Cachar, 1895) was ordered by the manager to bring back certain *coolies* who had absconded. While returning back to the garden, two of the apprehended *coolies* escaped. He was severely disciplined by the manager who beat him up with a stick. Later in the day when the manager was making the rounds of the garden, the *coolies* attacked him. One caught hold of the bridle of his pony and others threatened him with *kodalis*.

²¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty in the context of Calcutta Jute mill worker argues that the rebel worker inverted the terms of his relationship, and overturned the two major everyday signs of his subordination: abusive language and physical violence. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History* (Delhi, 1996), pp. 181-182.

The case of Aghna, a *chaukidar* at the bungalow of Dr. Patherson (Moran tea garden, Lakhimpur, 1902) who beat him up with a riding whip is an illustrative case of the communal disenchantment. The official report of the incident read:

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

The 'enragement' of Aghna and his relations, which the Deputy Commissioner's report suggests grossly, underestimates the resentment the incident provoked. The 'unlawful assembly' consisted of around sixty *coolies* of the garden who followed the carriage of the manager and doctor, as they were driving home through the lines, using abusive and threatening language.

There was yet another case of multiple assault on Matadin, a *coolie* of Monai garden (1914) by the manager, assistant manager and their orderlies leading to him being hospitalised in a very critical condition. The incensed *coolies* of the garden formed a body of about two hundred, took the ailing Matadin from the hospital and proceeded to leave the garden. The manager in his endeavours to induce them to return, rode on a horseback after them. One of them Ramadin, (possibly a relative of Matadin), seized the Manager's horse by the bridle, ordering him to dismount and struck him with a *lathi*. The cornered manager drew out his revolver and fired a shot at Ramadin. Enraged at this the other *coolies* attacked the manager with *lathis* till he fell unconscious. The *coolies* then broke into two parties, one of which administered a severe beating to a Sikh *havildar* and the other party went searching for a particular *jamadar*.²²

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

It is interesting to note that sometimes these moments of defiance were not restricted to the particular individual on whom the authority was invested (the manager); but the symbolic manifestations of his authority (bungalow, tea-house, the figure of him riding the horse etc.) and the other individuals perpetuating this authority structure (*sardar*, *jamadar*, European and native staff, and even the local police administration who made frequent visits to the gardens to arrest the 'defaulting' *coolies* and were actively involved in the arrest of absconding *coolies* on the complaints made by the manager) became potential targets.

Generally, such actions took a deeper connotation when the person in question was 'respected' in the community. An incident from Talap tea garden (Lakhimpur, 1898) clearly reflected such sentiments:

A *sardar* of long standing who had been abused by one of the assistant managers for sitting down and talking to some *sardars* when they ought to work incited the *coolies* to make an attack upon the manager and his three assistants.

Two years later, on the same garden, a riot occurred under similar circumstances:

...Mr Jameson, a newly joined assistant, was trying to explain to the *coolies* how *ticca* plucking should be done. The *coolies* either could not or would not understand his orders, so he took hold of the *sardar* and ran him up to the place where the plucking was to begin. He was attacked with sticks.

In Singrimari tea garden (Darrang, 1900), the manager finding fault with some bad hoeing, reprimanded the two *daffadars* in charge and struck them with a cane, whereupon about thirty Cachari *coolies* threatened to assault the manager with their hoes.

***'You must finish your task else you will be short paid'*²³: Work related grievances**

It was not always that the assaults/abuse/outrage of social norms but also specific wage related grievances, at certain times, formed the object of collective anxiety and action. In a case reported from Barhalla tea garden (Sibsagar, 1892) the manager refused to pay a *coolie* and ordered him to be taken away for supposedly making a disturbance during the distribution of wages. The *coolie* in question called out to the other assembled *coolies* to seize the manager, and then broken bricks and clay was thrown at him and his assistant. Again a *coolie* of Hukanpukri garden (Lakhimpur, 1900) objected to the sum being paid to him as *ticca* (overtime work) demanding an immediate enquiry. The Assistant manager Hennessy went down and struck the dissenting man with his fist. This led to a deep sense of agitation among the three hundred assembled *coolies* who surrounded the bungalow of the assistant and threw bricks into it. They finally made a charge inside the building, but the assistant alongwith two other European staff made an escape through the bathroom. On this the party of *coolies* proceeded to assault the native establishment of the garden as they fancied that they had helped the *sahibs* to escape. Some 50 or 60 Oriya *coolies* of Sephanjuri (Sylhet, 1902) made a collective protest on the refusal of the manager to give one of their numbers leave. A quantity of plucked leaf was thrown away, and a large body of *coolies* left the garden.

An interesting case representing the solidarities formed at the workplace was reported from Khawang garden (Lakhimpur, 1914). The manager of the garden on his usual rounds of inspection found faults with the way a female *coolie*, Durapati, was plucking. Later in the day when the women *coolies* were being paid for their daily tasks, the manager told her to wait till he finished paying the other women. Durapati apprehending that the manager would not pay her on account of her defiance asked

²³ *Santhali Language Handbook*, p.40

the other women present not to leave until she was paid. The other women on finding such apprehensions coming true made a rush towards the manager, who had to take refuge inside the office in company of his head clerk. This move proved futile as the women made a siege of the office and kept Mr. Saunders [the manager] a prisoner for three hours. Windows were broken, abuses were hurled and missiles, broken bricks and like were thrown.²⁴

A similar incident was reported from Adabari garden (Sylhet, 1897), where certain *coolies* in order to earn *ticca* money went voluntarily to work on a Sunday. The assistant manager, overlooking that it was Sunday and that the *coolies* could stop working when they liked, ordered them back again. This created a general feeling of discontent and anger, and shortly after, at the tea-house several women attacked another European assistant (who had really not been responsible) beat him on the head with their umbrellas, and threw him over into a ditch. Several male *coolies*, who were present, stood looking on—encouraging the women.²⁵

Again, a collective complaint was made by around 150 to 200 *coolies* of Khorikotia garden (Sibsagar, 1899), that they did not get enough leave in the middle of the day. This led to a heated discussion with the manager who caught a *coolie* by his hair and threw him down. On this the whole crowd turned on him and the manager received several blows from the *lathies*.

Wages and tasks formed the reason, at times, of collective grievance and action. In this case, it is important to bear in mind the mode of assessment and payment of

²⁴ *King Emperor versus Durapati and nine others*. Home Department, Police Branch, September 1914, No 139. NAI.

²⁵ John Kelly in his study of Fiji plantation cites a similar report by an overseer of Fiji plantation of work-gangs of women *coolies* disciplining their European overseers by capturing them, beating them, immobilising them and urinating on them. Such an act argues Kelly, had a sexual dimension to it, for the 'dignity of the overseer, his masculine, sexual, controlling persona could not survive it.' John D: Kelly 'Coolie' as a Labour Commodity: Race, Sex, and European Dignity in Colonial Fiji in *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, special edition, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1992, 19(3&4), pp. 259-63.

wages in the gardens. The *coolie* in order to earn his daily wage (*hazira*) had to complete a standard daily task-*nirikh*, the payment for work over and above the standard task, amounted to what was called as *ticca* (or the overtime work). The *nirikh* was not determined by a fixed amount of hours put in daily by the *coolie*, but by the work assigned by the supervising authorities as constituting a reasonable day's labour. The assignment of tasks to the individuals was also contingent on the tea plant cycle and the state and demands of the industry. In the cold weather the *coolies* were especially hard pressed with a sharp drop in the works within the garden and the tasks being far from remunerative.²⁶

The two primary tasks worked out on the gardens were hoeing and plucking.²⁷ Measurements of hoeing tasks primarily done by the men, were made by the *nal*- a measuring device, or counting the rows of tea bushes or *galis*. As planting was not uniform everywhere the two measurements did not necessarily coincide. Plucking done almost exclusively by women and young children was one of the most labour-intensive jobs within the gardens. This was also contingent on local geographical conditions and was carried out by taking various other factors into account.²⁸

There was no necessary consistency among the tasks in the different gardens and the remuneration for them. However, each garden at a particular point in time evolved the rates (its *dustoor*) which could not always show arbitrary changes and revisions.

²⁶ *ALECR 1921-22*, p.204.

²⁷ Hoeing essentially done by men different rates for the light surface hoe carried out 5 to 7 times a year and a deep hoe done once a year. *ALECR 1921-22*, p.65.

²⁸ The three important considerations were the season, the method of plucking and the species of tea bush. Again on the same garden, there were variable conditions- the flush might have been full or weak, plucking might have to be carried on from behind the flush or by getting in front of it; bushes could have been fine, as in the flat or the less producing bushes on the *tilas*. Distance was also a factor, where in some gardens the planted areas were close by to the *coolie* lines and tea houses while in some others it could be as far as a mile.

At times such revisions were deemed as excessive, unreasonable, and more than anything else illegitimate, provoking collective rejection. It further emphasises the bargaining instincts of the *coolie* with the management in evolving what was the *dustoor* and hence the legitimate rate. Such was the case in Kharjan tea estate (1901) when the pruning task was increased from 25 nals to 30 nals, which the *coolies* refused to accept. The manager summoned the *coolies* to his bungalow and asked one man, Gulali whether he had finished his task. Gulali answered in an affirmative going by the old rates, which was immediately contradicted by the *muharrir*. Mr. Powell [the manager] then slapped Gulali, on which the *coolies* present attacked him with their sticks. Powell took refuge inside his bungalow where he was confined with his assistant and the *muharrirs* for nearly two hours. Again when the hoeing task was increased in Pathiacherra tea garden (Sylhet, 1902) the discontented *coolies* made an attack on the sardar and assaulted the manager. On the increase of the hoeing task of Bangaon garden (Darrang, 1903), the *coolies* worked under the new rates for few days but eventually struck work. When the *chaukidar* and *jamadar* tried to get them back to work, the *coolies* threatened to assault them. They finally assembled outside the garden office with hoes in hand and left only after ventilating their complaints. The collective expression against such acts deemed as illegitimate was most visibly expressed, when about sixty *coolies* from Sessa tea garden (Lakhimpur, 1901) left their gardens and made an appearance before the Assistant Commissioner, Dibrugarh, complaining that tasks within their garden was excessive.

The tasks within the gardens were not only subject to arbitrary changes but their assessment and payment of wages based on that was also open to the 'interpretations' and 'readings' of the various supervising authorities. Cases can be cited of underassessment, disparity and corrupt practices in the determining of the day's

labour. The language handbook meant to facilitate the managers to conduct their supervisory tasks in the native language contains phrases, which makes for a very interesting and suggestive reading in this context:

Work and Thikka and earning²⁹

You must come to 'hazri' at 7O' clock, I see you coming late to work everyday. If you come late in future you will be turned back to your home.

This is your task. You must finish it, else you will be short paid. Others can finish it, why can't you?

What is the brick doing in your basket?

You are trying to get extra weight

Your leaf is hot and red

Your leaf is very coarse

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

However it was not as if every such deviations from the "norms" were justified and met with no resistance. There were complaints made by the *Bengali coolies* of Balipara tea garden (Sylhet, 1890), of being paid less than what had actually earned during the month; when the manager went to look into the matter he was assaulted. Again when the management of Mirtinga tea garden (Sylhet, 1903), stopped the pay of the *coolies* on account of bad work, they collected in a threatening manner and used abusive language in protest. The issue of short wages in Tiphuk garden (Lakhimpur, 1899) created a great amount of discontent among Garo and Kachari *coolies*. The manager called a leading man of the dissenting group and struck him a blow for his defiance. This led to all Garo and Kachari *coolies* attacking the manager.

The assessment and verification of the fieldwork was the duty and responsibility of the native staff and their excessiveness at times met with collective resistance. When the *coolies* of Khobang tea garden (Lakhimpur, 1892), were paid short wages they assaulted the head and *hazira muharrir* whom they thought were responsible for

²⁹ *Santhali Language Handbook*, pp.40-41.

the faulty assessment of their tasks leading to them being paid less than what they deserved. Often the manager became the target of such discrepancies as he was seen to be in the position of authority and therefore accountable for the actions of his subordinates. In Titadimoru garden, (Lakhimpur, 1900) there was grave dissatisfaction among the *coolies* on the way in which the new *muharrir* was conducting the weighing of leaf. The dissatisfied *coolies* threatened the Manager, Mr. Macdonald. In another instance, when the manager of Amrailcherra tea garden (Sylhet, 1902) sided with the garden *muharrir* against whom the *coolies* had grievances, there was a general strike and the *coolies* outrightly refused to work. On the use of coercion by the manager to get back the *coolies* to work, he was assaulted by two men with hoes and was severely injured.

Grievances were articulated when the payments of wages did not show consistency and regularity or there was deviation from the "agreed" practice. On the non-payment of wages on the regular pay-day, the *coolies* of Scottpur garden (Cachar, 1896), declined to work. Again when the tasks of the previous day was not assessed and *haziras* not paid, *coolies* of the Rema tea estate (Sylhet, 1898) refused to work. On the use of physical intimidation by the manager to get them back to work, the *coolies* made a collective assault on him. They were ordered to the muster ground where they attacked the manager, and struck him several blows with sticks and stones.

In an interesting case reported from Powai tea garden (Lakhimpur, 1917), Grant, the Assistant manager, on a Monday afternoon, came to his office to pay the *coolies* what they had earned in the previous week by hoeing at contract rates. The assembled *coolies* seemed to be in an agitated and infuriated mood and Grant sensing danger made a rush for his bungalow but was struck several times on the way. The office premise was ransacked, and the furniture and papers destroyed. Next morning, despite

the presence of police in the garden, about 500 *coolies* with sticks and knives came out beating drums and marched round the lines in procession. Later in the day the local *kaya*'s shop was wrecked.

On the investigations into the incident, it was revealed that there was general discontentment on account of the garden authorities delaying the normal practice of weekly payments from Saturdays to Mondays. This meant that the *coolies* did not get money in time for the weekly Sunday bazaar. They were forced into taking loans from the local *kaya* (trader), whose prices they considered extortionate. The simultaneous attacks, on the symbols representing the garden authorities and the local trader, were out of this apprehension that there was a collusion between the two parties and the change in the timing of payment of weekly wages was made to benefit the *kayas*.³⁰

The collective will to leave

Confrontational/ violent modes of collective articulation of dissent, as we have seen, were not entirely absent in the period of our study. The expression of anxieties and at times purposeful action showed an appreciation of their social/material context and the process of negotiation which it was subject to. However the modes of expression at times were not limited to violent confrontational attacks on the authority and its contiguous symbols but instances of collective desire to leave the gardens can also be cited. At times this reflected the bankruptcy of legitimacy of the authority within the garden arising out of an extreme outrage of social/material interests.

³⁰ Letter from JC Webster, Chief Secretary to Chief Commissioner of Assam to Secretary to Government of India dated 23rd April 1917. Home Department, Police Branch, June 1917, 115, NAI. Again when the prices demanded by the traders were found to be unjustifiably high, there were cases of *hat* looting in Bindukhuri and Balipara gardens (Darrang, 1901) Forms of Labour protest in Assam Valley Tea Plantations, 1900-1930', *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. XX, No.4, Jan 26 1985, PE 21

In a very well publicised 'Mesaijan affair' (Lakhimpur, 1888) a large body of *coolies* left the garden extremely distressed with the brutal treatment meted out to three *coolie* women of the garden. Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur gives the following account of the case:

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

The act of disciplining could not have been but considered extremely unreasonable, for it was not only made into a spectacle (tied in front of the manager's house where the other *coolies* could see it) and was brutal (flogged with leather stirrups on their buttocks) but also persistent (one individual beaten three or four times) and repeated (the treatment was meted out to three different women). That it was inflicted on the women *coolies* of the garden, could also have provoked the patriarchal anxieties of honour and the threat to it.

The case cited, of coolies leaving the Monai garden (1914), after an assault was made on one of the coolies; Matadin can be better appreciated in this light. The unreasonableness of the act provoking this response was not only because of the disciplining that Matadin was subject to. But the fact that he was punished for the same mistake on three different occasions— by the manager, the assistant manager

and by the orderlies of these authorities, could not have but made it extremely illegitimate and highly excessive.³¹

In the year 1891, the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur talks of groups of coolies leaving the gardens. In one case certain Rewa *coolies* left the garden in large numbers articulating various grievances relating to work and life within the plantation:

The case of the Khabang garden has been specially reported. A *large number of Rewa coolies struck work, declaring that they had come up for four months only...they came to the station enmasse in spite of the protests of the manager and made various complaints...sent back[to the garden], and shortly after there was a riot on the garden, in course of which the manager was seriously assaulted. The allegations of fraudulent recruitment and ill-treatment were disproved. The coolies were from a new labour district, and did not like to work...*

Continuing with report of such collective desertions, the Deputy Commissioner writes:

In two other cases, batches of coolies came to complain of overwork, insufficient food etc...Superintendent sent a large number of Ganjamese coolies who insisted on coming into cutcherry...Their complaint against sardar was at once remedied by the Superintendent

Often such cases of collective withdrawal of work and the decision to leave the garden, were not only due to the presence of specific grievances, but the lack of faith on the garden authorities to resolve such concerns and therefore the futility to indulge in a negotiatory process within them and in turn appeal to a different set of authority. That such tendencies were evident in case of the sixty *coolies* Sessa garden (Lakhimpur, 1901) appearing before the Assistant Commissioner, Dibrugarh alleging excessive tasks within the garden or the two hundred coolies of Rowmari (Lakhimpur, 1904), making their way to the sub-divisional headquarters at Dibrugarh complaining

³¹ Home Department, Police Branch, August 1914, Nos 120-22, NAI.

against the introduction of a new practice (of using *Jhampis* instead of umbrellas) or the entire population of Koliapani garden (Sibsagar, 1905), men and women numbering around two hundred going upto Jorhat—the subdivisional headquarters, and making complaints to the Deputy Commissioner that the *sahib* threatened their *izzat*, on account of the assault made on a coolie girl by the manager.³²

At least three cases in the second decade of the twentieth century can be cited of coolies leaving the garden to appeal to the ‘higher’ authorities of their grievances. In, 1910, the coolies of Denan tea garden (Cachar) left the garden in a large body. The manager’s persuasion and his forcible attempts met with retaliatory attacks. These coolies when intercepted by the Sub Inspector of Police related to him that they were on their way to Silchar to complain to the Magistrate that they had been given short pay.³³ In 1911, the coolies of Namrup tea garden (Lakhimpur) left the garden in a body, intending to proceed to Dibrugarh and complain against the manager because he refused to give them bonus at the rate of Rs. 10 per head, which they argued was the accepted rate. The coolies refused to listen to the pleas of the manager and showed signs of travelling on foot. When the manager tried to catch hold of one of them, he was attacked and assaulted. The coolies finally proceeded on the journey on foot.³⁴ Again in the year 1917, about 600 coolies of Pathini tea garden of Karimganj Subdivision (in which the valley of Chargola was located) struck work and made their way to Karimganj demanding higher wages.³⁵

³² Home Department, Police Branch, July 1905, Nos 105-107, Part B. NAI

³³ Letter from L.J. Kershaw, Financial Secretary to the Government of India to Secretary to Government of India, Home Department dated 2nd March 1910. Home Department, Police Branch, March 1910, Nos 20, Part B. NAI

³⁴ W.J. Reid Financial Secretary to Government of India to Secretary to Government of India, Home Department, 17th July, 1911. Home Department, Police Branch, July 1911, No. 172, Part B and Home Department, Police Branch, April 1911, No. 55, Part B. NAI.

³⁵ Home Department, Police Branch, April 1917, No. 26, Part B, NAI.

The exodus in Chargola: Historical factors

In that instance does the exodus in Chargola represent a new stage in the articulation of protest in the tea plantations of Assam or was it just a continuation of the forms of protest evident in the plantations of Assam? It is important to bear in mind that unlike the other moments of collective action in the tea gardens of Assam, the exodus in Chargola was not limited to a garden and the numbers involved were far greater than what used to be usually the case.³⁶ Also the coolies were not just making a bid to go to the nearby headquarters and make complaints to a district official but there was a collective desire to go back to the districts from which they originally came.

How do we then explain the collective nature of the exodus in Chargola? Was it a fallout of the specific nature of plantations in the valley in terms of the labour recruited and the forms in which they were settled in the valley?

Coolies in the valley for the better part of the nineteenth century were mobilised by *sardars* working outside the Emigration Acts and settled primarily on Act XIII. Chargola valley atleast till the end of the nineteenth century drew upon *coolies* through the agency of *sardars* from Ghazipur, Azamgarh, and Benaras districts of North West Provinces. These districts were the catchment areas for the overseas plantations but with the decline in the demand in these areas *coolies* were finding work in the inland destinations of which the valley was of particular interest.³⁷

The recruitment through *sardars* seems to have a bearing on the nature of the workforce that had a degree of 'community' sense where kinship, caste and family

³⁶The entire Chargola valley alongwith the adjoining Longai valley was affected. In total 8,000 out of the total working population of 15,000 left the gardens. See the footnote 3 of the introductory chapter.

³⁷ See Chapter I for more details

ties were mobilised by the *sardars* to bring in their recruits. The special report of Act I for the years 1886-89 clearly makes that suggestion:

The *sirdar* maybe a *coolie* sent to his country by his employer, or he might be a *coolie* who obtains leave to go home, and at the time of return brings back neighbours, friends and relatives with him. This last is what occurs in the Chargola valley or to speak in the case of Chargola, Singlacherra and Mukamcherra concerns in the valley...the result brought about is one which might be called 'family colonization'³⁸

However by the turn of the century the 'unassisted *sardari*' recruitment was coming under increasing pressure and checks. The debates arising out of the maladies of the process of 'free recruitment', most significantly the rising incidence of cholera and the scandals of the abduction of women. 1901 Act tried to redress to the concerns by making the process of recruitment more stringent.³⁹

This had a negative bearing on the *sardari* recruitment the valley was used to. CWA Trevor, the manager of the Chargola Tea Estate clearly highlighted these concerns before Labour Enquiry Commission of 1906:

My labour force is entirely North West. With the abolition of the Act, I hope to be able to recruit successfully through *sardars*, as there will be no interference with the men I send down. Upto 1898 I used to have no difficulty in recruiting through *sardars* in Ghazipur and Ballia; they went down and brought up their own relatives and acquaintances as third class passengers.⁴⁰

This Labour Enquiry Commission was primarily concerned with removing the prejudices concerned with the *coolie* emigration to Assam. It was in favour of *sardari recruitment* which it described as 'the best way of working with natives of the *coolie* classes is...through headmen who understands their likes and dislikes in a way no

³⁸ *Special Report On the Working Act I of 1882 in the Province of Assam During Years 1886-89*, p. 23.

³⁹ See Chapter II for more details.

⁴⁰ *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1906*, p.144.

European can do.’ This was reflective of the general mood of the British administration from the late nineteenth century of adhering to the native norms of morality and hierarchy.⁴¹ *Sardari* system of recruitment therefore was thought to fit most into the scheme of things. By the legislation of 1908, control over contractors was tightened, recruitment by unlicensed contractors abolished and increased facilities given to recruitment by garden *sardars* working under the local agents of TDLSA. By 1915 the Assam Labour and Emigration Amendment Act (Act VIII of 1915) was passed, under which the system of recruitment by contractors was abolished, and a Labour Board for the supervision of local agents and of the recruitment, engagement and emigration to labour districts of natives of India was constituted.

World War I and the Recruitment Drive

However it is important to bear in mind the specific context of the exodus especially the changes introduced in the wake of the First World War. The war had sparked off a boom in the industry with a spurt in demands. This was adequately manifested in the increased demand for the working hands, with over 100,000 *coolies* recruited in the 1915-16 season. The next two seasons however showed a sharp dip in the *coolies* travelling to Assam, with only 19,000 *coolies* being recruited in 1917-18 season. The increased demand for labour in these districts in connection with war was said to be a major factor behind the sharp fall in numbers.

However the end of the war meant that there was a stoppage of this abnormal demand of the labour within the recruiting districts. There was a huge demand for

⁴¹ The perceived accommodation between West and East, market and custom, capital and labour, was characteristic of the mood of British administration towards the end of the nineteenth century. See the introduction of Peter Robb, (ed.), *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India* (New Delhi, 1993), pp.17-22.

labour not just to compensate for the insufficient supply in the previous years but also to meet the requirements in the large extensions of tea cultivation on old estates and the opening of new gardens justified by artificial war time prosperity.⁴² The existing workforce was also depleted by the influenza epidemics raging the tea gardens and certain gardens of South Sylhet were facing a persistent problem of desertions to Independent Tiperrah. In 1918-19 and 1919-20 seasons more than three lakh *coolies* were recruited for the gardens of Assam.

[Table 4.1]⁴³

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

These newer recruits were seriously impacted by high mortality during transit, due to cholera and the prevailing influenza epidemic in the labour districts. It was the newer coolies, which formed the 'bulk' of *coolies* leaving the plantations during the exodus. This was confirmed by most of the managers interviewed by the Enquiry Commission. The statistics given in the Labour Enquiry Report of the *coolies* leaving and the number of years on the garden provides interesting insights.

⁴² The all-India area under tea had risen from 624,000 acres in 1914, to nearly 692,000 acres in 1919. P. Griffiths, *History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967). p.177

⁴³ *ALECR 1921-22*, p.103

[Table 4.2] ⁴⁴

| TEA GARDEN | 1 YEAR | 2 YEAR | 3 YEAR | 4 YEAR | 5 YEAR | 6 YEAR | 7 YEAR | 8 YEAR | 9 YEAR | 10 YEAR AND MORE |
|-----------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|------------------|
| Dullabcherra | 105 | 173 | 111 | 95 | 64 | 40 | 15 | 19 | 48 | 218 |
| Singlacherra | 3 | 92 | 132 | 138 | 26 | 25 | 38 | 51 | 24 | 32 |
| Maguracherra | ... | ... | ... | ... | 4 | 99 | ... | ... | 257 | 161 |
| Kekragool | ... | 194 | 122 | 58 | 76 | 158 | ... | 177 | ... | 96 |
| Goombhiracherra | 59 | 152 | 243 | 178 | 126 | 88 | ... | 33 | ... | 20 |
| Oliviacherra | 96 | 277 | 271 | 179 | 87 | 79 | ... | 70 | ... | 50 |
| Chargola | 215 | 232 | ... | ... | 280 | ... | ... | ... | ... | 73 |
| Anipur | 128 | 78 | ... | 152 | ... | 107 | ... | ... | ... | 35 |
| Tarvincherra | ... | ... | ... | ... | 5 | ... | ... | ... | ... | 24 |
| Kalacherra | 7 | ... | 12 | ... | 43 | ... | ... | ... | ... | 11 |
| Kalinagar | 95 | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... |
| Mukamcherra | 88 | 87 | 75 | 127 | 39 | 46 | 41 | 37 | 56 | 81 |
| Lalcherra | 44 | ... | 63 | ... | ... | ... | ... | 3 | ... | 335 |
| Total | 840 | 1285 | 1029 | 927 | 750 | 642 | 94 | 390 | 385 | 1,136 |

The figures clearly suggest the preponderance of the newer *coolies* among those leaving the gardens. There were also reports of over four to five thousand of the *coolies* returning to the two districts of Gorakhpur and Basti from where most of the recent recruits came.⁴⁵

In the case of Chargola valley the huge influx of *coolies* recently recruited through the agency of Tea District Labour Supply Association [TDLSA] came from a different geographical and at times social background than what was historically the case. By the second decades of twentieth century districts like Basti and Gorakhpur were replacing the older districts of Azamgarh and Ghazipur as the major “suppliers” of recruits for the inland destinations. The recent recruitment drive in the valley mostly constituted of lower caste *Chamars* from Central Provinces and UP districts of Gorakhpur and Basti. There were cases of oppression of these new lower caste *coolies* by the older ‘caste’ *coolies* of Chargola.⁴⁶ The evidence of the Commissioner of Surma valley clearly indicates to this:

⁴⁴ ALECR 1921-22, p.11

⁴⁵ Report of the Revenue administration of UP for the year ending 30th September 1921. Reproduced in ALECR 1921-22, p. 15

⁴⁶ Fortnightly report of 1st half of May and ALECR 1921-22, p. 12.

Perhaps I may explain that the majority of the *coolies* who were leaving were the remnants of large batches of Chamars and low-caste men from the Central Provinces and Gorakhpur, who had been imported in famine years, had suffered severely in the beginning of the influenza epidemic...Also they had a very poor time on the gardens, because the old, indigenous *coolies* of Chargola are good caste Hindus who utterly despised those people who had been brought in among them, and I gather, rather bullied them; so they had special reasons for being unhappy.⁴⁷

The Deputy Commissioner most clearly established this connection of newer/bad quality *coolies* and the *coolies* leaving:

I think the cause of the exodus was that the appeal of the non-cooperators at the Ratabari meetings found a ready response in the hearts of the *coolies* of low caste, many of whom were I am convinced that if the Agents of the TDLSA [Tea district labour supply association] had been more careful in their selection of *coolies* and if the Calcutta agents had not been so keen in getting hundreds of new *coolies* into the gardens in war time when tea was prosperous and money plentiful without troubling much about the quality of the recruits, the exodus, if it had taken place at all, would have been much smaller extent.⁴⁸

Here the two stages of *coolie* exodus is articulated. First, that most of them are new, of bad health and physique on account of indiscriminate recruiting and in a state of abject poverty and second that these were the perfect conditions for them to be manipulated and in the words of the officer 'bad recruiting made the non-co-operation propaganda easy.'⁴⁹ The transition in this explanatory strategy from stage one to two shares a depoliticised notion of *coolie* action where any action with slight inclination of politics has to be attributed to an external agent—in this case the non-co-operators. The official historian of the Assam Company describing the exodus seems to be in agreement with this view:

⁴⁷ Webster, Commissioner, Surma valley. *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22*, p.89.

⁴⁸ *ALECR 1921-22*, p.12

⁴⁹ *ALECR 1921-22*, p.12.

...seem little doubt that the success of the agitator was facilitated by an influx of new labour...they were easy prey to the agitator, for another innovation created by this type of labour was the fact that they were recruited in large numbers for a single garden...only necessary for the evilly disposed to persuade one or two of the elders on each garden to move, and there followed what was described at the time as a veritable exodus.⁵⁰

Again the 'political' aspect of the exodus is denied as the newer *coolies* who just herd along with their elders when the agitator persuades them. The proprietor of Kalinagar tea estate clearly makes this distinction between the unrest among 'masses' and 'classes' during this period:

As far as the classes are concerned, I think the unrest is more political than economic, and as regards the masses, economic rather than political.⁵¹

However a fragmentary look into the 'voices' shows that the *coolies* were extremely alive to the prevailing political situation and economic condition and not just passive reactionaries to the economic depression and non co-operation awakening.

Also the 'bad recruiting'/'new recruit' theory still does not explain as to why only the new recruits of Chargola and to an extent Longai valley left the gardens? Also how does this explain the nature of the exodus, which was not restricted to a particular garden and at times not just to the newer *coolies*? From the Mukamcherra and Dullabcherra gardens of the valley more than two hundred fifty *coolies* left the gardens who were there for almost fifteen years, and over eleven hundred *coolies* leaving the valley during the exodus were on it for more than ten years.⁵²

⁵⁰ H.T. Antrobus, *A History of the Assam Company* (Edinburgh, 1957).p.209

⁵¹ *ALECR 1921-22*, p. 29

⁵² *ALECR, 1921-22*, p.11.

Networks and circulation of information: *Haats* and *Bazaar* talk

Chargola valley, the focal point of the exodus, extended about thirteen miles north and south and was situated between the Longai and Hailakandy valleys. A government road ran all the way down the valley leaving Chargola, Singlacherra and Magura tea gardens on the west side of the road, and Girish Babu's, Mookamcherra, Dullabcherra and Goombira companies on the east side.⁵³ A closer look at the gardens in the valley and adjoining valley of Longai provides critical insights pivotal to our discussion:

[Table 4.3] ⁵⁴

| NO. | NAME OF GARDEN | NAME OF OWNER ⁵³ | THANA | APPROX DISTANCE FROM SUB DIVISIONAL HEADQUARTERS | LABOUR IN 1911 | LABOUR IN 1921 | LEFT DURING EXODUS |
|-----|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------|--|--------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| 1. | ANIPUR | CTA | Ratabari | 30 | 1,634 {Includes garden 1-4} | 3465 | 1399 |
| 2. | CHARGOLA | do | do | 30 | | | 800 |
| 3. | KALACHERRA | do | do | 32 | | | 73 |
| 4. | TARVINCHERRA | do | do | 30 | | | 29 |
| 5. | MAGURACHERRA | do | do | 42 | 758 | 980 | 650 |
| 6. | SINGLACHERRA AND BALICHERRA | do | do | 36 | 1,056 | 1,756 | 561 |
| 7. | GAMBIRACHERRA | CTLC | do | 39 | 633 | 948 | 899 |
| 8. | KEKRAGUL | do | do | 40 | 1,051 | 1,729 | 881 |
| 9. | OLIVACHERRA | do | do | 40 | 547 | 1,423 | 1,109 |
| 10. | MUKAMCHERRA | EICTCL | do | 34 | 865 | 1,890 | 877 |
| 11. | LALCHERRA | do | do | 37 | 1,084 | 1,416 | 633 |
| 12. | BIDYANAGAR | KGRR | do | 31 | 1,200 | | |
| 13. | KALINAGAR | BSL | do | 30 | 435 | 691 | 335 |
| 14. | ADAMTILA | | Patharkandi | 23 | 461 | 914 | 109 |
| 15. | ERALIGUL | | do | 17 | 595 | 1073 | 145 |
| 16. | LALKHIRA AND SONAKHIRA | | do | 27 | 707 (includes 16 and 17) | 932 | 262 |
| 17. | LONGAI VALLEY | | do | 23 | | 1053 | 150 |

⁵³ Alec H Walker, *Rivers, Roads and Tea Gardens of Cachar and Sylhet* p. 21

⁵⁴ *Assam District Gazetteers, Sylhet District, Supplement to Vol II* (Shillong, 1905) pp. 19-22 and *ALECR 1921-22*, p.11.

⁵⁵ The various tea companies of the Chargola valley were Chargola Tea Association, The Consolidated Tea and Lands Company, Limited, East India and Ceylon Tea Company limited, Bharat Samiti Limited

The eighteen gardens which close proximity (all the gardens were located within the distance of 15-20 miles) meant that it opened up possibilities of interaction, association and circulation of information outside the strict confines of the colonial enclaves.

This also brings into relief the specific social terrain of the district of Sylhet. Being a dense district the tea gardens and the surrounding village population had significant overlaps in their social and geographical space and were not as divorced as the 'enclaves' of Assam valley plantations. *Ganj*, a very common suffix used in Sylhet district, indicated the place to be a market place. The 1906 Report indicates to this fact:

Bazaars are numerous (in Surma Valley); besides the public markets nearly every tea garden has its weekly or bi-weekly *hat*, to which crowds of villagers and tea garden *coolies* may be seen streaming either to make purchases or with supplies or goods for sale.⁵⁶

These markets were "a strong bond of union between the two parties [villagers and coolies], as the villagers derive[d] profit from the sale of commodities, which the garden *coolies* are only glad to buy."⁵⁷ But *bazaars* and *hats* were sites where not just economic relationships between *coolies* of adjacent gardens, and villagers were established but significant information networks were also forged, which could not deprive the *coolies* of news about the general situation in the locality and region. Bazaars and hats therefore emerge as sites where the colonial claims of absolute control were contested, forging new ties and relationships not entirely approved by the planters and the colonial state. More importantly *bazaars* represented an arena of disorder in the colonial imagination, giving rise to voices of dissent and 'rumour',

⁵⁶ *The Report of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1906*, pp. 66-69

⁵⁷ *Annual Report on Labour immigration into Assam for the year 1885*.

which in turn showed its inability and inadequacy to satisfactorily police it. Very crucial to this was the presence of a large body of time-expired *coolies* who were settled outside the garden grants in the neighbouring villages. They frequented the *bazaars* and *hats* to sell their products but also acted as important conduits of information and news as they shared ethnic and more importantly linguistic affinities with the *coolie* population.

The newer *coolies* coming from the home districts established larger networks of information. This becomes all the more interesting if we take into account that most of them were coming from the Eastern districts of Gorakhpur and Basti where Gandhi of late had assumed cultic status and rumours around him were very much in the air.

Stop this nasty chat! Anxieties and initiatives of state and nationalists

One of the first measures taken by the Assam administration, during the exodus, was the application of Section 144 prohibiting meetings and speeches within seven kilometres of the gardens. It assumed that this measure would be able to counter the rumours, which it believed to have been a result of the intensive propaganda campaign of the Congress volunteers filling the mind of the *coolies* with wild ideas. However these actions did not yield desired results because of what it called as the covert nature of propaganda campaign targeting the *coolie* population in markets and other places frequented by them.⁵⁸ The Labour Enquiry Committee also makes the point:

It is probable that secret propaganda had been carried on for some time in the gardens in the Chargola valley. Otherwise it is difficult to account for the extent and suddenness of the exodus. There is also no doubt that after the

⁵⁸ Telegram dated 18th May from Chief Secretary Government of Assam to Secretary to Government of India, Home Department, Political Branch, June 1921, Nos 143-146. NAI

prohibition of meetings an insidious campaign was being conducted surreptitiously on some gardens.⁵⁹

This clearly indicates that it was not the regular meetings and speeches of the non co-operators but *bazaar* talk and gossip which was creating all the nasty chat. A proposal by the government of Assam, to apply the Seditious Meeting Act X of 1911 to the districts of Sylhet and Cachar and declare Karimganj subdivision as a proclaimed area clearly stems from such concerns of not being able to check this feeling and articulation of dissension.⁶⁰

A story titled *Non-Co-operation* written by a manager describing the unrest in a tea garden during this period articulates similar sentiments.⁶¹ In the story, *Pano*, a Santhali woman who was a maid at the Manager's bungalow is the narrator relating to her friends the coming of "trouble" in her garden. She says, "there are strange tales going around these days. They say that the Engrazi Raj [British Raj] is at end in India, and that Ghandi is the King of Hindustan...A rumour has also been heard that the *coolies* on all gardens in Sylhet have gone on strike, and the that several Sahibs have been severely beaten, and bungalows and tea-houses have been burnt down, and the *coolies* demand to be sent back their country. It is great *zoolum*, [injustice] sister, indeed, and all this may have happened and be true; but do these stupid *Ghandi-wallahs* think they will get better of Sahib-logs." The very use of a *coolie* woman as the narrator is a confirmation of its objectivity of being the "authentic" voice of the *coolies*. Speaking about the *Ghandi-wallah's zoolum* Pano says that a *Fakeer* of late was seen moving in the lines of her garden and when confronted by the *Burra Sahib salaamed* him and called down blessings on him. "...but scarcely had he gone out of

⁵⁹ ALECR 1921-22, p.19

⁶⁰ *Strike of tea garden coolies in Assam, Proposal of the Government of Assam to apply the Seditious meeting Act X Of 1911 to that province.* Hon.e Department, Political Branch, June 1921, 143-146. NAI.

⁶¹ Maurice P Hanley, *Tales and Songs from an Assam Tea Garden* (Calcutta: Thacker, Sphinx & Co, 1928) pp. 58-63.

sight, when the evil one started inciting the *coolies* to go on strike and murder the *feringhi* as he called the Sahib.” This indicated trouble in *Pano’s* narrative “...for *Ghandi* agents had been moving about the lines for some time, disguised as *fakeers* and beggars, inciting the *coolies* against the white men.” This suspicion of *Pano* is finally vindicated when a gang of “drunken” *coolies*, incited by the *Ghandi* agents, assault her for being the informer and lay siege at the Manager’s Bungalow armed with *daos* and heavy sticks. The very use of the character of a *Fakeer* in the narrative establishes covertness of the activity, which is difficult to comprehend, and is not very obvious. For, it is not the information and news that is being propagated through “conventional” channels of meetings and speeches by the non co-operators, which is the source of anxiety, but it is the distorted manipulated rumour circulated by the disguised *fakeers*, which is creating all the nuisance. *Fakeer* in this account also facilitates in establishing the externality of this voice of dissension denying the agency to the *coolie*, which validates his docile apolitical stereotype but at the same time uneasily expresses the gaps in the information grid of the plantation and the inabilities to effectively police it.

Such unease was aptly reflected in the measures deemed necessary by the colonial administration to tackle the situation. Attempts were made to strengthen the armed police, intelligence system was beefed up and counter propaganda work was undertaken.⁶² A desire to make an impression on the minds of *coolies* about the continued existence of the British Raj –the official version of the situation, was sought to be forcefully pushed forward and at the same time the policing of information deemed important was to be made all the more rigorous. A Muhammedan man was convicted on account of spreading “stories” among the *coolies* in Dholai valley, that the garden wells have been poisoned. Another *sadhu* was arrested in one of the

⁶² *Political situation in Assam-Increase of the strength of troops in the province for internal security purposes.* Home Department, Political Branch, File no 534, 1922, NAI

Habiganj gardens for “tampering” with the *coolies*.⁶³ A British officer named Llyod was specially deputed to organise counter-propaganda work in Surma Valley. He held a series of meetings in Sylhet district for this purpose. Special assistance was sought from the United Provinces Government to this end, and they accordingly sent two men to conduct counter-propaganda work amongst tea garden *coolies* from United Provinces. Assam rifles were augmented in affected areas so that the continued authority of the British Raj should be impressed upon the *coolies*.⁶⁴

The desire to control information was not limited to the colonial state; the nationalists as well realised their shortcomings as well. A very familiar and often quoted explanation given by the *coolies* of Chargoala valley for their decision to leave was that it was *Gandhi ka Hookum*. However making this as a case for simplistic connection with the Non co-operation movement and as an evidence of following the Gandhian creed falls flat on its face when one looks at the matter closely. An Ex non-co-operator from Silchar testifying before the Enquiry committee said:

When I was in the non-co-operation movement I was deadly against the *coolie exodus*... When Mr. Gandhi visited these parts some *coolies* were produced before him and he told them that they had no complaints to make and that they had better go back... Mr Pandey [Ratabari meeting] spoke to the *coolies*: he did not however directly make any suggestion that they should go, but his speech did infuse a spirit of independence and free will into the minds of the *coolies*.⁶⁵

The fact that the individual having changed his political predilections was now on the payrolls of the Indian Tea Association might have induced him to take such a polarised view of things. But still the whole idea of leaving the garden in a body as being organised or even tutored, to the *coolies*, by the non-co-operators does not stand the test of evidence. In order to quell the disquiet among *coolies* the proprietor of an ‘Indian’ garden Kalinagar, sought the assistance of an ‘upcountry’ *Pandit* probably

⁶³ ALECR, 1921-22, p.19.

⁶⁴ *Forthnightly report for the Second half of July for the Province of Assam*. NAI

⁶⁵ *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22, p.74.*

belonging to the Congress Committee. The *Pandit* exhorted the *coolie* not to leave the garden but remain and strike work if they had grievances. The *coolies* disregarding such suggestions left the garden carrying all their property with them and selling their goods and cattle on their way. More than three hundred *coolies* out of a total population of five hundred eventually left the garden. The owner out of his “cruel” experience suggests before the committee:

Even if there was no meeting at Ratabari, still I think the *coolies* would have left sooner or later...*I don't think any political agitator in Karimganj recommended any exodus.*⁶⁶

But that did not deter him from the search of the ‘originator of these ideas’ as he was at pains to explain as to how the *coolies*, so innately ignorant and dumb could resort to such an action:

At Kalinagar, the Bengali population is not very advanced and there is not much political agitation round about, so it is difficult to say who put the idea into their[*coolies*] head.⁶⁷

The superintendent of the Longai Tea Company who went to see the *coolies* leaving from his garden—claiming to work under *Gandhi ka Hookum*—also could not find any direct “proof” to that effect:

I had no reports from my Managers that any agitators had entered the lines. I do not think any of the babus in the garden did anything to propagate the Gandhi doctrine or were mixed up with them. The *coolies* go to Chandkhira bazaar [the local bazaar] and may have come in contact with the agitators there, but I cannot say positively that agitators went to that bazaar.⁶⁸

Gandhi’s first reaction to the exodus is very symptomatic in this regard:

⁶⁶ Nagendranath Dutta, managing Director of Bharat Samiti, Limited. *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22*, p.28. (emphasis mine)

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ Manager, Longai Valley, *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22*, p.52.

*I should be sorry if anybody used my name to lead the men to desert their employers, it was clear enough that it is purely a labour trouble. Das and Andrews informed that the trouble is purely economic*⁶⁹.

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

I can assure him (the planter) that I never advised a single *coolie* in Assam to strike. I do not profess to know the problem of labour there. . *He should moreover know that there is no non-co-operation going on with capital or capitalists.* Non Co-operation is going on with the existing Government as a system. But there is bound to be non-cooperation wherever there is evil, oppression and injustice, whether anybody wishes it or not. The people, having found the remedy, will resort to it. If they do stupidly or unjustifiably, they alone will be the real losers.⁷⁰

A yearning to give a distinctive orientation to the movement among the *coolies* is evident from Gandhi's statements. However the agencies to make that happen were not in place, and therefore the claims to own up or disown the movement appears to be of no consequence in this context. Gandhi in his visit to Surma Valley in September 1921, particularly expressed his disapproval of the *coolie* strikes and hartals and censured them for indifference to what he regarded as the more important matters of boycott and the use of spinning wheel suggesting such desires and their failings.⁷¹

⁶⁹ *Young India*, 8th June in Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. XX. Emphasis mine.

⁷⁰ *Young India*, 29th June in Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. XX, p.299-300.Emphasis mine.

⁷¹ Khan Bahadur Saiyid Abdul Majid, a minister who visited Sylhet during the period said, "[that] the people were quite unanimous in thinking that Gandhi unseen was a far greater personage than Gandhi seen...and the common people's observation was that he was only a *kaya*". *Forthnightly report for 1st half of September 1921*. Even during Gandhi's visit to Cuddapah district in Andhra in September 1921 he was greeted by "enormous" crowd of villagers who believed that he would get their taxes reduced and forest regulations abolished-many returned home greatly disappointed. Quoted in Sumit Sarkar, *Primitive rebellion and Modern Nationalism: A note on Forest Satyagraha in the Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience Movements*.p.19

The investment of the Gandhian message in this context often at variance to the dictates of Gandhi and the official Congress creed suggest a lack of control over the information networks within the plantation area covering a number of gardens and the circulating population of *coolies* which had typical dynamics of operation. An argument of these networks of information inhabiting an “autonomous” sphere is not made where the contacts with other *coolies*, villagers and the non co-operators had a significant bearing. The general climate of defiance, anticipating a possible end to the British Raj and the imminence of Gandhi’s Raj. The frequent demonstrations, public meetings and *hartals* in the nearby Subdivisional headquarters of Karimganj and the Sylhet town and the extreme low rates of realisation of land revenue in the adjoining villages could have been very strong impressions in the circulation of such ideas. The *coolies* bound by a rigorous work-schedule with various checks on their movement, could not have personally attended the public meetings and speeches in large numbers, but nonetheless the interactions with villagers, ex-*coolies* and even the non-cooperators at these market places could not deprive them of the ‘buzz in the town’. But this does not warrant a case being made that these networks could have been effectively manipulated by any of these agencies as to authenticate as to what was official ‘news’ and ‘information’ and what was the distorted ‘propaganda’ and ‘rumour’.

Gandhi Baba ka Hookum: Fall of the sahib, rumour of Gandhi

What were these rumours that were in circulation in the gardens of Chargola valley? Were these also informed by the specific context that *coolies* lived and worked?

The projection of the relationship of manager-*coolie* within the garden as analogous to *zamindar-ryot* masked the controls that the managing agencies, positioned in Calcutta, exercised over vital decisions like the fixation of wages. The manager who claimed almost unrestrained power within the plantation was sometimes not more than a mere “employee” executing the decisions of superior authorities.⁷² Such concerns were raised from the turn of the century evident from the statement made by the Commissioner of Assam valley.

...Private concerns are giving place to companies, and private owners are disappearing. Control is being removed from managers on the spot to absentee Agents and Directors. The cost of production (local cost, -I cannot say about Calcutta charges) is being reduced...⁷³

However some leverage and autonomy was not entirely denied to him to effect changes in these matters that would “steady” their workforce and create a good moral hold over them. The perpetuation of the authority structure within the plantation as we have argued was not just premised exclusively on coercive mechanisms of control but also by invoking cultural idioms of legitimacy.

But in this period of economy drive in the industry, managers were left with little discretion in effecting wage hikes or giving out other remuneration to the *coolies*. Concerns were raised about the prestige of managers being undermined by the ‘hard and fast’ decisions as regards the wage rates by the Calcutta agencies. There were cases of *coolies* wiring directly to the agencies for relief, which was said to be ‘most subversive of discipline and the very necessary patriarchal control of the manager.’

⁷² Sharit Bhowmick. *Class Formation in the Plantation System*. (New Delhi, 1981), See Chapter 3.

⁷³ Letter from P.G. Meltius, Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam. Dated 6th May, 1904. Rev A, 77-117, Aug 1904, ASA

...The management of a garden always had been, and always should remain, patriarchal. The *coolie* recognises the Manager as his “*Ma-Bap*”. He comes with his grievances and sorrows to him for redress or alleviation, and I know as a fact that the great majority of Managers spend no inconsiderable amounts from their own pockets in giving his *baksheesh* to deserving cases. While this was possible in the past, economic stringency has very largely curtailed it...⁷⁴

In such a situation, consider the scene on the morning of the 3rd of May in the Anipur tea estate described by the manager, from where it all began:

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

It is important here to repeat the decisions taken in the meeting of the managers and local officials held at Dullabcherra Club on the 6th May— just four days into the first batches of *coolies* leaving the tea estates of the valley and already one thousand *coolies*. The extremely tense and nervous body of the planters most reluctantly agreed upon a hike of wages but emphasised that such a decision should be communicated to the *coolies* at the earliest to stop the spread of the unrest. The resolutions of the meeting read:

While recognising the danger of yielding to pressure and the encouragement that such yielding [Wage hike] may give to agitation elsewhere the officials did not consider this a sufficient reason for refusing concessions just due and absolutely necessary to keep the labour on the gardens...we therefore advise to concede the rates they had unanimously agreed on, and to do this at once and not wait for further trouble.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Ballantine, SP, Sylhet. *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22*, p. 32..

⁷⁵ Conference of Chargola Valley Tea Planters and Government Officials, 6th May 1921. See Appendix III for the resolutions of the meeting.

However the delay in implementation and at times withdrawal of concessions on many gardens, after being announced; not being ratified by their Calcutta agents. On the 8th of May, Dunlop, the manager of Goombhira division, gave out to the *coolies* that they would get 6 annas and 4 annas but this proposal was refused by his agents. This could not but have seriously eroded the credibility, legitimacy and sense of authority of the managers among the *coolie* population and therefore they found it futile to engage in a negotiatory process with him. It was therefore of no surprise that the coolies of Goombhira division leaving on the 10th of May. Even the personal assurances of the manager of the Dullabcherra of the offered concession being permanent, could not stop the *coolies* of his garden leaving. On being interrogated the *coolies* said that the concessions after all would not be confirmed.⁷⁶

Some managers complained of the submission of the government to the demand of wage hikes under the pressure of strike on a later date. This they believed proved counterproductive as *coolies* now thought it was on account of Gandhi's orders that the wages have been increased.

...All the remaining *coolies* [of the garden] had worked regularly throughout the week at the old rate of wages. Sunday 8th, was our pay day, and pay was proceeding as usual *when word came that three neighbouring gardens had raised the wages to 6 and 4 annas*. From this moment the *coolies* were absolutely mad and for three days the garden was in an uproar. *It was stated that Gandhi has raised wages.*⁷⁷

Therefore the decision to hike wages did not necessarily reinvigorate the sense of authority as expected by the employers and the local administration. The extra Assistant commissioner of Karimganj Subdivision, for example, ventilated the complaints of several managers that even with those increased wages the *coolies* were

⁷⁶ Webster, Commissioner, Surma Valley. *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22*, p.84.

⁷⁷ Gunnery, Manager, Chargola Division. *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22*, p.58.

doing just as they liked and were not working satisfactorily. Wage hikes did not necessarily have a deterrent effect and *coolies* on some other gardens went on strike for one or two days even after the wages had been increased.⁷⁸ Some managers who considered themselves extremely fortunate of not having to deal with strikes on their gardens nevertheless maintained a 'nasty feeling' among their *coolies* during the period.⁷⁹

...There was a feeling of unrest before the exodus. When I met some *coolies* they were bitterly complaining against the Manager...they said that the manager would not listen to their grievances...when I went to the garden after the exodus and obtained evidence of his extreme unpopularity, I dismissed him. If I had kept him on, I am afraid I would have lost all my *coolies*.⁸⁰

The manager of Singlacherra Tea Estate related about a male returnee who said that he would not have stayed back at the time of exodus for even a rupee a day!⁸¹

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

I obtained a stock of rice and salt and arranged to supply the *coolies*. About 200 *coolies* came up to me on the 7th or 8th May as far as I remember and the first question they put me was whether this rice was being supplied by Government or by the tea gardens; they said that they would not touch it if it was supplied by the gardens...I told them that if they did not want to take rice

⁷⁸ Rai Bahadur Panchu Gopal Mukherjee, Extra Asst Com, SDO, Karimganj and HA Wray, Manager, Singlacherra T.E. *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22*, pp.61-63 & p.56.

⁷⁹ A Brown, Rajnagar TE. *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22*, p.47.

⁸⁰ *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22*, p.28.

⁸¹ H.A. Wray, Manager, Singlacherra TE in *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22*, p.55.

and salt that was offered them, they might go. Nobody took anything and they all went.⁸²

This bankruptcy of legitimacy did arise from a momentary failure of the managers to effect the wage hikes but had its past of its own. It was observed during the time of the exodus of the *coolies* also showed definite signs of scepticism towards European medicine/hospitals. This *coolie*'s detestation to European medicine has been taken at times as a manifestation of the 'native' inertia/resistance. However during the exodus there was a degree of magnification of the aversion to hospitals and European medicine. The Enquiry Committee came across many such suggestions by the local doctors and medical practitioners:

It was observed about the time of the Chargola exodus that the *coolies* declined to go to hospitals and in particular complained that in hospital they were "cut up", the reference being to the intravenous treatment for cholera.⁸³

Dr. Dunlop of the Chargola Valley read this 'resistance' as a part of the 'Gandhi propaganda' to induce people to have nothing to do with hospitals and Western medicine.⁸⁴ However it was not simply a case of tradition versus modernity in the *coolie*'s resistance to go to the hospitals, but their general ineffectiveness as relating to the high rates of mortality especially during this period evoked a sense of cynicism.

⁸² Rai Bahadur Panchu Gopal Mukherjee, Extra Asst Com, SDO, Karimganj. *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22*, p. 64. It is significant to note here the cultural value of salt as an index of loyalty. For accepting food/salt provided by someone would mean an acknowledgement of allegiance to him and the failure to do so would be deemed as *namak-harami* –the term in Hindustani for disloyalty.

⁸³ *ALECR 1921-22*, p.97

⁸⁴ *ALECR 1921-22*, p.97

[Table 4.4]⁸⁵

| YEAR | TOTAL DEATHS | RATIO PER MILLE |
|-----------|--------------|-----------------|
| 1917-1918 | 21,961 | 23.2 |
| 1918-1919 | 62,176 | 61.4 |
| 1919-1920 | 44,866 | 48.8 |
| 1920-1921 | 28,927 | 27.3 |

The virulent influenza epidemic raging in the tea gardens claimed 40,000 lives between 1919 to 1921 peaking in 1919 with 29,000 influenza victims. That year the death rate per *mille* for the gardens was substantially high at 83.82 against the provincial ratio of 50.09 per *mille*.⁸⁶ More than one and half lakh people lost their lives in the tea estates of Assam in the 1917 to 1921 period. The Labour Enquiry Committee particularly observed these conditions as the reasons for ‘discontentment with garden life’:

The fact that the best medical attention on the gardens could often do little to save life in such circumstances conduced to a feeling of despair, and even to a belief among the more ignorant that the garden was haunted by some evil spirit. It is not, therefore a surprise that some of these *unfortunate immigrants lost faith in European medicines and methods of treatment and that when ill-health began to prey on body and mind and the earning capacity was diminished, they became discontented with the conditions of tea-garden life.*⁸⁷

The failure of the authorities, that claimed to make wage hikes or protect the lives, could not have but led to a feeling that something was drastically wrong. The

⁸⁵ ALECR 1921-22, p.94 (Emphasis mine) and *Resolution on Immigrant Labour in Assam for the year 1917-18, 1918-19 and 1919-1920*.

⁸⁶ ALECR 1921-22, p.94.

⁸⁷ ALECR 1921-22, p.95. Emphasis mine

conditions of working and changes to it affecting the material/social circumstances (*the dustoor*) could not have but added to this disillusionment.

It is important to bear in mind that gardens in Surma valley traditionally plucked coarse, unlike the gardens of Assam valley where fine plucking was carried out, producing high-grade tea, which commanded good prices in the market.⁸⁸ However the heavy yield partly compensated for the lower price realised in the market. During the war, when quality became to some extent a secondary consideration, the result was still coarser plucking. However the end of war led to accumulation of large stocks of tea.⁸⁹ In order to equate supply and demand garden agents realised that the remedy lay in resorting to fine plucking. This had a twofold impact particularly in the Surma valley plantations. Firstly, it made a serious dent to the opportunities for overtime work. Between January and May 1921, there was little *ticca* work. *Ticca* hoeing virtually stopped till the cold weather when the semi abandoned tea was being reclaimed.⁹⁰ Secondly, the precision demanded in fine plucking meant an obvious fall in the quantity plucked, calling for a revision in the daily task for plucking. However these changes were not always taken into consideration and many managers steadfastly stuck to their old rates. They would not come round to the view that the change in the methods of plucking yielded different results.

⁸⁸ The gardens in the valley grew up in a specific geographical and social terrain leading to kind of tea produced. For a more detailed discussion refer to Chapter 1.

⁸⁹ The war had a tremendous stimulus to the industry and between 1914-1919 the increase in production of Indian tea was nearly 64 million pounds. In the 1919 season there was a shortage in the shipping space, again in 1920, congestion in the Port of London, made it necessary to regulate shipments from India. Thus the 1919 crop was not completely shipped till June 1920. Tea had to be kept on the gardens during the worst part of the monsoon and they arrived at market flat and dull showing the effects of storage. Then the unfavourable conditions in London rendered necessary a limitation of the quantity of tea offered at the weekly auctions in Mincing Lane, as the dealers were unable to finance or pay for larger quantities. P Griffiths, *History of the Indian Tea Industry*. p.177

⁹⁰ *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22*, p.59.

It is therefore not surprising that *coolies* on some gardens demanded the reduction of *nirikh* (task) or *nal* (measurement).⁹¹ *Coolies* of the Lungla Tea Estate during the exodus went on strike for three weeks in April, asking for the same rates as given in the neighbouring gardens. But when the new rates with the increased hoeing tasks was offered they refused, continuing with their strike.⁹²

This fall in the volume of the leaves plucked and no necessary amendments in the tasks was seriously aggravated by the oppressive practices in gardens in weighing leaves meant a sharp decline in the daily earnings of the *coolies*. Deductions were made for the weight of the basket, for wet leaf and the quality of the leaf plucked. Not only did the managers find anything wrong in deducting for the “wastage” in manufacture of tea called the ‘factory charges’, but one manager went to the extent of penalising the *coolies* an additional two pounds in peak seasons to make up for the loss on plucking early and late in the year when leaf was scarce!⁹³ No hard and fast rule was observed in regard to these deductions and in some gardens in Surma valley the deductions were as high as fifty percent.⁹⁴

Of late a novel practice of payment called the ‘ticket-system’ became quite common in the Surma valley tea gardens. In this system, the previous day’s work was paid in brass tokens of different face values at the morning muster. There was a feeling among managers that it encouraged a good muster ensuring better attendance and discipline among their working population. This meant pressing difficulties for the *coolies*, who was practically without any money in hand to buy his daily provisions and forced to take more credit from the local *kayas /mahajans*. The

⁹¹ *ALECR 1921-22*, p.65

⁹² *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22*, p.42

⁹³ Warner, *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22*, p.42

⁹⁴ *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22*, p.32.

gardens generally cashed these tokens on a weekly basis—by the time, which the *coolies* might have already been gravely indebted to the *mahajans*. The Committee came across cases where the local *kayas*, accepting the tokens did not honour its full face value, taking huge discounts on them. The Superintendent of Police of Sylhet, observed that a *coolie* who took a ticket worth 4 annas (25 pice) to the *mahajan* got only 15 pice in return.⁹⁵

Therefore the cutting down on the expenditure and changed working practices within the garden meant that certain “norms” were not honoured—*coolies* in many gardens were not given the usual agreement bonuses, *ticca* amount was reduced, and they were forced to take leave.

The unrest, if any, amongst *coolies* was I think mainly due to cutting down of expenditure. In our own case it meant that *coolies were not given the usual agreement bonuses and a smaller amount of ticca, and were also encouraged, and in some cases, forced to take more leave than they wanted and could not, of course, and understand the reason.* This fact combined with Gandhi talk that was openly being instilled into them by Bengalis in the *bustee* and bazaar, had the effect of *unsettling them and making them think there was something wrong.*⁹⁶

Land, which was an important feature on the plantations of Surma valley, was increasingly becoming a scarce commodity due to heavy influx of newer *coolies*. Also the mad extensions during the time of war could only have intruded into the land held by *coolies* for cultivation or grazing lands for their cattle.

The South Sylhet gardens, which were in close proximity to the independent state of Tipperah, saw a substantial number of *coolies* moving into the new gardens being opened there, being offered not just higher wages but land for cultivation free of rent

⁹⁵ Evidence, ALECR 1921-22, p.31.

⁹⁶ ALECR 1921-22, p.64 (Emphasis mine.)

for a term of two or three years.⁹⁷ The manager of Balisera and Lungla tea estate related to the Enquiry Commission of spending more than Rs. 1,80,000 and 60,000 respectively in recruiting during the 1915-1920 period without any increase in the *coolie* population, most of them making their way to Tipperah especially in the years 1919 and 1920.⁹⁸

That in making such a decision to move, the *coolies* were extremely alive to the situation, is made evident from statement of the manager of Madhabcherra tea estate:

They [*coolies*] put forward their grievances ...for instance they have been telling me that such and such garden and such garden is paying 8 annas for a day whereas we give them 4 and 5 annas only. During the last 4 or 5 years about 50 % of the *coolies* on one gardens gradually but peacefully absconded to Tipperah, without causing any commotion...*coolies* are attracted to Tipperah because they say that they would get 8 annas for each *hazira* and also plenty of paddy fields.⁹⁹

However the local tea bodies and the planting community signatories to the 'anti-enticement' agreement did not take this merely as a case of the *coolie* exercising a better choice.¹⁰⁰ In an illustrative case from the Naraincherra garden of Sylhet district in the year 1911, warrants were issued against certain *coolies* under agreement who had left for the adjoining Balacherra garden. The assistant manager alongwith his *sardars* and two constables proceeded to apprehend the 'absconding' *coolies*. Two of them were caught on the way. However the news of their arrest agitated their 'fellow *coolies*' and other *coolies* of the Balacherra garden who came out in force armed with sticks and bamboos. The arresting party was attacked and the prisoners rescued.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ ALECR 1921-22, pp. 87-88

⁹⁸ Evidence, ALECR 1921-22, pp..35,37-38,41

⁹⁹ Babu Rajniranjan Deb, Madhabcherra, Evidence, ALECR 1921-22, pp .29.

¹⁰⁰ See Appendix II for the text of the 'Anti-enticement agreement'.

¹⁰¹ Home Department, Police Branch, April 1911, 56, Part B.

The desertions to Tipperah was of a more serious nature and during the 1919 annual meeting of Surma Valley Branch of Indian Tea Association grave concerns were expressed and suggestions made to come to an agreement with the Tipperah authorities on this issue. Around 241 warrants were issued between 1st July 1920 and 30th June 1921, in the South Sylhet subdivision of Sylhet, mostly against *coolies* who had 'absconded' into Hill Tipperah. Out of the 216 warrants issued during the same period in Habiganj subdivision of the district, practically all were against *coolies* who had left the gardens for Hill Tipperah.

The management at times of scarcity and high prices used to arrange for the supply of rice and clothing at concession rates. But the arbitrary usage of Act XIII and contracting budgets of the gardens were inadequate to satisfactorily live out these obligations even when prices were showing a sharp rise.

Advantage [from the use of Act XIII] was taken to lower the wage to an all-round rate of Rs.5 and Rs. 4-the initial wages of new *coolies* under Act VI...while the supply of rice at Rs. 3 per maund was discontinued.

An oft repeated complaint of the departing *coolies* as *Pet nahi bharta*¹⁰² in this instance appears to be a better "indicator" of the disenchantment of the *coolies* with the life in the plantations than the cold figures of falling wages and rising cost of living.¹⁰³

¹⁰² The rough translation as 'there is not enough to eat' fails to capture the embedded social and cultural meanings of *Pet nahi bharta*. It does not merely suggest hunger and deprivation of the speaker but legitimises her/his actions taken as a consequence of it. Action manifested in variegated forms and could lead to violent attacks, food riots and the collective desire to leave as evident in our case.

¹⁰³ Sumit Sarkar in his study of conditions and nature of 'subaltern' militancy argues that the concept of breakdown of the authority structure, real or often rumoured was central to the most outbreaks. This breakdown he argues can have two dimensions- a sudden change in the conditions of life and the rumours of weakening of authority structures.' Ranajit Dasgupta has analysed a fascinating instance of agitation in the Duars tea plantation region in 1916, drawing upon symbols and idioms of the Tana Bhagat movement in Chotanagpur but definitely showing the specificity the locale. The rumours of the falling British Raj and the coming of the German *baba* could be understood in the immediate historical context. The dislocating impact of the war on the economy and the German victories in its early years gave rise to the rumour that the British Raj was not only in crisis but also coming to an end. Sumit Sarkar, *The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to Non-Cooperation, 1905-22. Subaltern Studies III*, p.305; Ranajit Das Gupta, 'Oraon Labour Agitation Duars in Jalpaiguri District, 1915-16', *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 30, 1989.

These conditions of a bankruptcy of legitimacy and a general sense of changed conditions in life exacerbated the repressed oppressions and aspirations within the plantations, which was increasingly articulated during the period. Grievances and at times purposeful action was directed against the authority structure within the plantation. *Coolies* on certain gardens went on strike objecting to the posting of a particular manager recalled from leave.¹⁰⁴ The manager of the Doloï tea company said that the *coolies* on his garden went on strike for five days demanding the dismissal of *kernani babu*.¹⁰⁵ During the April strikes in the Burtoll and Lydiacherra gardens, the *coolies* complained of *babus* cheating them in payments and drove out some of them. On being interrogated the *coolies* said that they wanted to get rid of the *babus* first and then deal with the manager.¹⁰⁶ The batches of *coolies* of Anipur Tea Estate when interrogated by the Subdivisional officer at Karimganj complained about the *Jamadar* of the garden.¹⁰⁷ JW Hallan, the manager of Phulcherra Division, talked about the “absurd” demand made by his *coolies*- that no Europeans should speak to the women and no *Babus* should speak directly to them and that everything should be done through their *sardars*.¹⁰⁸

The mechanism of discipline and punishment within the plantations needs to be emphasised. The *coolies* though were “free” in the legal sense with the abolition of Act VI in 1908 but the use of Act XIII to “steady” the labour force was a very serious impediment to their claimed freedom.

¹⁰⁴ *Forthnightly report for the 2nd half of May.*

¹⁰⁵ R Pringle, Manager, Doloï Tea Company *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22, p.48*

¹⁰⁶ *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22, p.72*

¹⁰⁷ *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22, p.63*

¹⁰⁸ JW Hallan, Manager, Phulcherra division, Consolidated Tea and Lands Company *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22, p.38-39.*

...Committee record their strong disapproval of the irregularities...particularly placing the new immigrants, under illegal long term agreements, the illegal arrest of absconders, and the practice of taking contracts from minors. They cannot believe that large concerns, at any rate, were unaware of the amending Act XII of 1920[which restricted contracts to a maximum period of one year].

The practice of private arrest not included in the Act was exercised. Cases that of *coolie* returning from jail to complete their contract on the garden was not entirely a rare phenomenon. The Manager of Bidyanagar Tea Estate in the Chargola valley brought to notice a case in which the Manager of a neighbouring garden sent *chowkidars* to his garden bring back a woman whose husband had left in the Chargola exodus.¹⁰⁹ The managers maintained their claims to exercise unrestrained power, which was no longer as compulsive and invincible.

The authority exercised by the *babus* over and above that of their *sardars* who were supposed to be their in-charge was also resented. Also they were detested for their corrupt practices in maintaining the accounts of *coolies*.¹¹⁰

The sexual exploitation of the 'coolie women' by the managers also drew deep antipathy. The *Khoreal shooting case* where a manager shot a *coolie* who was resisting his daughter being forcibly taken by him was widely publicised. The fact that the Manager got away with a small fine could not have but drawn deep resentment.¹¹¹

The loss of legitimacy, oppression and the general depressed material and living standard was inscribed in the message and person of Gandhi. There were reports from the garden staff, that letters had been received by certain *coolies* from the United Provinces that said that Gandhi would arrange free conveyance of *coolies* to their homes. Some of the departing *coolies* claimed that Gandhi has sent a steamer to

¹⁰⁹ Evidence, ALECR 1921-22, p.86

¹¹⁰ ALECR 1921-22, p..31

¹¹¹ The local press most extensively covered Khoreal Shooting case and even news articles in Calcutta were published in evidence to the oppression of *coolies* by the planters and complicity of the state in it.

Karimganj to take them back to their home districts where they would be given land for free. There were also rumours of food without work, and land now under tea to be given to them to cultivate. In some cases the garden and *hats* were said to be Gandhi's, and that the manager had no right over them, and that they could cut out the tea and plant paddy and sugarcane instead.¹¹² While in some gardens hearing that the wages in the nearby garden have been hiked agitated *coolies* stated that Gandhi has increased wages and demanded similar hikes.¹¹³

Gandhi Ka Hookum symbolised the yearnings; anxieties and the general spirit of defiance of the *coolies* expressed and legitimised through cultural/religious idioms, which were much in popular circulation. That the coolies of the valley came from similar ethnic/regional background could have been strong factors in the effectiveness of mobilisation along such idioms. During the time of the exodus there were reports of a boy in one of the gardens of Anipur proclaiming that the spirit of Gandhi had come upon him and asked all the people to gather around and listen to what he had to say (in effect what Gandhi has to say or *Gandhi ka Hookum*). He was placed on a Hindu shrine in the lines and worshipped by *coolies* for two days. Another man made similar claims in the Singlacherra gardens.¹¹⁴ There were reports of *coolies* taking oath over a bowl of holy water (*Shapath lena*) not to disobey *Gandhi Ka Hookum* of leaving the gardens in a body else being turned into mud or stone!¹¹⁵

¹¹² Panchu Gopal Mukherjee, *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22*, p.62

¹¹³ WRP Gunnery, Manager, Chargola Division. *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22*, p.57

¹¹⁴ *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22*, p.57 & 64.

¹¹⁵ *Evidence, ALECR, 1921-22* and PC Bamford *Histories of Non cooperation and Khilafat* p.61. Shahid Amin in his fascinating study of 'Gandhi as Mahatma' argues that Gandhi's pratap and appreciation of his message derived from popular Hindu beliefs and practices and the material culture of the peasantry. What the peasants thought about Mahatma were the projections on the existing patterns of popular beliefs about the 'worship of worthies' in rural north India. The stories of Mahatma from the Swadesh journal that he analyses falls in four distinct groups- testing the power of the Mahatma, opposing the Mahatma, opposing the Gandhian creed and boons granted and/or miracles performed. We do not access to such vast and continuous accounts in the region of our study but the last three categories broadly apply to the evidence of our case. Shahid Amin, Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921-22, *Subaltern Studies III*.

Religion has at times been seen as playing a specific role in a predominantly peasant society untouched by secular creeds where the breakdown of the world could only be perceived in supernatural terms.¹¹⁶ This Secular/Religious divide in modes of articulation of protest fails to appreciate the 'culture' of protest and the idioms through which they are expressed. The use of religious/cultural metaphors, stories and idioms did not necessarily mean that they were conceptualised in the spiritual rather than a material domain. Such a dichotomy creates a false distinction and simplifies the complex of no necessary essentials.

Victory cries of *Gandhi Maharaj ki Jai* [Hail King Gandhi] manifested that defiance into collective action, which was after all justified. Legitimacy of the act and its collective nature played on this self-perpetuating interplay of that it was justified because it was collective and that it was collective and so justified. Many *coolies* interrogated by their managers and *sardars* during the exodus said that they were leaving because their *bhailog* had decided to go.¹¹⁷ Formal discharge certificates were needed to be obtained for *coolies* leaving the gardens serving under an agreement of Act XIII.¹¹⁸ The Subdivisional officer of Karimganj who met many batches of the *coolies* pointed out this "illegality" of their action, but agreed upon the practice of coming to Karimganj and applying for discharge in the 'usual' way.¹¹⁹ *Coolies* admitted to the practice being observed in the past but now that as they were willing

¹¹⁶ Sumit Sarkar, *The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to Non-Cooperation, 1905-22*, *Subaltern Studies III*, pp. 309-310.

¹¹⁷ C. Townsend, Superintendent of the Longai Tea Company and H.A. Wray, Manager, Singlacherra T.E. *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22*, p.51-52, p.56.

¹¹⁸ Out of 8,799 *coolies* leaving 3,715 were under agreement, 2,286 were not under agreement and 2,798 were dependents..*ALECR 1921-22*, p.10

¹¹⁹ *Coolies* frequently came to Courts and applied for a discharge certificate on the ground that they had finished their agreement. There was no such provision in the Act, which entitled the applicant such a certificate, but it was a well established practice.

to leave in a body, they were not prepared to follow the 'norms' and more so they claimed it to be *Gandhi Baba ka hookum*.¹²⁰

Conclusions

The system of indenture was said to have had a bearing on the bargaining capabilities of the *coolie* not just at the labour market but also at the workplace. 'Non Resistance' and individualised modes of protest has been argued to constitute the norm. Chargoia exodus in that instance constituted the reflection of that transition from individualised to collective modes of protest. Without denying the oppressive aspects of the system of indenture, we in turn tried to critique such a model and look at the 'moments' of collective action in the tea plantations of Assam in the period of our study. Such an exercise was not to privilege the occasional confrontational and collective modes of protest but to question the productive use that its assumed absence was put to.

The articulation of the authority structure within the gardens backed by legal and extra-legal features invested in the person of the manager was not just premised on the brute force and oppression, but traditional/cultural idioms of legitimacy were also brought into play. Such an appreciation helped us understand the non-coercive dimensions of authority, and basis of its longevity and perpetuation.

Dustoor as we argued represented a collective sense of material and cultural well being and any dramatic deviation from that provoked anxieties inducing at times collective action. This notion of *dustoor* was not informed by any static/non-dynamic elements but to have been achieved in a negotiary process with the management.

The issues around which such collective urges to protest revealed the various anxieties from women/social/cultural issues, oppression and violence to grievances at

¹²⁰ Panchu Gopal Mukherjee, *Evidence, ALECR 1921-22*, p. 63.

the workplace. At times it was as illegitimate as to torture and abuse women seen as the repository of *izzat*, as to make them work for longer hours and pay them short wages.

The nature of collective protest revealed a strong element of physical violence. This as we argued was informed by the dimension of the modes of control with a strong element of physicality and abusive behaviour. At these moments of inversion the violence was recast on the authority structure and its symbolic manifestations. However it was not just violent and confrontational expressions, which characterised the collective modes of protest, but at times there was a mass withdrawal of work showing a sense of futility to engage in a negotiatory process.

We located the 'novelty' of the exodus in Chargola not in terms of its collective nature but in terms of the numbers involved, often not just limited to a garden, and the intentions of the coolies of making the 'long march' back home.

This to an extent was informed by the nature of the work-force coming from a similar geographical/regional background and mobilised through more informal modes along caste/kinship lines. However this was subject to changes in the first two decades of the twentieth century, due to revisions in the legislation regarding coolie recruitment and transit, and more crucially due to the specific developments happening in the wake of the War.

The artificial prosperity generated by the War meant a huge demand of working hands manifesting in the large number of *coolies* making their way to the tea gardens of Assam, now recruited through the agency of the newly constituted Labour Board. These coolies coming at times from different social/regional background faced oppression and were discriminated upon by the 'caste' coolies of the Chargola valley. Also the epidemics and lower standards of living made these coolies detest the life on

gardens and they constituted the bulk of the coolies leaving the gardens. However this 'new-recruit' theory still did not explain why only the newer coolies of the Chargaola valley left and how does one explain the leaving of the eleven hundred *coolies* who were the residents of these gardens for more than ten years.

The geographical proximity of the "affected" gardens and the specific nature of the densely populated Sylhet district with the large numbers of *hats* and *bazaars* opened up channels of communication and circulation of information. Rumours in these sites became the anxieties of state and nationalists and attempts were made to check and disown them.

Denying the 'pure autonomy' argument we argued that these rumours were informed not only by the general political climate of agitation and the spirit of defiance but also by the specific social/material context of the coolies.

The new work practices, payment strategies and general changed conditions of life and work induced a sense of disenchantment and the feeling of 'something was going absolutely wrong.' It was in this context that the issue of wage hikes acted almost as a test-issue for the already battered authority and legitimacy of the managers and their failure to effect the changes confirmed these apprehensions and the decision to move out of the gardens. *Gandhi ka Hookum* in this context alluded to a different authority, which now commanded their loyalties. The denial of a batch of *coolies* to accept the food and salt provided by the government on suspecting the garden management to be behind it and the *coolies* attributing the later rise in wages in some of the gardens to be out of Gandhi's orders could not have better represented this shift in loyalties. *Gandhi ka Hookum* however did not simplistically mean a passive reception of his ideas but various anxieties and aspirations informed by the context was read into his image and message.

CONCLUSION

The *coolie* exodus in Chargola proved to be a very interesting and eventful entry point for the larger discussions and concerns that has animated this dissertation. The intersection of the 'event' with the national Non-Cooperation movement meant a multiplicity and amplification of voices about the Assam tea gardens in general and the tea *coolies* in particular, making for an interesting read. The docile, submissive and impulsive images of the *coolie* informed the various narratives which were contended to have served different purposes in different accounts and a search for these commitments was undertaken. While the official-planter read into the *coolie* action the effects of manipulation and the evil designs of the emissaries/non-co-operators, the nationalist press and leaders saw in it as the awakening effects of the movement and the calls of Gandhi. Like the official planter narratives that saw this an evidence of 'contamination', the nationalist intervention did not appreciate a dialogic interaction with the ideas of the movement but a passive, almost unconscious internalisation of the dictates.

However our interest was not just limited to interrogate and critique the strategies of the narratives but enquire into the questions and issues raised by such readings. The first chapter especially tried to situate our discussion by looking into the characteristics of the development of tea industry in Sylhet in which the valley of Chargola was situated. Unlike the other 'labour districts' of Assam valley, the district situated in the valley of Surma was densely populated. The 'wasteland policy' of the colonial state of giving out land termed as waste to planters at extremely favourable terms therefore could not have been successfully implemented without provoking resentment and resistance from the surrounding agrarian population. The plantations

in the district showed characteristic geography and therefore the nature of tea crop produced. Also such practical impediments that the district offered meant that it was not “tapped” until that time when the tea industry in Assam got the approval from the markets in London of its viability and new areas outside valley of Assam and Cachar were explored and brought under the crop. The development of industry in Sylhet was therefore a delayed phenomenon in comparison to the other tea producing districts of Assam. However its growth in the last quarter of the nineteenth cannot be better illustrated than by the position of ‘largest tea producing district of the province’, it came to occupy by the turn of century.

This success story would be incomplete without talking about the people who made it happen in an industry, which was quintessentially ‘labour-intensive’. Labour infact was one of the most enduring anxieties of the planters of Assam most graphically expressed in terms of laziness of the native and an almost uniform complaint of its perpetual shortage. Such characterisations we argued stemmed from the superior bargaining powers that the natives enjoyed who worked in the early days of the plantations. Therefore to intensify the ‘labour process’ and curb the play of ‘labour market’, an immigrant labour force was mobilised. *Coolies* and most preferably of the *Jungle* variety of Chotanagpur became a common sense in tea plantations of Assam. The ‘upcountry *coolies*’ from North West Provinces and Bihar in this racialized sociology of *coolie* labour almost exemplified as to ‘what should not be in a tea *coolie*’. However such a characterisation almost made a U-turn in the valley of Chargola where they were almost universally preferred by the planters. This shift in the discourse was to an extent informed by the context. The ‘upcountry’ *coolies* most significantly moved into the inland destinations like the tea plantations of Assam from the 1880s when the gardens of Sylhet and Surma valley were most

rapidly coming up. Such a process was evident with respect to the *coolies* from Chotanagpur going to tea plantations in Assam valley from the 1860s. The *coolies* from NWP were mobilised through the agency of *sardars* not only making sense of their cheap rate (because of not having to go through the official formalities) but also their preference for the district of Sylhet which was more accessible.

However being recruited outside the Assam Emigrant Act through the agency of unassisted *sardars* did not ensure the 'freedom' of the *coolies* going to the valley because even though they were outside the ambit of the Assam Emigrant Act they were nevertheless indentured on the tea gardens under the Workman Breach of Contract Act, Act XIII of 1859. This was the focus of the second chapter where we attempted a more closer analysis of the modes of recruitment and settlement in the tea plantations of Assam bearing in mind the area of our interest.

The recruitment and settlement of *coolies* for Assam tea gardens was from the 1860s conducted under the provisions of the Assam Emigrant Act with its comprehensive regulatory and policing provisions bringing every aspect of recruitment, transit and settlement under vision and control. The controls that it provided was almost epitomised by the right of private arrest seen at times to have inaugurated the indenture system in Assam tea gardens. However we tried to go beyond the freedom-unfreedom debate of the system and tried to understand the other strategies, discourses and practices of control, where a majority of *coolies* especially in the valley of Surma were outside its ambit being recruited under Act XIII.

The applicability of a general contractual Act, like Act XIII, to the tea *coolies* generated a lot of debate in the official circles in the 1880s as there were moves to make it inapplicable for the tea gardens of Assam. However the shift in the governmental policy was located in the use the Act was put to reengage not just time-expired *coolies*

but its widespread prevalence in the valley of Surma. Here the *coolies* were recruited by *sardars* working outside the Act recruited along caste/kinship lines, brought to the gardens under his own initiative and placed under the Act XIII on the payment of the bonus. A major official explanation for this practice was the 'cost effectiveness' of the entire process. However as we argued that this was also conditioned by the superior accessibility of the valley and therefore attempts to put the *coolies* under the stringent Act at times met with 'resistance' in form of rising rates of desertion.

However the Non-act *coolie* was not 'free' in the classical sense of the word of not only being indentured on the payment of an advance and punishment for the breach of contract which the *coolie* entered into, on such payments, but also being incarcerated in the governmental discourses of knowledge and the necessity to act in situations demanding proactive gestures.

The Act I of 1882 most clearly revealed the contradictory pressures, interests and anxieties that animated the question of *coolie* recruitment and settlement in the tea gardens of Assam. The relaxation of the labour recruitment and the intensification of the labour process as demanded by the tea pressure groups got the governmental approval in the form of the increase in the period of the labour contract and the inauguration of the 'free recruitment' system. This demand was seen to be situated in the capitalist overdrive in the industry, demanding a cheap and unremitting supply of labour. However the relaxed system provoked patriarchal and medical anxieties with the increasing cases of abductions of women and the high incidence of cholera seen to be its obvious fallout.

The changing medical discourse of cholera, legislation and the reports of officials called for greater interventions and controls having a bearing on the unassisted *sardari* migration to the valley of Surma. The legislation of 1901 encapsulated such

concerns with the checks on the recruitment and transit process making it difficult for the single women to travel to Assam without patriarchal consent and the clampdown on the unregulated migration. This had a bearing in the valley of Surma with the checks making the unassisted *sardari* mode of recruitment more cumbersome. At the same time the penal-contract system of Assam was coming under attack and the Surma valley tea interests group made a case for its abrogation with the necessary additions being made to Act XIII—the preferred labour law.

It was in this historical context that we tried to situate the exodus in Chargola, however an exclusive focus on the episode would have led to certain conclusions that we attempted to critique in the third chapter. Denying any such neat transition from individualised to collective modes of protest, we looked into the ‘instances’ of collective action in the tea plantations of Assam from the late decades of nineteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth century. This exercise was not premised to valorise the occasional moments as the ‘norm’ in the gardens; where every act of oppression was necessarily resisted in a collective confrontational sense. Such a view as we argued failed to appreciate the normalising strategies that informed the relationships of power and authority. Therefore our focus on these moments that were ‘abnormal’, was an attempt to understand how it was made so, in those ‘normal’ times.

We particularly worked with the category of *dustoor* or customary as the reflection of material/social well being of the *coolies*, not in the static/non-dynamic sense but acutely informed by the context. The deviations we argued at times provoked action, which after all thought to be ‘legitimate’. The violent nature of protest was informed by the nature of authority which a strong disciplining instinct which at these moments of inversions were recast generally on the managers upon

whom such an authority was vested. The collective will to leave the gardens in a number of cases that were cited, showed not just the prevalence of anxieties but also the futility of engaging in the process of negotiation with the authority, which itself was no longer legitimate.

The exodus in Chargola therefore did not present the 'unique' in the sense of the being the collective, but showed certain features like in terms of its scope and numbers involved that needed to be explained. This we argued, had to be located in the specific history of plantation in the region, with the labour force not only coming from a particular geographical area, but also recruited and settled under certain informal modes. The geographical and social characteristics of the valley were also significant in such articulations. The unassisted *sardari* system from its principal catchment area, of North Western Provinces, made a case for a collective/community sense among the *coolies*.

The nature and modes of recruitment of the *coolies* was showing changes happening in the first two decades of the 20th century. The War and the fillip that it gave to the tea industry, meant a recruitment drive in the industry with the *coolies* now recruited by the Labour Board, coming from a different social/regional background in the Valley. There were instances of caste abuse and discrimination in the Chargola valley on these newer *coolies* and most of the *coolies* who moved out during the time of exodus were these newly recruited ones. However focussing exclusively on this had its problems for why were just the newer *coolies* of the valley leaving and how does one explain the substantial number of older *coolies* leaving the gardens.

A closer look into the valley and the plantations gave us critical insights how the networks of communications were forged and information circulated. Rumours in

circulation revealed a deep sense of anxiety and crisis among the working population in the valley. These anxieties we argued were informed by the context showing a sense of change for the worse. Legitimacy was stake for its crisis could not have been better represented with the managers failing to hike wages, medicine failing to protect lives and the British Raj failing to the onslaught of the imminent *Gandhi Raj*—the perfect makings for a ‘world turned upside’ down. The batches of *coolies* leaving the valley claiming to work under Gandhi’s orders in that instance did not make a case of manipulation or awakening of the *coolie*, but a reading of their anxieties into the Gandhian message and person often at contradiction to the “official” position. Also the religious/cultural expressions of these terms though strong mobilising idioms in a regionally ‘homogeneous’ population was not argued to be conceptualised in an exclusively spiritual or material domain. *Gandhi ka Hookum* in turn defined that new authority and the legitimacy the act—in this case of moving out of the gardens, drew from associating with it.

APPENDIX I

ACT XIII CONTRACT

With 8 anna Stamp

Contract under Act XIII of 1859, between the undersigned labourer and the Manager of the _____ tea estate, WHEREAS I _____ the said labourer _____ do now hereby bind myself to serve as a coolie for a period of _____ days in the _____ tea estate for which I hereby acknowledge to have received from the Manager of the said Estate, the sum of Rs. _____ as an advance, and I do hereby make the following Covenants: --

1. That I shall like other imported labourers work out the said period of my contract for _____ days without any break or objection and do all the works of a coolie or any work that is required of me of whatever description, under the direction and orders of the Manager or the representatives of the Estate.
2. That the time of my service, viz., _____ days, shall be made up of full daily attendance to my work. I shall serve for _____ days, calculating a day according to the measure of work, which is, or may be, prevalent in the said Estate for determining a daily attendance or full task and I accept the garden *Hazirah* book as a true and proper account of the number of my attendance at work from which book the date of the termination of my contract shall be determined.
3. That my wages shall be at the rate of Rs _____ per month and that every month's wages shall be paid to me within the following month.
4. The amount of any advance made to me, by the Manager in cash or otherwise and the price of rice or any other food I may receive from the Garden Godown shall be deducted from my monthly wages, and I shall only be entitled to receive the balance of my wages after such deductions have been made.
5. That it before the expiry of this my contract I absent myself from the work without leave, or abscond, or if by disobedience to any lawful command or in any other way I cause any loss to my Employer, I shall be liable to punishment under the said Act according to Law, and I further bind myself to refund to my said employer the said amount of my _____ together with Rs. 25 as compensation for loss, in all Rs. _____ which sum I shall pay without any objection.

Dated the _____

| Number | Name of coolie | Father's name | Age | Sex | Caste | Zillah | Pergunnah | Thannah | Village | Signature |
|--------|----------------|---------------|-----|-----|-------|--------|-----------|---------|---------|---|
| | | | | | | | | | | H. Mark. Witness Witness Manager |

APPENDIX II

MEMORANDUM OF AGREEMENT IN CONNECTION WITH ENTICEMENT OF LABOUR FROM TEA GARDENS AND OTHER CONCERNS IN THE BRAHMAPUTRA AND SURMA VALLEY.

The proprietors or accredited representatives of the several companies or concerns who have signed copies of this agreement do and each of them doth by these presents mutually bind the said companies and concerns to abide by the following Rules and Provisions which are aimed at discouraging and preventing the enticement, harbouring, detention or employment (hereafter called "offences") of garden or other coolies without the consent of the companies and concerns by or for whom such coolies may have been imported recruited or employed and at prescribing certain fines or penalties by way of damages for infringement of such Rules or Provisions, which Rules and Provisions are framed and subscribed on the assurance or assumption that all proprietors, Board of Directors, and Managing or other Agents or Secretaries of the said companies and concerns may be depended on to enforce due compliance with all awards made in pursuance of such Rules and Provisions, their active support in that behalf being deemed essential to the same being successfully carried out.

For the purposes of this agreement the following definitions will obtain:-

- (1) *Offence*- A person is guilty of an offence against these rules who employs or harbours or entices any coolie who is claimable, under these rules, by another concern.
- (2) *Defaulter* means any free coolie who has absconded while under *bona fide* advances to his concern or a coolie recruited by one concern who has proceeded direct from the recruiting district to another concern without reporting to, and obtaining the sanction of, the first concern.
- (3) *Bona fide advances* means advances made by a concern or its recognised agents and do not include shop-keeper's bills or line debts.
- (4) *To employ and/ or employment* shall include special contract work and/ or work under contractors engaged by and /or on the concern.

IT IS AGREED THAT---

1. All coolies living within the area of a concern's grant or premises are to be considered coolies of such concern whether regularly employed or not, but coolies living in the vicinity of a concern and outside its boundaries shall not be considered as coolies of such concern unless under agreement to the concern.
2. No subscriber to these rules shall employ directly or indirectly or harbour or detain any coolie (whether under contract or not) who has been imported by another concern, within the period of 3 year after importation, it being understood, however, that no claim under this rule shall be made or entertained unless duly formulated within two calendar years after the coolie has left the importing concern.
3. No subscriber to these rules shall employ directly or indirectly or harbour or detain any coolie (whether under contract or not) other than mentioned in

Rule 2 who may be under Act XIII agreement to another concern, as shown by such concern's Cash and agreement Books, it being understood, however, that no claim under this rule shall be made or entertained unless duly formulated within two calendar years after the coolie has left the concern to which he was under contract.

4. No subscriber to these rules shall employ directly or indirectly or harbour or detain a coolie who is a defaulter to another concern, it being understood, however, that no claim under this rule shall be made or entertained unless duly formulated within two calendar years after such coolie has defaulted.
5. No subscriber to these rules shall directly or indirectly entice or endeavour to entice any coolies employed on another concern from such employment.
6. No subscriber to these rules shall employ directly or indirectly or harbour or detain a coolie who has been imported *bonafide* by him and has been employed as a coolie and/or as a recruiter, but who, it is proved, was either originally imported, or employed under Act XIII agreement, or employed as a free coolie, by another concern.
7. The respective penalties for breaches of the foregoing rules No. 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 shall not exceed the maximum penalties respectively laid down for breaches of these respective rules in the schedule hereto. Such sum or sums as may be awarded under this schedule shall be in addition to any other sum, properly claimable under Rule 8 as recruiting expenses.
8. In all cases in which under these rules (save as hereafter provided in cases coming under the provisions of Rule 6) coolies are properly claimable from one concern by another and are returned to the claiming concern the claiming concern shall not be responsible to pay the concern from which such coolies return, any sums of money advanced or any bonuses or other like sums paid by such latter concern to such coolies. In such cases of claims under Rule 6, where the recruiting coolie and her wife husband child or children are returned to the claiming concern the claiming concern shall be liable to pay the actual recruiting expenses paid by the concern from which such coolies are claimed in respect of such coolies.
9. Every complaint as to the alleged infringement of the foregoing rules or as to an offence of the kind or nature in such Rules indicated shall be in writing signed by the Superintendent or Manager in charge who is directly responsible to the Agents or Proprietors of the complainant concern and addressed and delivered or sent to the like Superintendent or manager of the concern complained against and every such complaint shall state:-
 - (1) In the case of an alleged infringement of either Rules 2, 3, 4 or 6 as above, such of the
Following particulars as are applicable to the particular case:-
 - (a) All particulars necessary for the identification of the coolies who are the subject matter of the complaint.
 - (b) The period, if any, of the coolie's non-expired service compulsory or otherwise: *Such complaint shall also contain a statement that in the event of the non-return of the coolies the following sums will be claimed, viz :*

- (c) The amount of penalty.
 - (d) The cost of importing and recruiting the coolies when claimed under Rule 2.
 - (e) The amount of advances outstanding when claimed under Rules 3 and 4.
- (2) In the case of an alleged infringement of Rule 5 the grounds which it is alleged constitute the alleged offence.
10. The recipient of any such complaint within three days from the receipt thereof, shall, if the complaint be made under Rules 2, 3 or 4 hereof, and in the event of his not repudiating the same either-
- (a) Pay or remit or settle the amount claimed in which case he may retain the coolie, or
 - (b) Forthwith eject (in the presence of complainant's representative if so required) such coolie with all his belongings from his concern.
11. If the complaint be made under Rule 6, and in the event of his not repudiating the same he shall forthwith eject (in the presence of complainant's representative if so required) such coolie with his or her wife, husband, child or children and all his belongings from his concern.
12. In the event of the recipient of any such complaint (whether made under Rules 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6) repudiating responsibility thereof-
- (c) he shall deliver or send to the complainant a written statement recording the grounds on which he disputes liability in the whole or in part, as the case may be, provided that if he adopts this course his liability shall not be affected should the coolies or any of them abscond before final award or payment thereof.
13. If the recipient of any such complaint should fail or neglect to take either of these courses, he shall stand liable for the full amount of the claim and/or penalties provided by the rules as the case may be.
14. If the dispute be not otherwise adjusted, the complainant may send-
- (a) to the Secretary of the Assam Branch:-
 - (i) when the complainant concern and the concern complained against are both in the Brahmaputra valley;
 - (ii) when the complainant concern is in the Surma Valley and the concern complained against is in Brahmaputra valley;

(b) to the secretary of the Surma Valley Branch:-

- (i) when the complainant concern and the complained against are both in the Surma valley;
- (ii) when the complainant concern is in the Brahmaputra Valley and the concern complained against is in Surma valley;

under registered post, a full copy of his complaint and of the other side's statement to be adjudicated upon by a Court of arbitration.

APPENDIX III¹

CONFERENCE OF CHARGOLA VALLEY TEA PLANTERS AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS, HELD AT DULLABCHERRA CLUB ON 6TH MAY 1921.

Present:

Officials

Commissioner, Surma Valley and Hill
Deputy Commissioner, Sylhet
Superintendent of Police, Sylhet

Tea Planters

Mr. Bather, Dullabcherra.
Mr. Hunter, Bidyanagar.
Mr. Simpson, Singlacherra.
Mr. Macleod, Mookamcherra
Mr. Dunlop, Gumbhira.
Mr. Wray, Maguracherra.

The position presented to the conference was:-

- (1) General unrest among the labour force, the coolies have been instigated to make a united demand for 0-8-0, 0-6-0 and 0-4-0 annas "*haziras*".
- (2) Already over 1000 coolies from Anipore, Mookamcherra and Damcherra have left their gardens and are being fed by Government in Karimganj and the coolies of Balcherra are on strike.
- (3) More strikes are apprehended immediately or after next pay day.
- (4) Unless something is done to satisfy the coolies the gardens throughout the Valley risk losing the greater part of their labour force.
- (5) There is a grave fear of strikes ending in rioting.
- (6) There is a consensus of opinion that present wages are too low and that the wage of a man for a fair task should be 0-6-0 annas and of a woman annas 0-4-0 and that unless these rates are conceded a large proportion of the coolies will strike work or desert.
- (7) From the official standpoint it was considered inadvisable to attempt to enforce Act XIII agreements and impracticable to force deserters to return to their gardens.
- (8) While recognising the danger of yielding to pressure and the encouragement that such yielding may give to agitation elsewhere the officials did not consider this a sufficient reason for refusing concessions justly due and absolutely necessary to keep the labour on the gardens. In coming to this conclusion we took into consideration the isolated position of the valley, which lessens the effect of concessions here on the tea industry elsewhere.
- (9) We therefore advised all present to concede the rates they had unanimously agreed on, and to do this at once and not wait for further trouble.

¹ Reproduced from Appendix III of ALECR 1921-22, p.118

APPENDIX IV

The Lesson of Assam
Young India, 15th June, 1921.

My object in referring to the Assam tragedy is to save my own conscience, and draw a moral from it. As soon as the coolies struck work, I received a wire asking me to go to the scene of what has developed into a national affliction. But I telegraphed and wrote to all I could think of. I had not the courage to leave the work in hand. No man dare leave the service to which he is called, however humble it may be, for answering a call to another, however high it may be, unless there is a clear way open to it. I found none. I could not leave the task in hand. The dumb labourers and God will forgive me if I have erred. For I feel that I am fully serving the labourers whilst I am occupied with the ceaseless prosecution of the Bezwada programme. My grief over my helplessness is all the greater because, somehow or other, the labourers have come to think that they will find me by their side, wherever and whenever they may be in trouble. I am humble enough to know that, in the vast majority of cases, I can send them nothing but my heartfelt prayers and sympathy. The spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is incapable. I hear, I feel and fret over the hopeless incapacity to help.

Happily God is as powerful as man is weak. He works through an infinitude of agencies. He has Andrewses and Dases ever ready at his beck and call. I remain happy in the faith that God leaves no misery uncared for. We can but do our allotted task in prayerful humility and with all possible watchfulness.

The Assam tragedy has enabled Mr. Andrews to draw up a terrible indictment against the Indian Government. The callous indifference, in the name of impartiality, shown to the immediate wants of the labourers, even assuming that they were in the wrong, the charge of the Gurkhas and the hackeyed defence of the necessity of using force against a perfectly helpless people, mark out the Government as barbarous and utterly untrustworthy of respect. Why were the Gurkhas let loose upon the coolies? Everyone knows that the army contains some men simply trained to be brutal and inhuman. They may be good for war, but to employ them for dealing with coolies on strike is to side with the rich and powerful. The refusal to take rice offered in name of the Government was a refusal to live by the hand that humbled. And when the spirit of quiet courage and resignation pervades India, the fate of the Government is sealed.

Mr. Andrews deplored the sympathetic strike of the steamship employees. Whosoever instigated it did an ill service to the labourers. In India we want no political strikes. We are not yet instructed enough for them. Not to have political strikes is to forward the cause of freedom. We do not need an atmosphere of unsettled unrest. It hampers our progress towards the final stages of our programme. A soldier who run amok is unfit to be in an army. We must gain control over all unruly and disturbing elements, or isolate them even as we are isolating the Government. The only way, therefore, we can help strikers is to give them help and relief when they have struck their own *bona-fide* grievances. We must sedulously prevent all other strikes. We seek not to destroy capital or capitalists, but to regulate the relations between capital and labour. We want to harness capital to our side. It would be folly to encourage sympathetic strikes.

APPENDIX V

CHAIRMAN'S ADDRESS TO THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE SURMA VALLEY BRANCH OF THE INDIAN TEA ASSOCIATION, held at the Amusement Club, Silchar, on Wednesday, the 8th March 1922.

Gentlemen,-Before reviewing the past year I would like to welcome our guests who have come, in some cases, long distances to hear what we have to say, and I trust also to give some useful information.

Gentlemen, I am not a politician and this is not a political meeting, but as about 10,000 coolies have been lost to this valley by the work of paid political agitators, it is quite impossible to review the past year without bringing in the political side of the present unrest.

When the non-cooperators began their agitation in the Surma valley they found it ideally suited for purposes, as police protection in this valley, is practically non-existent and public security has rested on the prestige of the white man; and the elimination of that prestige and creating an atmosphere of racial hatred was the first item on the programme of these non-cooperators.

Now Gentlemen, after reading the treatment by an Indian mob of their own creed and colour, at Gorakhpore, without any racial hatred to really inflame them; I consider that every white man in this country has a grave responsibility, and that we should make it our principal duty to keep the people at home fully informed as to the course of events in this country, and so work up a real live interest in Indian affairs, so that important alterations in the governing of these people should not be left entirely to a Secretary of State.

At a meeting of your General Committee held in Silchar on 25th January, it was decided that the position in this valley was most unsatisfactory and accordingly your general Committee wired to His Excellency the Governor to this effect, this did not mean gentlemen that we were in any way dissatisfied with our local officers who have always done their utmost, but our local officers are here to interpret the law; and what we wished to emphasise to His Excellency the Governor was that the law at that time was unsuitable and that the law did not meet the present situation also that the force at the disposal of our officers were insufficient to enforce any law or order or if necessary, to protect life or property.

His Excellency the Governor met your General Committee and some of the leading planters in Silchar on the 4th February, and at that meeting the requirements of this valley, as that meeting saw them were very forcibly placed before him.

As, Cachar has, so far, had no bloodshed possibly there are men who think we overstated our case, but what about Sylhet? Do you realise what the position in Sylhet would have been if the Commissioner and the 30 men had been wiped out? Do you realise that behind these 30 men there was a population of 2 ½

million people a great number of whom I am sorry to say are assuredly disloyal and distinctly hostile. Do you realise that if these thirty men had been wiped out that possibly tea gardens would have been attacked. If you realise this you will realise that meeting on the 4th February correctly gauged the serious situation in this valley, and your General Committee most certainly did not over state our case.

Now Gentlemen, with reference to the industry in the past there has been a good deal of professional jealousy, and when a man had trouble with his coolies, it was sometimes inferred the cause was bad management; if that was true in the past, which I very much doubt, it is most certainly not going to be true of the future, as we are all going to have trouble with our coolies, and I appeal to you to unite against this very real danger and to remember that united we may stand but divided a great number of us are certainly going to fall and I am quite certain that we shall have less trouble and fewer strikes, if the coolies see that the planters are combined and determined, so far as possible, to help one another to stop the most unsatisfactory state of affairs.

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