



2. Borderlands, Rice Eaters, and Tea Growers

HISTORICALLY, ASSAM WAS A BORDERLAND on the margins of Indic culture. Over the centuries Indo-Aryan migrants bearing wet-rice technology, Sanskritic caste, and ritual norms settled there alongside indigenous groups practicing diverse technologies and belief systems. Textualized representations of difference and alterity between Assam and the Indic heartland were generated and extended even as military, commercial, and cultural encounters strengthened the links between these spaces. With the annexation of Assam in 1826 and the discovery of tea thereafter, Assamese élites soon deemed it necessary to prove their Indic credentials. This chapter argues that boundaries for Assam's inhabitants, once permeable, became more rigid over the colonial period as élite local groups began to emphasize their racial distance from social subordinates and seek a place in the Indic sun.

In 1881 the census showed Assam's population to be 4,881,426, a considerable increase of 376,550 over the estimates of 1872.¹ A large part of this increase was due to the operations of the tea plantation economy. British planters were now importing a large number of labourers annually into Assam. These "coolie" newcomers were supplemented by European planters, "Marwari" traders, Bengali Hindu clerks, Nepali graziers, and East Bengali Muslim traders and peasants. Migration into Assam was not in any way a new phenomenon, but its scope and prominence were greatly amplified under colonial modernity. Local reactions to this population increase were mixed.

In 1885 a writer for the periodical *Assam Bandhu* declared, “Apart from the people of our own land and the people of the hills, everyone else is a Bongali [lit. inhabitant of Bengal]. The very word denotes an inauspicious and unholy jati.”²² This statement should be read as an aggressive response to the rapidly changing demographics in British-ruled Assam, rather than as a statement of fact. Neighbouring Bengal had historically functioned as a symbolic and real space where flows of people and cultures encountered the Brahmaputra valley. Conventionally the terms “Bongali” and “Bangal” denoted residents of Bengal. But within Assam these terms were used to refer to outsiders, denizens of an indeterminate space beyond Assam’s western limits. The use of these terms allowed Assam’s inhabitants to make a conceptual differentiation between their *des* (homeland) and other Indic lands. This distinction acquired force in the medieval period and retained sway until the nineteenth century. People, rather than space, formed its referent. Yet the writer for the *Assam Bandhu* now employed the term “Bongali” to articulate his negative feelings toward new migrants into Assam, whether from Bengal or beyond.

In the past Assam had connected with other regions of the subcontinent through occasional flows of people and long-distance commerce, alongside seasonal links for trade and pilgrimage with Himalayan regions such as Bhutan and Tibet. While successive waves of Indo-Aryan migrants from the North and East into Assam helped to establish wet-rice technology and caste ideology, the Indic world continued to imagine Assam as a distant, ritually ambiguous frontier zone. Dominant literary representations, whether in older Sanskrit or later Persian texts, continued to recycle images of a fabulous and mysterious periphery inhabited by practitioners of the occult, yoga, and black magic. This textualized imagery obfuscated the actuality of a mobile frontier where material goods, people, and ideas circulated and mingled in Assam with existing institutions and discourses.

The impact of Indic knowledge upon the region itself was to harden internal social and cultural hierarchies. By the nineteenth century Assam’s élites flaunted Indic genealogies of élite descent and caste purity as a sign of racial distinctiveness from social subordinates, even as they prized local indicators of social capital such as titles bestowed by Ahom rulers, and Asomiya vernacular prowess. Through the workings of the new colonial economy, this hierarchy combined with Victorian notions of race science to create a situation in which local élites racialized

tea's new labouring migrants as ritually impure and primitive aboriginals, and sought to prove the impeccability of their own Indic and Aryanist credentials.

“Indo-Aryan” Agriculturists and a Moving Frontier

Sanskrit literature of the later Vedic period described Assam as a distant land toward the East. The *Satpatha Brahmana* deemed the region impure for ritual sacrifices, and therefore for Indo-Aryan settlement.³ In fact, as the historian Richard Eaton's work shows, textual taboos notwithstanding, Indo-Aryan groups in early South Asia gradually settled the upper, the middle, and finally the lower Gangetic region. Plough-bearing migrants pushed first into Bengal and later into Assam.⁴ In the Brahmaputra valley they settled amid existing inhabitants who, by contrast, used stone hoes to cultivate rice crops. Assam's rich mythology about local figures such as Raja Narak-Asur and Usha-Ban interacting with Indic figures such as the god Krishna reveal the tensions, as existing groups of “Mlecchas, Danavas, and Asuras” (lit. demons—that is, people outside the ritual pale) were absorbed into the world of Indo-Aryan newcomers.⁵

Historians disagree on when these Indo-Aryan migrations from northern and eastern India took place, and how far their wet-rice cultivating, iron plough technology penetrated. The archaeologist Nayanjot Lahiri cites more than thirty Sanskrit inscriptions of the fifth to fifteenth centuries which recorded privileges and lands granted to Brahmins. Based on them she postulates the presence of a highly developed agricultural civilization in Assam in which peasant life revolved around homesteads, paddy fields, dry fields, and ponds.⁶ Yet scholars such as Amalendu Guha dispute her conclusions. They warn that epigraphic sources from ruling groups eager for ritual and territorial aggrandizement need to be treated with caution. Amalendu Guha describes Assam's Sanskritization as slow and patchy. Early settled agriculturists long formed isolated outposts in a sea of shifting hoe cultivation and forest land. Different levels of technology and culture probably coexisted in early Assam, even in the fertile Brahmaputra valley. Near the Ambari (Guwahati) temple complex, where the finding of fine wheel-turned pottery brought claims of an ancient Brahmaputra valley civilization, archaeologists also found contem-

poraneous evidence for crude stone hoes. His view is strengthened by the tendency of this mix of plough and hoe cultivators, and wide variations in material and social culture, to remain characteristic of Assam until the mid-nineteenth century.⁷

In addition, Upper and Lower Assam developed quite differently. Known to late Vedic lore as Kamarupa, Lower Assam was closer to Bengal and allowed closer links to the Gangetic plains. The historian Kunal Chakrabarti argues that Lower Assam produced a number of *Upapurana* and *Tantra* literary texts, which were Brahminical attempts to integrate ritually peripheral lands. The *Kalika Purana*, *Jogini Tantra*, and other works valorized local shrines such as that of the Kamakhya mother-goddess (near Guwahati) and linked them with worship of newer Indo-Aryan gods such as Shiva, Vishnu, and their consorts.⁸ The relatively late appearance of locally produced Sanskrit texts between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries supports the thesis of Assam's tardy and incomplete incorporation into the Indo-Aryanist world. The older Sanskrit inscriptions can then be taken to refer to the smaller groups of early migrants who brought wet-rice, plough-based agriculture, caste ideology, and Sanskrit rituals into Lower Assam. These pioneering Indo-Aryan migrants interacted with extant tribal groups who possessed a range of technological and belief systems. While some local cults such as that of the Kamakhya mother-goddess were incorporated into the Brahminical belief system, others such as the Kachari and Chutia worship of the Bathou and Tamreswari deities stayed on its fringes.

Outside of belief systems, divergent groups of Assam's inhabitants found an important element of cultural unity insofar as *bhaat* (cooked rice) represented a common staple food. In the Assam plains rice, fish, and *saak* (wild greens) collected from common lands formed the essential diet across the social divide. In the hills meat was substituted for fish, and bamboo for greens. For all except ritually orthodox upper castes, this diet was supplemented by home-brewed *lao pani* (rice beer). Newcomers usually signified their absorption when they adopted these dietary and other living habits. Yet notwithstanding the entry of successive waves of migrants and Indic cultural influences, Assam's ecology and location rendered it for the most part a mysterious, impenetrable frontier until well into the colonial period.

Borderly Transactions

The terms “Bongali” and “Bangal” as indices of externality also reveal how pre-modern territoriality was often linked with a notion of community. The historians Romila Thapar and Hermann Kulke see early state growth as tied to an emergent sense of territoriality.⁹ Often territoriality was defined through interactions with external forces rather than rigid spatial or ethnic parameters. For instance, the category Bangal first appears in local chronicles that narrated military conflicts with medieval Indo-Turkish forces. Later the British were called *boga* (white) Bangals.

Often this sense of alterity worked both ways. Those whom the Assamese saw as Bangals had their own views of Assam as a foreign, alien space. Persian chroniclers who accompanied invading armies into the Brahmaputra valley annexed older Sanskrit lore about Kamarupa as a land of *jadugiri* (black magic) to their own experiences to fashion a potent, alienating image of Assam. They tacitly denied any affinity to other parts of the subcontinent when they located Assam alongside other fearsome lands beyond the Himalayas. For example, the Persian poet Mulla Darviah’s ode of 1663 declared: “Assam, which lies on the border of China and Cathay; It is another world, another people and other customs; its land is not like our land, its sky is not like our sky.”¹⁰ Assam’s witching reputation was such that the Rajput prince Ram Singh arranged to have his expedition, mounted on behalf of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, accompanied by several *pirs* (holy men) and the Sikh guru Tegh Bahadur.¹¹

Nonetheless, continued transactions between Assam and the Indic world did substantially extend zones of exchange and mutuality, even as different sides employed a discursive vocabulary of alterity. Between 1494 and 1533 Bengal’s Hussain Shahi regime dominated a large portion of Lower Assam. The Ahom kings forced its retreat in the course of their own expansion down the Brahmaputra valley from their original base in Upper Assam. In addition, over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there was a long history of military struggle between Ahom and Mughals. One effect of this conflict was the long and gradual permeation of courtly and administrative Indo-Persian mores, as well as a steady influx of Muslim migrants from Bengal and North India. These migrants were often sponsored by rulers for building, brass-working, scribal, priestly, and Persian skills.

Brahmin priests, Sufi teachers, and Bengal artisans were particularly welcome. The Ahom king Rudra Singha patronized a talented craftsman, Ghanashyam, who is said to have introduced Bengal's brick ornamentation style in place of wooden buildings.¹²

Many of these Muslims settled and intermarried with existing populations. Testimony for this comes from Shihabuddin Talish, the chronicler who accompanied Mir Jumla's Mughal expedition in 1663. He observed sourly that of the "Musalmans who had been taken prisoner in former times and had chosen to marry [here], their descendants act exactly in the manner of the Assamese, and have nothing of Islam except the name; their hearts are inclined far more toward mingling with the Assamese than toward association with Muslims."¹³ Talish's reaction probably stemmed from finding that his co-religionists were in the trusted service of the enemy. His assertion that local Muslims were not allowed to perform their religious duties certainly ran counter to the evidence of an eighteenth-century folksong which narrated how the Ahom king Siva Singha built a mosque big enough to house six score devotees at a time.¹⁴ The most important Islamic shrine was the Hajo mosque in Lower Assam, adjacent to the tomb of the Sufi teacher Ghiyasuddin Aulia. The shrine was known as Poa Mecca, since a pilgrimage bestowed a *poa* (one-fourth) of Mecca's blessings.¹⁵ Sufi preachers such as Azan Fakir who migrated to Assam from Baghdad in the seventeenth century propagated a faith and a way of life based on devotional principles quite similar to local Vaishnavite teachings.¹⁶ Azan Fakir's real name was Shah Milan, but he took his sobriquet from the Azan (call to prayer). A large number of *jikir* (Assamese Sufi songs) are attributed to him.¹⁷ Local lore speaks of Azan Fakir's initial persecution by Ahom officials, soon followed by royal rehabilitation with grants of revenue-free lands.¹⁸

Long-distance trade represented another channel of interaction with the Indic world, although its character and volume often depended on political circumstances. Luxury goods were the original mainstay of the trade between Assam, Bengal, and North India, since everyday staples were locally produced. The best-known of these luxuries was a condiment, salt. Lacking adequate local sources, Assam's pre-modern élites consumed expensively procured imported salt. Common people depended on home-made substitutes such as *khar* (plantain bark-ash). Talish was horrified at the absence of mar-

kets for staples, finding that betel nuts were the only edible goods for sale. As he remarked, “the inhabitants store in their houses one year’s supply of food of all kinds; and are under no necessity to sell or buy eatables.”¹⁹ Until the seventeenth century Bengal merchants sailed on large boats into Lower Assam. There Assamese traders and some Vaishnavite monasteries took a leading role in sending long-distance goods upriver.

Ongoing rivalry between Ahom and Mughals caused the Assam kings to prohibit foreign traders’ entry into the kingdom. This forced them to exchange goods at the border. “Once a year, by order of the Raja, a party used to go for trade to their frontier near Guwahati; they have gold, musk, aloe wood, pepper, spikenard, and silk cloth in exchange of salt, saltpeter, sulphur, and other products.”²⁰ Urbane Mughal courtiers were understandably amazed that “their kings neither allow foreigners to enter their lands, nor permit any of their own subjects to go out of it.”²¹ In reality, traders often did manage to evade such restrictions.²² Also, Ahom control extended only over the Brahmaputra valley; other routes to Bengal were open. For example, a key route connected the Bengal district of Sylhet to the Khasi and Jaintia hill states. Cotton, iron, wax, ivory, betel leaves, and cloth were exchanged at Jaintiapur for Bengal’s salt, tobacco, rice, and goats.²³

In the absence of political rivalry, there were no prohibitions on free movement of people and commodities across the hilly territories which linked Assam with Tibet, Yunnan, and Burma. Another Persian chronicle, the *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* by Minhaj-i-Siraj, mentions regular caravan routes used mostly by Tibetan pilgrims and traders.²⁴ Assam’s traders travelled through territory controlled by Bhutia chiefs to reach Geegunsheer, about two months’ journey from Tibet. There they sold rice, silk cloths, iron, lac, skins, buffalo horns, and precious stones. Again, from Bhutan, Bhutias and Tibetans journeyed to Hajo for religious and trading purposes.²⁵ They also timed their journeys so as to take advantage of markets and fairs such as the Udalguri one held annually at the foot of the Bhutan hills. The last Ahom capital, the town of Jorhat, was named after the two *haats* (markets) held on the banks of the Dikhow river in Upper Assam.

Right into the nineteenth century barter held the key to these transactions, since cash coins played only a minor role in Assam’s economy. Local coinage appeared from the sixteenth century, mostly in higher denominations. In the late seventeenth century the Mu-

ghals found that *kauri* (conch shells), silver, and gold coins circulated in the Ahom kingdoms, but no copper coins.²⁶ Since the volume and value of salt imports from Bengal alone exceeded local products, Assam had a long-standing outflow of slaves and gold. Subsequently, King Rudra Singha set up a revenue farming system that allowed a steady exchange of commodities between Assam and Bengal, but minimized direct contact. He appointed revenue farmers called *Duariya Baruas* at the Hadira Chowky frontier outpost opposite Goalpara. These functionaries were in charge of exchanging Assam's goods with Bengal's traders. The Duariya Baruas were assisted by *Bairagis* (customs officials). These revenue farmers paid the Ahom state an annual rent of ninety thousand rupees for their monopoly over the Assam-Bengal trade. In effect they supervised Ahom relations with neighbouring Bengal, and with the traders, Indians and Europeans, who congregated on the Assam-Bengal border. The Assamese magistrate, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, hailed from a line of such wealthy Duariya Baruas. By the eighteenth century the Bengal salt trade was controlled by European traders such as Jean Baptiste Chevalier and John Robinson. This trade provided the West with its first regular contacts with Assam.²⁷ In the early nineteenth century Francis Buchanan Hamilton reported to his employer, the East India Company, that salt headed the list of imports into Assam. Others were ghee, fine pulses, sugar, stone beads, precious stones, spices, paints, copper, English woollens, and fine Banarasi fabrics. These high-value goods were exchanged for Assamese silks, lac, black pepper, cotton, ivory, bell-metal vessels, iron hoes, and slaves.²⁸ A commodity much in demand was Assam's lustrous muga silk.²⁹ Ahom functionaries paid the balance in gold dust and silver coins.³⁰ This trade later suffered much disruption during the strife with Moamoria rebels and Burmese invaders.

As early as 1771 the English East India Company had shown interest in trading with Assam and Bhutan. It sponsored the explorer George Bogle on an expedition which aimed to collect information about Tibet, the Brahmaputra river, and Assam. In 1774 the East India Company appointed Hugh Baillie to the border town of Goalpara as its agent to oversee the Assam-Bengal trade. British observers remained lukewarm about trading prospects with Assam, given the barriers to free trade imposed by the Ahom regime. Nonetheless the number of European and Bengal merchants on the Assam-Bengal border gradu-

ally increased, even though commerce was often marred by the European traders' infighting, and by their allegations of nonpayment against Assamese creditors. Their confrontations led to defiant incursions by Europeans into Assam, causing the first official communications between the English East India Company and the Ahom state. In 1780 the newly appointed governor general, Warren Hastings, expressed his determination to prevent the disputes. He promised to offer protection to the Assam traders from their European counterparts so that commerce might continue for mutual advantage.³¹

Meanwhile the late-eighteenth-century Ahom state was troubled by both internal rebellions and the depredations of military mercenaries from Bengal. After repeated Ahom protests, the British governor general Lord Cornwallis agreed in 1792 to help eject "gangs of vagabonds belonging to Bengal."³² Captain Welsh, previously distinguished in the Mysore wars, was appointed commander of an Assam military expedition. His medical officer J. P. Wade exulted, "Today we shall enter a kingdom scarcely if ever trodden by Europeans before."³³ Once Welsh achieved his political mission to expel the Bengal mercenaries from Ahom territory, he attended to the East India Company's main concern: commercial relations. He proposed the abolition of monopolies, a fixed duty of 10 percent on imports, and a similar duty on exports. But Welsh's early recall by Cornwallis's successor Sir John Shore renewed internal turmoil in Assam, and the Burmese invasion of the Ahom kingdom meant that the Assam-Bengal border and its commercial transactions remained unstable.

Through this period newcomers to Assam were still called Bangals, but they lost that ascription once they settled down. Usually they entered into local marriages and gradually adopted living habits, religious norms, and dietary customs similar to those of their neighbours. The political scientist Sudipta Kaviraj terms similarly derived pre-modern conceptions of community "fuzzy," in contrast to the more recent "enumerated" type, born from the marriage of colonialism and modernity. He sees community as a notion necessarily predicated on some conception of difference. People handled their daily experience of social complexity through some system of rules by which people could be classified as similar or different.³⁴ Yet there are tensions and ambiguities inherent in this notion of fuzzy community. Pre-modern classifications such as Bangal represented relative distance rather than a permanent essence. They could easily

be acquired and often as easily lost if location changed. When a vestige of externality remained, it was as a marker of status and difference, real or fictive.

Ambiguity in representing the self and the other is evident from the internal differentiation of categories within Assam itself. Between the hills and the plains there were a number of ways for people to see themselves as different from other groups. The labels “Naga” and “Abor” for hill and frontier groups denoted naked and rude. Plains inhabitants often used these pejorative names for neighbours whom they regarded as *a-sabhya* (uncultured), but this sort of identification was often contingent upon habitat and way of life, rather than signaling a permanent unchanging condition. Plains groups often applied the name “Abor,” signifying barbarous, rude, or independent, quite imprecisely to a number of distant, independent hill clans.³⁵ The term was a shorthand label for groups living at the furthest distance from Ahom kingly authority and influence. In contrast, the name “Naga” was applied to those hill dwellers who inhabited nearby peripheries and existed within a complex intermeshing of exchanges. Therefore terms denoting indigenous alterity were fairly amorphous. As a British army official noted, “a Naga in the middle of the Naga hills” might “point out some distant and unknown village or country” in even more distant hill territory as inhabited by savage Abors.³⁶ The flexibility of these labels is clear from the tendency of individuals and groups from the hills to acquire different names when they entered the Brahmaputra valley’s social life more closely. For instance, under the Assam kings meritorious state service earned for a few high-ranking individuals who originally hailed from hill communities the prestigious status of Ahom. Again, the collective adoption of Sanskritized lived practices and a shift of habitat might serve to transform a hill clan of Nagas or Kacharis who previously existed outside the caste order into a plains community of lower-caste Hindus.

In this manner the pre-modern relationship between the Brahmaputra valley and its bordering territories was characterized by degrees of alterity, fluidity, and flux. This was especially true of Assam’s plains and the surrounding hills, where an intricate net of relationships and perceptions, rather than a rigid set of binaries, knit the inhabitants together. For example, in a Naga tale an old man asked the three sons of an ancestor what they would do for a living. The eldest decided to till the soil, the second to be a writer, the youngest

to be a hunter. From the tiller of the soil was born the Naga tribal people; the hunter disappeared into the forest; and the writer became the ancestor of the plains Assamese.³⁷ Overlapping frontiers of technology, ecology, and migration thus shaped the multiple and contextually shifting contours of social identities in Assam.

Colonial Changes: Élite Pedigrees and Hill “Savages”

Colonial rule was the catalyst for change in this flexible social landscape, as political and economic incorporation into British India brought closer social and intellectual contacts with other regions. Assam’s repertoire of Sanskritized cultural and political ingredients had cohabited and partially overlapped with patterns tied to hill, Sinic, and Tibeto-Burman cultures. But from the late nineteenth century, as Assam’s gentry fashioned themselves into a colonial intelligentsia, they evinced a new, strong desire to be Indian, and “Aryan.”

High-caste claims of Aryan descent became central, with the gentry’s self-representation now anchored to a distant, migratory origin in the Indo-Gangetic plains. Such claims are not surprising. As the historian Sumit Guha shows, fictive claims of immigration from the core areas of Islam and Hinduism were a well-established device in South Asia for constructing a high-status identity.³⁸ In their new location as Indian subjects, Assamese élites wished for this key to an Indo-Aryan heritage.³⁹ By asserting their status as historical Indic migrants, these élites aggressively denied kinship with Assam’s lower castes and hill groups, who ranked low in the Sanskritic ritual hierarchy.

These genealogical fictions reflected racial ones, as modernizing Indian and British intellectuals interpreted a Vedic “Arya” cultural lineage as Indo-European or Aryan racial belonging. Assamese publicists now claimed historical Indic migrants, the Bangals of yore, as “Aryan ancestors.”⁴⁰ Their assertions served to buttress their other, locally rooted claims to prestige, such as the ranks, offices, and titles acquired through past state service in the Ahom kingdom. When Prafulla Chandra Barua compiled his father’s memoir, for example, he appended to it a *vamsavali* (genealogy) that detailed thirteen generations of his ancestors.⁴¹ While his family’s local status was linked to its Ahom-conferred Bujar Barua gentry rank, it still claimed original ancestry from Mithila (now in Bihar), famous as the land of

Sita in the *Ramayana* epic tradition. Almost every high-caste family boasted intricately inscribed palm-leaf genealogies which linked it to ritually sanctified Indic locations such as Mithila and Kanauj. Similarly, Assam's small Muslim gentry declared their descent from élite Shaikhs of Gaur (Bengal) who accompanied Turkish armies. Under the Ahom rulers many Muslims acquired high official rank, as modern family names such as Ali Hazarika and Rahman Barua reveal.⁴² Others traced their origin to *khalifas* (preachers) who entered the Brahmaputra valley and settled there with honourable titles and landed endowments.⁴³ With claims of Persianized Gaur origins, colonial-era Muslim gentry racially distinguished themselves from lowly co-religionists such as Moria brass-workers whom they stigmatized as aboriginal converts to Islam.⁴⁴

In a similar fashion, Ahom élites took pride in their own myths of origin outside the space of Assam. As local intellectuals and British officials transmuted older chronicles into printed knowledge, another set of legends about noble migrants to Assam acquired currency. These narratives centred around Ahom warrior ancestors whom they claimed as followers of the heroic Sukapha, the first of Assam's Ahom kings. One version claimed that Sukapha was a Shan prince from Upper Burma. Another described Sukapha as descended from the sons of the Lord of Heaven, Indra, who arrived on earth by an iron ladder, bearing a magic sword. By the early twentieth century a consensus emerged that in the thirteenth century, a royal prince, Sukapha accompanied by his band, had made his way into Assam. In the course of this journey he vanquished and allied with tribal groups such as the Barahis, Morans, and Nagas. The Ahom line of kings that he founded subsequently ruled over the fertile rice-plains of the Brahmaputra valley with the help of their warrior followers and a caste Hindu service gentry. From the late nineteenth century this was the explanation of Ahom rule, widely circulated by the British administrator Edward Gait in his *History of Assam* (1906),⁴⁵ and his one-time research assistant Golap Chandra Barua, an Ahom aristocrat in British service.⁴⁶ This view later received support from anthropologists and linguists who studied Tai migrations in early Asia. As Tai groups carried wet-rice and irrigation technology into Laos, Yunnan, Burma, and Assam, they intermarried with existing settlers to lay the foundation for dispersed kingdoms.⁴⁷

Overall, in colonial Assam's changing cultural landscape, myths of origin and distance, whether for Brahmins, Muslims, or the Ahom

warrior elite, emphasized a common theme of elite superiority over subordinate groups whom they viewed as autochthones. Colonial appropriation of local chronicles gave greater currency to these myths. These views achieved further importance when, from the mid-nineteenth century, Assam's upper-caste gentry accrued a significant amount of cultural capital through their scribal and literate skills. They gradually adapted an existing repertoire of Indic affiliation to fit in with newly racialized, pan-Indian narratives of Indo-Aryanist belonging, and distance themselves from lower castes and tribes. They simultaneously distanced themselves from neighbouring hill groups.

When the British became Assam's rulers their authority was confined mostly to the plains. Subsequent colonial attempts at "pacifying" the frontier produced an escalated rhetoric of Nagas as hill savages responsible for bloody raids on the plains. For the British rulers, one political solution was the installation of the Inner Line Restrictions of 1873, which cordoned off the hill areas. These regulations prevented ingress into the hills except with special permission. Like the rest of Assam, the hill districts also came under the Non-Regulation system of administration, which concentrated vast powers in official hands, often British military cadres, with little accountability. Yet the low revenue-generating possibilities of the hill districts meant that colonial officials paid heed primarily to maintaining the rule of law, and little or not at all to health, education, and general welfare in the hills. Later those responsibilities were made over to Christian missionaries. This isolation and administrative singularity caused political, economic, and racial boundaries to rigidify. Measures such as the Inner Line Regulations which restricted movement into the hill districts further reified perceived differences between Assam's hills and plains. An older economy of exchange and interaction gradually withered away. Over the modern period the dominant Brahmaputra valley discourse hardened to ascribe civilizational and racial externality to neighbouring hill dwellers as savage, marauding tribal autochthones.

"Lazy" Peasants and "Opium Eaters"

In early British-ruled Assam the cultivated portion of the Brahmaputra valley was covered by small-scale peasant holdings. Most inhabitants practiced a multi-tiered system of plough-based cultivation.

They grew higher-yielding wet-rice varieties on fertile *rupit* lands, and used dry *faringati* lands for other, inferior crops. Hoe-cultivating communities lived in the valley's hilly peripheries. They grew inferior varieties of dry rice and often practiced shifting cultivation. All over Assam people collected timber and other necessities from the non-arable, forested commons which were plentiful all around. The scarce factor of production in Assam was labour rather than land, given the low population and abundant uncultivated territory. Large estates were few, usually owned by religious heads or nobles. Previously these estates used servile labour. After the British abolition of slavery in 1843 the remaining large estates were cultivated by tenants and sharecroppers.

Rice was grown by all, almost entirely for subsistence, but in the new cash economy introduced by the British, peasants needed marketable products. Peasants initially turned to mustard, grown to obtain oil and sold to traders for cash. In the virtual absence of a rice market, mustard sales enabled peasants to pay colonial taxes and buy goods such as salt. Mustard as a marketable crop was speedily overtaken by opium. Migrant commodity traders, known as Kayas or Marwaris, aided this changeover by providing cash advances to peasants only if they grew opium.⁴⁸

Historical evidence on opium use indicates that by the eighteenth century Ahom notables consumed it in emulation of North Indian courtly fashions. In 1792 Captain Welsh found that it was grown abundantly in Lower Assam. He noted that "a great quantity of opium is produced and used by the inhabitants. In point of purity it is probably equal to that of Patna or Benares but it is prepared in a different form, being reduced to a dry state by exposure to the air spread on narrow strips of cloth, which are afterwards rolled up into small balls and called Kanee or Kappa."⁴⁹ These opium cloths were soaked in water to form a decoction. Numerous peasants began to grow small amounts of opium. They consumed some of their harvest in decoction form, and marketed the rest. During the early decades of British rule Assamese peasants solved the cash shortage and the excessively heavy demand of government dues when they cultivated more opium. While the rice crop maintained the peasant household, the opium crop brought in scarce cash. In contrast to mustard, the demand for opium had the potential to rise every year, as did its price. While opium's average after-harvest price in the 1840s was Rs 5

a seer, the retail price might rise to Rs 80 a seer during the lean months.⁵⁰ By 1852 Nagaon, the main opium-growing district, had more than three thousand acres, about 2 percent of cultivated acreage, under the plant.⁵¹

During the same period the Assam Company was attempting to enlist local peasants to work in the tea enterprise. A good many peasants responded positively. To meet an urgent need for cash, or as a source of extra income in the slack season, there were few other options, since most local work was paid in kind. Occasional tea work filled the need for cash. Yet these peasants would not stay for long periods and risk neglect of their ricefields. Mostly they chose to labour only when the tea gardens were near their own hamlets. Sometimes planters arranged with village headmen to round up a few daily labourers. Even such ad hoc arrangements became less attractive as the arduous work and discipline of the tea enterprise was better known.

Given abundant land availability, it was quite logical that most Brahmaputra valley peasants should not have been overly attracted to wage labour as a way of life. An early British report acutely stated that it would be rare for an Assamese living at a distance to leave his home for the mere inducement of working on a tea plantation: “Their taking such work at all is generally attributed to temporary necessity, as for instance, inability to pay their revenue, wanting to get married and not having the necessary means, being in debt to a Kaya [trader], or as more commonly happens, pawning their freedom, being in want of a yoke of buffaloes for cultivating purposes.”⁵² Such clear-sighted reporting became less common as the colonial regime became entrenched. As the tea venture’s need for a regular, disciplined labour force became urgent, its frustration with locals grew. British officials increasingly speculated that it was an innate indolence in Assam’s people, perhaps a climatic or racial trait, which made labouring work so unpopular. Missionaries concurred, eager to fault local people in a place where their proselytizing activities were as yet quite unsuccessful. In this manner colonialism discovered Assam’s lazy natives. They acquired the epithet of *labe labe* (slowly slowly).

The essentialist explanation of local indolence gained scientific and medicinal credence from the peasant’s easy access to opium. Not only were Assamese peasants lazy, but Nature seemed to compound

their weakness with a fertile soil. All crops, particularly opium, grew in easy profusion. Captain Rowlatt articulated the new colonial orthodoxy about the lazy native when he argued that Nature's bounty added a fatal element to human failing: "It is the low cost and great ease with which every ryot [peasant] is able to procure a supply of opium that so thoroughly demoralizes the whole people . . . This, if it produces no worse consequence, most certainly induces great laziness . . . the peculiar characteristic of the Assamese people."⁵³

Such opinions of officials, planters, and missionaries tended to ignore the material necessity that drove peasants to opium cultivation. Opium as a homegrown, morally dubious luxury was their focus. Some medical men already argued for opium's medicinal value in a malarial climate, but most colonial observers simply castigated indigenous society for sloth and indulgence. Homegrown opium was a needless luxury for Assamese peasants, just as alcohol was for Britain's factory workers. The perceived moral turpitude was all the more extreme since this luxury was obtained at virtually no cost from the peasant's own garden, in such abundance that peasants, observers alleged, even fed opium to their wives and children.⁵⁴ For western observers opium was the definitive sign of the profligate native. Not content with wasting Nature's bounty, peasants abused it to reinforce their moral and physical inadequacy. Captain John Butler declared, "The utter want of an industrious, enterprising spirit and the general degeneracy of the Assamese people are greatly promoted by the prevalent use of opium."⁵⁵ Concurring with British officials, some local élites did express perturbation that opium use had spread to ordinary people.⁵⁶ But these sentiments differed in nature from the moral outrage of colonial officials who chose to ignore the economic logic behind the newly increased domestic cultivation of opium and its connections with colonial revenue policies. Instead they condemned opium addiction as a congenital defect of the Assamese people.

Notwithstanding the moral rhetoric of its officials, the East India Company itself had a long-standing relationship with opium. The prosperous trade between China, Britain, and India largely depended on the sale by British traders of Indian opium in China. Since 1773 the silver that Britain obtained from China in return for Indian opium was remitted as profit back to Britain. After Britain's success in the Opium War with China, the supply of Indian opium smuggled

into China rose sharply, as did Chinese consumption of opium. But the East India Company was still not satisfied. It desired other, closer markets in Eastern India where surplus opium supplies from Bengal, Bihar, and Malwa could be marketed. As early as 1837 the Malaya expert John Crawford pointed out that “the countries lying between India and China” would be great marts for its consumption.⁵⁷ Accordingly, from the 1840s the East India Company arranged to sell imported opium in Assam through government agents. These sales remained limited, since there was an abundant and cheap local supply.⁵⁸ At the same time, some British officials expressed concern about opium’s debilitating effects. To limit opium use, both David Scott and Francis Jenkins suggested that the tax on homegrown opium should be gradually raised. Instead Justice Mills’s recommendation was adopted: “Opium they should have, but to get it they should be made to work for it.”⁵⁹

By the 1850s the two main problems for the colonial state were what it saw as local indolence and the shortage of tea labourers. Mills’s suggestion effectively linked these problems and suggested a solution. Following his advice, in 1861 the British banned opium cultivation in Assam, while the colonial state established a wide network of licensed outlets. Those outlets would sell imported opium. The necessity to purchase opium from them, the state anticipated, would forcibly drag indolent peasants into the labour market. This policy received support from officials, planters, and many missionaries. The Rev. Mr. Higgs of the SPG Mission in London reassured officials that their policy was morally and economically right: “The abkarry [state-distributed] opium is only supplying the place of the indigenous drug, and by forcing the lazy natives to work to gain the money to pay for it, it tends more than anything to bring Assam under cultivation.”⁶⁰ Interestingly, this dubious logic did not carry conviction with Higgs’s American Baptist missionary colleagues, whose periodical the *Orunodoi* publicized local opposition to this new opium policy.⁶¹ The temperance-minded Americans approved of colonial improvement initiatives but could not bring themselves to see opium as one such. Meanwhile Upper Assam peasants, whether opium consumers or not, mostly resisted incorporation into the tea garden’s regimented labour ranks. In their place socially and economically subordinate Kachari cultivators from Lower Assam momentarily formed the plantation’s workforce.

Kachari Tribals: “Primitive” Exceptionalism

These labouring discourses and practices in the Assam locality need to be placed in the larger context of the colonial construction of racial differences. Over the nineteenth century European race science became extremely influential in South Asia. The perceived physicality of race was extended and modified as colonial administrators ordered and separated South Asian populations into tribes and castes. Their discursive framework was built around ideas about savages and primitives, and about hunting, pastoralism, agriculture, and commerce. The historian Ajay Skaria has shown how by seizing upon and magnifying racial and cultural differences among different groups of people, the British prepared an exhaustive list of the “tribes of India.” In almost all cases the so-called tribes shared more cultural, social, and economic practices with their caste neighbours than with other, distant “tribes” with which British officials grouped them. Skaria claims that this listing of tribes represented the colonial invention of primitive societies in South Asia.⁶² Significantly, this invention occurred just when the colonial regime withdrew from its earlier promotion of “skilled and civilized” labour for the tea industry. The colonial quest for an amenable labouring class now led to a new interest in the “primitive virtues” of the subcontinent’s tribal populations.

Assam’s “heterogenous” population provided an array of additions to the list of tribes. Thus it was not difficult to find a local group which seemed more promising for the colonial tea enterprise than the usual lazy native. The British were especially interested in the Kachari people of the Lower Assam districts of Kamrup, Lakhimpur, Darrang, and Goalpara. Several colonial commentators already distinguished Kacharis from other locals because of their capacity for toil: an “aboriginal race of Assam” who were “cheery, good-natured, semi-savage folk.”⁶³ The SPG missionary Sidney Endle recommended his Kachari flock as being well fitted for all forms of outdoor field and factory labour which might require strength rather than skill: Assam’s “navvies.”⁶⁴

Notably, these late-nineteenth-century observers of the Kacharis were influenced by an older tradition of colonial ethnography which emphasized distinctions between India’s “Tamulian” and “Caucasian” races, in particular the work of the pioneering Himalayan explorer Brian Hodgson (1800–94), the first commentator to bring the Kacharis to scholarly notice. From his residency in Kathmandu,

Hodgson contributed over eighty papers to the *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, many about the “aboriginal” inhabitants of the Bengal Presidency. He sought to systematize the study of racial difference by linking it with language.⁶⁵ The historian David Arnold argues that when Europeans explored the interiors of the subcontinent, they distinguished between Indians of the plains, seen as an Indo-Caucasian race, and indigenous groups inhabiting hilly and forested territories, seen as aboriginal or tribal. Ethnographers such as Hodgson ascribed several traits to tribals: a minimal use of clothing, hunting or shifting cultivation, and lives spent in jungle habitats. These traits also differentiated tribals from caste society.⁶⁶ Hodgson collected a large variety of vocabularies from the sub-Himalayan regions of India and Nepal, and relied on these to classify local populations. He argued that the non-Caucasian inhabitants of these frontier lands belonged to a unique race. He termed this race the Tamulian and asserted that its members were India’s original inhabitants, forced to flee into hills and forests by racially and linguistically distinct newcomers who usurped the fertile lowlands.⁶⁷

Colonial race science changed considerably after Hodgson, the pioneering scholarly figure of the early and mid-nineteenth century. By the twentieth century other names appeared, such as Herbert Risley, whose emphasis on physical and biological traits considerably downplayed the linguistic features of racial groups. In this later period Hodgson’s work had much more impact on George Grierson’s *Linguistic Survey*⁶⁸ than it did on Risley’s *Anthropological Survey of India* and his magnum opus, the *People of India* volumes.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, from Hodgson’s research on “the Koch, Mech and Dhimals” of the Himalayan foothills, the missionary Sidney Endle and other late-nineteenth-century ethnographers borrowed the notion that these peoples were fragments of a larger Bodo Kachari race, itself an offshoot of the larger Tamulian race. Hodgson had also called attention to the physical suitability of Tamulians for life and work in territories inhospitable to the Caucasian races. This idea was developed further by his intellectual heirs. By the second half of the nineteenth century Kacharis were deemed to possess a “share in the marvellous freedom from the effects of malaria which characterizes nearly all the Tamulian aborigines of India, as the Kols, the Bheels and the Gonds.”⁷⁰ This was an important consideration for tea industry recruiters wishing to minimize labour deaths.

Previously, Assamese élites had played a key role in identifying

Kacharis as potential labourers. The last Assam ruler, Purandar Singha, first drew British attention to the Kacharis. When the East India Company asked to use his lands for tea, he gave permission. He recommended that it recruit “Cacharee” workers whom he called the labouring class of the country.⁷¹ Assamese folklore, with ubiquitous tales of Kachari servants and Brahmin masters, bears testimony to a long-standing hierarchical relationship between the high-status caste society of Upper Assam and the Kachari peasants who made a sparse living from the submontane lands of Lower Assam.⁷²

In the labour discourses that subsequently circulated in colonial Assam, there is a definite similarity between the ritual purity-obsessed superiority displayed by Assam’s high-caste groups, who disdained alcohol use as a lowly habit, and the British condescension toward primitiveness. Assam’s pioneering administrator Francis Jenkins felt that it was because “the Cacharee consume so much of their rice in making spirits that they are obliged to labour to pay their rents.”⁷³ Unlike the high-status, Hinduized groups who shunned alcohol consumption, Kacharis, Mishings, Nagas, and other tribal people regarded rice beer as an essential staple. Jenkins claimed that this custom forced Kacharis onto the labour market, since they brewed up their rice crop: “Cacharie labourers almost invariably engage on an agreement to receive Rs 6 per month for single task work, and very frequently they stipulate for double task work for double pay.”⁷⁴

Therefore colonial observers tended to cite the same “aboriginal” habits of alcohol consumption and non-settled agriculture that marked off “tribe” from “caste,” and the Kacharis from the Assamese, as proof of an equally “primitive” habit of diligence. Industriousness seemed a trait intrinsic to many primitive Asian peoples which distinguished them from primitive groups in Europe and North America. Ecology and climate had caused people who lived in India’s “enervating plains” to be lethargic, since “the fertility of the soil is such that one month’s labour is enough to maintain a family in comfort for a year.”⁷⁵ It was aboriginal groups, driven out by more civilized peoples into less productive hills, who remained industrious, since they needed to work hard to live.

Of course there were many inconsistencies in these opinions. Quite often the same observers bemoaned a vagabondage that they saw as peculiar to “savage” people. Nonetheless, for Kacharis and later for other “Tamulian aboriginals,” ethnography defined indus-

triousness as a prime attribute. The supposed Kachari appetite for work excited the tea industry. One planter described how “they travel in gangs of ten to twenty, from garden to garden, and will not take a job unless they are assured of being allowed to do at least a double day’s work in one day. After a garden is got into a good condition, and the work falls short, they will frequently pack up and move off to another place.”⁷⁶

British commentators constantly cited racial difference as the ultimate determinant of work capacity. Some did, however, note the marked differences in technology and resource base between Kachari tea labourers and Upper Assam peasants. Most Kachari workers originated from communities that depended on hoes to cultivate crops. Their caste Hindu neighbours, by contrast, possessed superior cattle-driven plough technology. District officials observed: “The population in Dhurmpore are mostly Assamese who cultivate only with the plough, Cacharees and Mikirs who cultivate much of the lands by the hoe alone, without the assistance of plough cattle, changing their grounds every three to four years and allowing their old fields to run to jungle and remain fallow nine to ten years.”⁷⁷ These Lower Assam Kacharis, a community low down the ladder of pre-colonial status and power, lived in hilly, less fertile tracts. Because their lands were marginal they had been exempt from customary *corvée* services. Most households held land suitable only for dry rice varieties, which yielded less than wet rice and required fallowing every three years. Under Ahom rule these Kacharis often supplemented their incomes by labouring for prosperous neighbours who paid them in kind. With the arrival of the British these Kacharis were pushed into plantation wage contracts by the cash-short economy of Assam, where wage-earning opportunities were limited. Therefore in contrast to Jenkins’s observations, Kachari peasants were forced into seasonal labour migrations by an insufficient resource base, not by improvident drinking habits. When they could, Kacharis also availed themselves of other wage-earning channels, either as “a strong element in the military and police forces”⁷⁸ or as “tenants of the Government or on the Gosains’ lands.”⁷⁹ Generally they retained household links in their home villages. One son usually lived in the village while his siblings seasonally moved to plantations. They often volunteered to work at double tasks so as to return to their villages with an ample supply of cash.⁸⁰

The British tea enterprise's fascination with the Kacharis soon faded. Despite colonial officials' lavish eulogies, planters became increasingly dissatisfied with Kachari workers. The reality was that local workers tended to come and go as they pleased, whether they were Kachari migrants from Lower Assam or Upper Assam peasants from villages adjoining plantations. Local workers were unwilling to start work without a wage advance. Planters complained that "after working a few days they go home."⁸¹ In 1854 the tea enterprise became totally disenchanted with its once cherished Kachari workers when the Assam Company's entire workforce, "thousands in number, and all Cacharees, struck work for an increase in pay."⁸² These workers clearly had good reason for the strike: even the capital-minded *Times* newspaper rebuked the Assam Company, which maintained "rather too strict a control over its rate of wages."⁸³ This dispute was resolved, but employer-labour relations definitively soured. In 1861 Kachari peasants joined the Phulaguri uprising against opium prohibition and a new agricultural tax. When a British officer was killed, colonial opinion branded Kacharis "bloodthirsty" as well as primitive.⁸⁴ Such an unruly workforce with a potential for violent resistance seemed uncomfortably reminiscent of the Chinese workers of yore.

Over the nineteenth century, encouraged by the British state, tea firms such as the Assam Company had sought to control large swaths of land, and to discover how to subordinate human skills to an industrial regime. British enterprise gradually reduced the basics of tea manufacture learnt from the Chinese to a large number of simple yet arduous tasks. The new agro-industrial enterprise of tea took shape. Once planters escaped the trap of high wages for Chinese workers, they sought, in their place, low-waged, unskilled labour from the Assam locality. Instead of Rs 16 a month that the Chinese earned, the wage rate for locals was a low 2 annas a day. But low wages alone were not enough to create all the attributes of a proletarian workforce. Local labour's ability to leave without notice enraged colonial capital. Planters complained that they lacked the power to discipline workers who left after taking advances. After 1859 employers could invoke the new Workmen's Breach of Contract Act, but planters still claimed that "tedious civil cases" were useless when defendants had practically no attachable property.⁸⁵ Workers might have had different imperatives and lived practices, but their common role as local

labour made them equally unsuitable for the plantation's needs. Assam's peasants could not be reduced to total dependence. Ultimately the simple, hardworking Kachari and the indolent Assamese seemed equally inconvenient for tea's labouring requirements. Although racial logic failed in its advocacy of the Kacharis, it remained critical, as the British colonial regime searched for yet another source of tea labour. Primitiveness necessitated looking further afield for the right type of worker.

Inventing the Tea Coolie

During the first few years of the tea enterprise Charles Bruce and his colleagues depended on China, its tea plant, and its tea growers. But once the British learnt how to cultivate tea, Chinese growers became expendable. Moreover, the China-Assam hybrid plant which imperial botany had created was discovered to be ill suited to its environment. By the 1870s British planters wittingly referred to this China-Assam hybrid plant as the "plague." In its place they replanted the indigenous Assam species. Thus the China tea plant too proved dispensable. While the British initially learnt to grow and process tea from the Chinese, they later created a different system. Rather than perpetuate the Assamese tea forests, or Chinese household production, British entrepreneurs learnt how to grow tea on an industrial scale. Under the white man's supervision the plantation's prime requirement became a vast pool of cheap, docile, easily reproducible labour.⁸⁶ To find such a workforce the Assam industry relied on the assistance of the colonial state and the expertise of other imperial plantation enterprises.

In the wake of the British Empire's slave emancipation in the 1830s, subcontinental labourers were recruited to the sugar plantations of the Caribbean and Mauritius as replacements for African slaves.⁸⁷ Most of these workers, known as coolies, were recruited from tribal groups which lived in Central and Eastern India. The anthropologist Kaushik Ghosh describes how the nineteenth-century British conquest of Bengal's "wild frontier," the Chotanagpur-Santal hill territory, physically and economically dislocated its inhabitants. Local groups such as the Kols rebelled in 1831–33, followed by the Santhals in 1855–56. The British state harshly suppressed these uprisings, and the rebels lost

most of their lands. Colonial policymakers were determined to “pacify” the region, and plains migrants who operated as moneylenders, traders, and landlords assisted the state in this endeavour. A long, ugly process of depeasantization took place. The displaced groups subsequently became known as compliant and hardworking labourers on mines, roads, and plantations. As with the Kacharis, facile racial explanations by more powerful contemporaries must be read against the grain if we are to comprehend how the colonial dispossession of Chotanagpur’s inhabitants transformed them into the British Empire’s labour reserve.

Newly labelled as hill coolies, these migrants were praised as far as the British House of Commons for their primitive traits of obedience and toil.⁸⁸ Colonial race thinkers once again revised their views on primitiveness as they observed these new labouring groups arrive on the plantations. In the early nineteenth century Brian Hodgson had classified the tribal inhabitants of Assam and Chotanagpur together as Turanian aboriginals belonging to the Tamulian race. But by the 1860s ethnographic manuals separated the two groups, to match their differential status as colonial labourers. George Campbell, later Bengal’s lieutenant governor, pioneered this modification, adapting Hodgson’s scheme to reflect changed realities. Campbell now distinguished between two groups of aboriginals: Kolarian people of Chotanagpur and Kacharis of the northeast frontier.⁸⁹ He employed the tenets of race science to argue that the Kolarians were far superior to their fellow aboriginals the Kacharis as tea labourers.

Campbell praised Chotanagpur labourers as a simple, industrious people. Unlike other aboriginal groups who succumbed before the onslaught of modern civilization, these groups steadily multiplied and supplied British India’s labour markets in abundance. These Kolarians worked on indigo plantations and on railway and road construction, and were the favourites for Assam tea work. Campbell speculated as to why they were so prized. “Partly on account of the cheapness of labour in their country, partly on account of their tractable disposition and freedom from all caste and food prejudices, and more especially, I think, because of that want of attachment to the soil which distinguishes the Aboriginal from the Arian.”⁹⁰ Campbell opportunely forgot that the equally primitive Kacharis had displayed too much of an attachment to their soil for the planters’ liking when they chose to return to their home villages. His theories effectively

erased history and the impact of colonial policies. In reality, dispossessed Kolarians had little alternative but to migrate from their home region of Central India. By contrast, Kachari peasants often had some land and some control over their labour. Campbell translated this social reality into racialized distinctions between Kolarians and Kacharis.

Both Chotanagpur Kolarians and Kachari workers became known as tea's archetypal coolies. The term "coolie," which apparently originated from the Tamil word for wages "kuli," was long used to denote low-level workers in the Indian Ocean labour market.⁹¹ Now it acquired a specific racial sense. Colonial ethnographers began to plot an essential link between the term and Chotanagpur's labourers, also known as Dhangars. In Campbell's influential *Ethnology of India* he suggested that the term was in fact derived from the name Kol, or Kolarian. He mentioned in his listing of tribes "Dhangars; that last term being one the proper meaning of which I cannot ascertain, but which, as far as I can learn, is applied generically to the aboriginal labourers in Calcutta."⁹² Following his lead, in 1883 the influential Anglo-Indian lexicon *Hobson-Jobson* defined Dhangar as "the name by which members of various tribes of Chutia Nagpur [*sic*] are generally known when they go out to distant lands to seek employment as labourers (coolies)."⁹³

Over the nineteenth century tribal labourers from Chotanagpur and Central India were subsumed into this identity of Dhangar, or hill coolie. Their migratory existence became another defining characteristic. Recruiters from all over the British Empire made their way to this region. During the 1830s and 1840s sugar planters in Mauritius and Trinidad were the pioneers in recruitment from this region. A recruitment team for Assam met little success in 1839 as it competed against established networks of overseas recruiters. However, after a few years high shipboard death rates forced the state to impose stricter medical checks on overseas recruitment. In response, labour contractors dispatched recruits to Assam, where regulations were lax. Tea plantations joined the overseas sugar colonies as a prime labouring destination. Steamers and roads, and at a later date railways, carried men, women, and children to the jungles and gardens of Upper Assam. Sent to Assam wearing the red jackets that many associated with degrading prison life, most Chotanagpur peasants viewed Assam as an unknown wilderness, "the end of the world." Yet

the circumstances of their home region left little choice but migration.⁹⁴ British policies had caused immense political and socioeconomic dislocation. Colonial observers asserted that “movements of this kind are due to take place from one province to another whenever there is a great demand for labour on the one hand, and a crowded population on the other.”⁹⁵ This was a disingenuous argument that ignored the state’s role in accelerating “push” and promoting “pull.”

British India’s promotion of “forced commercialization” caused an ever increasing amount of landlessness and indebtedness and forced many labourers to migrate outside existing seasonal circuits. By the end of the nineteenth century the recruitment area for coolie labour, once restricted to Chotanagpur, encompassed more and more of the subcontinent. Natural calamities and livelihood losses pushed starving people into distant coolie work. The famine of 1873–74 in North Bihar caused fresh migration from there to Assam.⁹⁶ Similarly, famine conditions in the Central Provinces in the 1890s caused large numbers of its lower classes to migrate: 28.2 percent of Assam recruits came from there in 1896, 37.7 percent in 1900, and 39.2 percent in 1901, compared with only 5.6 percent in 1894.⁹⁷ Economic crises fell disproportionately upon lower-caste and tribal groups. For example, in a famine-affected district tribal groups such as Gonds suffered a 17.3 percent population decline and untouchable Mahars a 6 percent decline, compared to only 0.3 percent for high-status Brahmins.⁹⁸ An observer noted: “Hard times, so to speak, have driven Khonds, Savaras, Gadahas, and others from their own to other jungles.”⁹⁹

From the 1860s the British state worked closely with Assam planters to establish a legal regime of coolie indenture buttressed by harsh penal provisions. Planters now attributed earlier labour problems to incorrect recruitment policies. In contrast to Chotanagpur coolies, earlier tea labouring groups such as the Chinese, Assamese, and Kacharis were regarded as aggressive, congenitally lazy, or addicted to opium. Taming the jungle might require “aboriginal” traits, but it also required labourers to submit to control and discipline. Neither China’s nor Assam’s local workers were willing to do that. While the Chinese clung to their contracts for protection, locals collected their advances and deserted the plantations. By the second half of the nineteenth century the tea regime devised a way to bring labourers of

its choice to the plantations — and to keep them there. Starting with the Transport of Native Labourers Act (1863), the colonial state passed numerous laws to facilitate the recruitment and control of Assam’s migrant workforce. In Mauritius, the Caribbean, Natal, and Fiji, indentured coolies became essential for sugar planting, and in Assam for tea production.¹⁰⁰ By the end of the nineteenth century Chotanagpur labourers acquired the highest rank among Assam coolies. They were known as “Class I junglies” in the planter’s lexicon.¹⁰¹ In the recruitment market, aboriginals were the most prized and the most expensive: planters ranked them high in terms of resilience, labouring ability, and resistance to disease.

Initially most tea labour recruitment was in the hands of professional recruiters (*arkattis*) who journeyed to Central Indian villages to recruit labourers for the plantations. When the *arkattis* became notorious as unscrupulous “coolie catchers,” tea planters sought around for alternative recruitment strategies. Individual plantations began to send coolie *sardars* (overseers) back to their home villages to raise fresh recruits. The *sardars* were especially successful in using kin and local ties to recruit newcomers. By the 1890s most *arkattis* moved to recruitment of coolie labour to work Bihar’s mines and collieries.¹⁰² Eventually the tea industry established its own organization to oversee labour recruitment and retention, the Tea Districts Labour Association.

A special correspondent of the *Times* lyrically reported on the tea coolie: “The labourer has been withdrawn from the fierce battle of the millions amid the storm and stress of varying seasons into the constant shadow of prosperity and peace. For him and his like alone among the poor of India the problem of life is solved.”¹⁰³ This account purported to depict the estimated 700,000 and 750,000 recruits for the tea industry who came to Assam between 1870 and 1900. About 250,000 were from Chotanagpur. Yet the reality of their new life under the penal regime of indenture was as far removed as possible from the “prosperity and peace” that London’s press described. Given an almost total absence of state regulation, labour abuses were staggering in scope.

The “he” adopted by the *Times* and most other official documents concealed the large number of women and children included within the term “coolie.” The plantation system divided the hundreds of tasks involved in tea production along lines of gender and age.¹⁰⁴

Planters employed semi-feudal methods of discipline and coercion to subject ostensibly free labourers to a new kind of serfdom. Indentured coolies were open to oppression in a way that earlier tea recruits had not been. They were virtually imprisoned in the squalor of the housing lines and locked in at night. These migrant workers found themselves living in the middle of remote, forested terrain, allowed little or no contact with neighbouring villagers. Flight was well-nigh impossible, since migrants' ignorance of the terrain, coupled with bounties offered to hill people to track fleeing coolies with dogs, ensured that they would stay.¹⁰⁵ The archives provide some records of the frequent floggings, beatings, and even killings of coolies but are usually silent about other forms of exploitation. Fragmentary anecdotal accounts testify to the many ways female coolies were sexually exploited by Assam's white masters, and of the mixed-race, illegitimate children who often resulted.¹⁰⁶ These regressive aspects of coolie life had an enduring, negative impact on the migrants' status among local populations.

The plantation hierarchy consisted of the European manager at the top, with the coolie workers at the bottom. In between were European assistant managers, aided by a number of native supervisors, or *mohurirs*. Most of the latter were Assamese or Bengali caste Hindus. A. R. Ramsden's estate, for example, employed five mohurirs, described as "Assamese and agriculturists by birth."¹⁰⁷ Their main task was to oversee the workforce of three thousand coolies. Ramsden's clerks earned an average of one rupee a day as well as a monthly commission "on the payment for work done by those they supervise."¹⁰⁸ Considerable distance and antagonism separated coolie labourers and the caste gentry who disciplined them on behalf of the white "sahibs." Many mohurirs possessed a full share of racial prejudices and class antagonisms to vent upon these migrant labourers, scorning the tribal coolies as alien, ritually low intruders. Census reports detail how local clerks, when sent as enumerators, refused to enter coolies as Hindus, but indifferently lumped them together with Christians or Animists, because, they said, "they eat anything."¹⁰⁹ A mohurir, Someswar Sarma, wrote a traditional verse panegyric, *Assam Companir Biboron* (Description of the Assam Company), notable for its groveling praise of the tea gardens' picturesque beauty, in complete disregard of the wretched reality of the coolie lives.

Despite planters' complaints about the high cost of importing la-

bour, their state-conferred ability to impose starvation wages and a draconian work regime, as well as to prevent desertion by these migrants, was quite unprecedented.¹¹⁰ As the historian Samita Sen suggests, in the manner of other sectors of colonial capital, planters could minimize labour costs since the burden of reproduction was usually passed back to the rural hinterland.¹¹¹ Only later did the state and the industry evince concern at the low birth rate and infant survival rate and the high number of abortions among coolie women.¹¹² The tea industry was immensely successful in evading the costs that participation in a truly “free” labour market would have entailed. In 1864, while a labourer in the Public Works Department earned Rs 7 monthly, the going rate in the Assam Company was only Rs 4 to 5. In this manner the indentured labour and penal contract systems permitted planters to bypass prevailing wage structures.¹¹³

The significance of the Assam tea industry to the British Empire was reflected in the large body of legislation enacted to facilitate labour supply. The Transport of Native Labourers Act of 1863 was followed in quick succession by the Bengal Acts of 1865 and 1870, the Inland Emigration Act of 1893, the Assam Labour and Emigration Acts of 1901 and 1915, and finally the Tea Districts Emigrant Labour Act of 1932. As with the overseas sugar industry, the state claimed that these laws would facilitate the recruitment and retention of labour and also allay humanitarian concerns. For the tea industry the only relevant parts of this legislation related to labour recruitment and discipline. Penal privileges such as the right of private arrest formed the foundation of Assam’s notorious “Planters’ Raj.” Minimum wages remained the same for forty years. Legal provisions which limited work to nine hours a day and six days a week, or stipulated the construction of a hospital on every plantation, existed only on paper. The state did not attempt enforcement of these benefits, while workers had little knowledge of their legal entitlements. They had no way to make a claim even on recruitment promises. Given the isolated, regimented, and illiterate conditions of labour, planters easily enforced their writ. Although the penal provisions underlying tea recruitment were removed in 1926, almost four years later the Royal Commission of Labour found that workers still believed they could be arrested by their employers if they left before their contracts expired.¹¹⁴

This tea enterprise visibly transformed Assam’s landscape and

ecology. The gazetteers described the Sibsagar district as “a wide plain on which there is hardly any jungle to be seen. On the lower levels, the staple crop is transplanted rice, while the higher levels have been planted out with tea.”¹¹⁵ At the turn of the century this tea landscape represented the “second nature”¹¹⁶ of ecological transformation, resulting from plantations cultivating the alluvial slopes of the Brahmaputra valley. Upper Assam’s forests were steadily replaced by European-owned tea plantations and the numerous rice-fields required to feed a growing labour population. In 1858 Sibsagar already possessed fifteen tea estates to which the state granted 13,977 acres from its estimated 1,612,636 acres of wasteland holdings.¹¹⁷ By 1901 the tea enterprise covered 164 plantations over 244,653 acres, while the cropped area under rice and other crops was 357,135 acres.¹¹⁸ Assam tea acquired a leading position in the world market. By 1888 India’s tea production outpaced that of China. By 1901 Indian tea obtained 57 percent of the British market.¹¹⁹