

Abstract

In Search of the 'Suitable Coolie'¹ *Homogenisation and Colonial Migration of Labour to the Tea Gardens of Assam*

Tea plantations form an attractive feature in the global promotion of tourism in Assam in particular and North East India in general. Intrinsically linked to the promotion of tea tourism is the portrayal of Assam including North East as an Edenic paradise. The politics of difference that lent meaning to the vision of the tea garden as an idealized space of pleasure lay hidden beneath a fictionalized portrayal of a 'garden'. In this context, the identity of the tea garden migrant worker stood as a complete paradox to a romanticized portrayal of the tea 'garden'. In this study, I examine that colonial law played a significant role in homogenizing the heterogeneous identities of a migrant population within the rubric of 'suitable coolie' to create more subjects for the larger project of empire.

Race, violence and fear associated with slavery and indenture dominate the literature on plantations. In case of indenture, these themes became integral to the scholarship surrounding the 'enclave' paradigm. Post-colonial literature on indenture and plantations have simultaneously refrained from portraying workers as timid, defenseless masses and have highlighted their active resistance to injustice in the form of escape, desertions, assault on planters, refusal to work and mass exodus. Moreover, a new genre of scholarship on plantations and food products have attempted to bring into focus the universality of human conditions, global connections through foodways, networks and circulation of people and ideas. These studies have created the space for new research which would engage in the deeper understanding of the linkage between empire, subjectivity and migration.

This paper analyses letters of correspondence between colonial officials concerning the importation of 'inferior' type of coolies to the Assam tea gardens. Debates ensued between colonial officials regarding the 'fitness'/ 'unfitness' antipodals regarding the recruitment of coolies and opinions were expressed about the most suitable kind of coolie that flourished 'in gardens situated in jungly localities'. Comparisons were made between different groups of migrant labour thus, paving the way for a racialised classification of labour into 'aboriginal' and 'semi-aboriginal' races. Constant references to "bad race" and "bad batch of coolies" created a tendency to generalise the identity of a particular community in racial terms. If, on one hand, colonial law placed the colonised body outside the purview of legality and justice, the imposition

¹The colonial term 'coolie' has been used frequently in order to understand the history of the identity of a migrant population during the colonial period.

of legal contracts, on the other hand, brought the laboring body within the ambit of law and therefore, civilisation.²

The paper also tries to examine the creation of the 'suitable coolie' through the processes of circulation, movement, vaccination, bathing, inspection and the regulation of movement of migrants through a modern system of transport such as steamers, railways and travel by foot. These processes brought forth the purity/pollution dichotomies which was intrinsic in determining the suitability factor for inhabiting the colonial tea garden. If, on one hand, colonial documents mention the provisions and care taken during the migrants' journey to Assam, there were also several instances of death and disease suffered by migrants during their journey. Death, disease and unfavourable work conditions in the tea gardens contradicted the intended process of homogenization by colonial officials, planters and medical examiners.

The paper also attempts to see how the migrant tea labour community in Assam viewed themselves vis-a-vis the colonial endeavour at homogenizing their identity within a constructed category. It further explores whether the sharing of common sentiments of pain, fear and anxiety also contributed towards the creation of the migrant tea garden worker as a homogenous entity.

Key words : migrant, coolie, tea gardens, colonial law, Assam

² Single and double quotes have been used to highlight subjects the way they appeared in colonial documents and to denote how they were seen through colonial lenses.