

# **Life after Empires: Comparing Trajectories of Workers in Plantations (Assam) and Kolkhozes (Kyrgyzstan)**

By

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Plantations (in South Asia) and kolkhozes (in Central Asia) are examples of interventions based on a certain notion of scientific rationality aimed at reordering pre-existing social organisation. The plantations were instrumental in linking regions with a subsistence agriculture based economy to world markets and the kolkhoz was a unique attempt to collectivise agricultural and pastoral production under socialist principles. While plantations were the site of a particular form of colonial control and regimentation of daily life for production of a single commodity, kolkhozes were celebrated as unique experiments aimed at an equitable sharing of resources with help from a socialist state. Perhaps the only common thread for institutional comparison is the fact that both forms involved the calculated settlement and employment of large numbers of people. Clearly, both forms of organising production have become redundant in the twenty first century but they continue to impact upon the lives of those who participated in them in myriad ways.

This paper traces the different strategies of controlling the conduct of the populace within the somewhat Fordist-production lines of the plantation and the kolkhoz. In doing so, it hopes to shed light on the present predicament of its inhabitants in geographically distant places such as Assam (in India) and Osh (in Kyrgyzstan). I look at the manner in which both the plantation and the kolkhoz are inscribed in the narratives of those who are forced to come to terms with their collapse. These narratives, I

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argue, upset the easy linearity of post-empire politics of belonging and livelihoods and force one to reconsider the many ways in which particular classes continue to be marginalised.

### **Production Lines: Making of the Kolkhoz**

Following the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, it took a while for Soviet Union to take the shape that one associates with it – expansive – stretching from Eastern Europe to the Pacific Ocean. Collectivisation of agriculture was written into the ideology of the Soviet Union following Lenin's reformulation of the role of the peasantry in semi-capitalist countries. According to Lenin:

“...Small production in agriculture is doomed to extinction and to an incredibly crushed, oppressed position under capitalism ... Being dependent on big capital, and being backward compared with large-scale production in agriculture, small production can hold on only because of the desperately reduced consumption and laborious, arduous toil. The dispersion and waste of human labour, the worst forms of dependence of the producer, exhaustion of the strength of the peasant family, of peasant cattle and peasant land – this is what capitalism brings to the peasant everywhere.” (Lenin 1970: 248).

Clearly, this is the basis for a huge transformation for regions that were incorporated within the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). What is pertinent to this paper is the manner in which it transformed the Central Asian Republics (Tajik, Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Turkmen). In these republics, collectivisation began relatively early, starting from a thesis that the semi-feudal irrigation agriculture base had to be transformed. Collectivisation brought about large shifts in the cultural matrix of the population. According to Dunn and Dunn, “...this involved a number of factors: a sudden and radical change in the status of women; a systematic struggle against Islam in its legal and social aspects, and against the pre-Islamic religious practices still prevalent in some places; a notable expansion in the irrigation system and a corresponding change in land tenure (and) political changes (Dunn and Dunn 1962: 332-334). In soviet historiography, kolkhozes were part of a repertoire of an elaborate system that also included clubs, libraries and large-scale dissemination of technical knowledge that sought to break the traditional isolation and conservatism of the rural community (Vucinich 1960: 867-877).

The kolkhoz thus was the vehicle of secularisation and socialisation of communities in Central Asia. Simultaneously, a new space was also being produced over Central Asia. It would be arduous to dwell on the manner in which Soviet ideology was sometimes grafted, sometimes imposed and at other times the defining element of popular social aspirations and historical destiny of the people of the USSR. While it fulfilled some of the functions associated with nationalist ideologies, it is also apparent now that many of its

former citizens – especially after the humiliating collapse of the economy – understand the old regime and capitalism in very different ways (Gledhill 2000: 155). Some of the discussions that follow in this paper are about the ways in which people of the former USSR (specifically Kyrgyzstan) have coped with collapse of important institutions like the kolkhoz, in their attempts to renegotiate power relations in contemporary times. The following section describes the contemporary life of people of Alaktalaa<sup>1</sup> in southern Kyrgyzstan.

### **Negotiating Realities: An Incomplete Ethnography of a Kolkhoz in Southern Kyrgyzstan**

Located in the southern limits of the Ferghana valley, a few hundred kilometres southeast of Osh and within the Osh oblast, Alaktalaa looks like a large, quiet village ringed by high mountains. Over a cup of tea, a village elder, Mahamat Sulaiev, cites the latest figures obtained from the *Ayl Ökbatii*<sup>2</sup>:

“There are 10,000 people in the *Ayl Ökbatii* at present. This includes the children as well. 2500 are already working outside the village. Last year, it was 1,963 people and more have left this year...there is no work in the village”

Mahamat Sulaiev<sup>3</sup>

For someone not used to the spatial organisation of villages in southern Kyrgyzstan, this constant back-and-forth when referring to the village as either the *Ayl Ökbatii* or (as the translators would refer to it) Alaktalaa, can be a little confusing at first. In the evenings Alaktalaa wears a deserted look with very few people out and about. The village has two schools and a hospital and houses the main building of the *Ayl Ökbatii*. Upon closer look, some new buildings have come up, a few shiny mosques, new fences and some second-hand cars. The houses are ordered in a way that evoke an ordered past, where collective decisions were encouraged through a process that involved all members of the community. It seemed as though there was more than a large-scale collectivisation of people, material, livestock and more like a system of governance that was able to impart some uniform trajectory upon the disparate local realities. During the Soviet times, one was often reminded, “...Alaktalaa had as many as 43,000 sheep, tractors and was known to be a successful kolkhoz in places as far away as Paris”<sup>4</sup>. In 2007, this seemed to be replaced by uneasy decisions taken by individual families. The schools and building of the *Ayl Ökbatii* needed repairs, as did many of the houses. Often, village elders spoke about the availability of goods, material and technical support before the break-up of the kolkhozes. There were very few young people around the village. Most families had one or two members outside, either working as traders, or in construction sites and places from where they could send back money to rebuild the houses that their parents lived in.

It was easy to see the houses that lived off remittances. Some had done up the interiors, others had consumer goods. The head of the *Ayl Ökhamatü* opined that more than twenty million som (approximately 40 thousand US dollars) were received as remittances in Alaktalaa in the last two years.<sup>5</sup> Some of the former members of the kolkhoz also moved to other places in search of work and to trade in the 1990s. What made this move possible was a hasty reallocation of the collective goods of the kolkhoz. The existing livestock and land was parcelled out the members of the collective. Some chose to sell their livestock and part of their land to neighbours and moved from Alaktalaa. Those who stayed, helped some of their own family members make the transition from the collective farm to towns and cities within Kyrgyzstan, as also to countries within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), notably Kazakhstan and Russia.

It was in households such as these that social change was written into every aspect of interaction. Young children would go around calling the two elder figures of authority “mother” and “father”, when it was clear that the correct salutation ought to have been “grandmother” and “grandfather”. The grandmother in one such household said:

“...When they (the children) grow up, our sons and their wives will take them away, and I shall take care of the next generation of children. Right now, these young ones call us father and mother, but I keep explaining to them that we are grandparents. Soon they will understand”

Salieva Asel<sup>6</sup>

Separation and the fact that one’s kin are far away are underlined by discussions that allude to their possible return. Most of the older residents of Alaktalaa hold on the hope that those who have will return. They see, in the early stages of remittances trickling in, a possibility of rebuilding not just the country (Kyrgyzstan), but also more centrally, the kolkhoz, even though attendant ideological underpinnings of the kolkhoz has undergone a quiet but definite transformation. At this stage, it is important to see what has caused this change in the peoples’ vision of the future. Part of the story has to do with narratives of hardship and legal ambiguities in the former USSR.

### **Seeing Transition through the Eyes of Migrants**

Leaving the kolkhoz has multiple meanings for migrants from Alaktalaa. For those who anticipated a breakdown of the kolkhoz in the 1990s, it was a difficult decision to give up socially favoured jobs as engineers and technical support staff (in the kolkhoz) and take up new work where social and economic security were almost entirely absent. Aliev Kasym<sup>7</sup>, a former engineer who had also served in the Soviet army in the late 1970s and early 1980s, left Alaktalaa as soon as he realised that it would be difficult to provide for his children in a place where the basic infrastructure would undergo radical change without centralised support

from the state. Having sold the few cattle and sheep that he got from the kolkhoz, he set off for Bishkek to try his hand in trading. In 1999, he left for Russia and traded in goods in the grey market in Moscow for three years. Having earned enough money, he returned to buy a house in the outskirts of Bishkek and brought his family away from there. His daughter helps run a stall in the sprawling Osh Bazaar in Bishkek. She also plans to study. The day we met the family in their home (in Bishkek), he mentioned that his young 19 year-old son, a student of languages and business (in Bishkek), was planning to go to Almaty in a few days time to work in a construction site. The network that Kasym used, to provide some money and job experience for his son over the summer was again, linked to the erstwhile kolkhoz, Alaktalaa. Kasym, for his part, sounded keen to return to the old kolkhoz – even hoping that some of his generation would return – but remained clear on the point that his children would have to live outside, in the urban areas.

While these networks are important and connect members of the old kolkhoz to the new economic transition, individuals who did not have a direct role in the organisation of collectives during the Soviet period are less nostalgic about the kolkhoz and the role it played in fostering social cohesion. A young trader, who frequently returns to Alaktalaa to meet his family, mentioned that he was happy to see the end of a strong government.<sup>8</sup> He mentioned, almost in passing, that while there was work and material during Soviet times, there was little to encourage entrepreneurship. As a successful trader in illegal Chinese goods in Russia, he wore his Kyrgyz nationality with ease and confidence. He spoke at length about the ingenuous ways to circumvent the Russian prohibition of Chinese goods by showing that the goods were actually produced in Kyrgyzstan. When questioned about the manner in which this might contribute to an actual loss for the Kyrgyz economy, he spoke of free markets and national identities being different matters altogether. Perhaps it was the fact that he was successful, but not all migrants leaving the once-assured stability of the kolkhoz are likely to be as gracious about how the market-driven economy shapes their lives.

For Kyrgyz (and other new Central Asian national citizens), Soviet Internationalism also implied an idea of theoretical mobility across valleys, hills, rivers and other markers that constitute national borders today. Although it is difficult to say that these borders have impeded movement of people, it has increasingly begun to include rituals of inclusion and exclusion that are meant to mark out the transformation of a once familiar place into a foreign one. For instance, when crossing over from Kazakhstan into Kyrgyzstan, border guards on the Kazakh side do not waste a chance to assert their authority in the span of a moment when confronted by a possible Kyrgyz migrant going over to Almaty to work in a construction site. The idea of local and foreign has actually been transformed in subtle ways to enforce and sense of familiarity and threat at borders (Reeves 2007: 281-

300). Speaking of the hardships that her daughter and son-in-law undergo in Almaty as traders, Alimbaeva Tymyngul says:

“They (her daughter and son-in-law) live in a small house with boxes instead of walls...They pay rent, but they don’t feel as though they are at home. There is always control, they cannot switch on the light, they have to switch off the gas...this is the same with all flats in Kazakhstan”<sup>9</sup>

There is a sense that this is not only about the flats. There is an implied resentment in such conversations that is hard to quantify. Her daughter, who has just given birth to a baby back in Alaktalaa is visibly worried about returning to Almaty to be with her husband, who rents out a container at the Bolashak market there. The container is periodically filled with Chinese and Thai clothes and accessories that the husbands ships across from Bishkek once a week. He pays border guards along the way. Alimbaeva Tymyngul’s daughter speaks anxiously about being a temporary citizen of Kazakhstan and not enjoying the freedom to be there and trade.

### **The Kolkhoz’ Last Sigh**

Back in the 1970s, Alaktalaa was a thriving kolkhoz whose inhabitants could take pride in the fact that their collective was known to people in Paris. Whether this apocryphal bit of information is true, is not a matter that one wishes to engage with. The main issue at stake here is that Alaktalaa was not always a remote village from where people have little option but to leave. At that time, it would have been absurd to suggest that people would have to learn almost mundane skills, like trading and so on, to be able to cope with the future. For the entire social organisation that went into building the kolkhoz, when it collapsed, the transition did not seem like a spectacle. Yet, the breakdown of the collective affected the lives of its inhabitants, in the span of a political moment, were citizens of the CIS; potential migrants in the grey markets of Central Asia and Russia; threats to the security of other states; targets of racial profiling<sup>10</sup> and much more.

In that sense, those who ran the kolkhoz earlier read the past in a complicated manner. The end of a Soviet experiment is rarely recounted in ideological terms. Sometimes, the overwhelming narrative is that of flawed planning. People question the manner in which entire territories were converted into cotton growing or livestock breeding areas, supplying goods to factories that are now situated in other countries. However, this is almost a post-facto critique of the system. The kolkhoz itself was seen as much more than an agrarian experiment. It was the source of a particular kind of social identity that found legitimacy in modern socialist thought and practice. It ushered in a sense of Sovietness, and some would argue, led to a “Russification” of rural Central Asia (Anderson 1992). Now that the days of the kolkhoz are over, it is interesting to note that there has been no large-scale upheaval in rural Kyrgyzstan. There has been none of the large-scale riots and violence associated with the earlier attempts to collectivise

agriculture in the semi-feudal, semi-capitalist reading of the past. Yet, in the contemporary sense, it would be hard to imagine that the kolkhoz could attract people back. In that sense, despite the cautious optimism of the older members who remain in places like Alaktalaa, it would need to reinvent its identity as a “village” in order to have people return. It is in this sense, that the contours of the life, demise and possible reinvention of the kolkhoz have an altogether parallel life in the story of the tea plantations of Assam.

### **Sequestering and Empire: The Tea Party in Assam**

In the populist history of Assam, the British first entered the domain of the old Ahom kings to quell a violent civil war where the Burmese king of Ava had sent in troops to strengthen the hand of one of the factions claiming power. Following the treaty of Yandabu in 1826, the king of Ava renounced his claims on Assam and Manipur and for a while, Assam was placed under British supervision. Assam, in the early nineteenth century was an unlikely patchwork of small state-formations in the valley, co-existing with even smaller but militarily important kin communities in the hills. The Ahom state was among one of the more important state formations (Kar 2004). The British did not take over what is now called the state of Assam in one go. Instead, they took over territory bit by bit – acquiring some nobleman’s estate here, freeing temple lands elsewhere and on occasion, divesting kings of their right to rule – until the region was roughly what it looks like today.

The history of tea followed the colonisation of Assam, almost like a corollary to the military conquest of the region. The colonial narrative makes much of the “discovery of tea” by the pioneers of the industry (Griffiths 1967). Tea was brewed in parts of Assam long before the British found it in growing in and around the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra valley. It is not a coincidence that the push for establishing a tea industry in British colonies came at a time when China closed its doors to British merchants. The fortuitous acquisition of Assam proved to be just what the colonial authorities were looking for. They encouraged investment at favourable rates in Assam, leased out so-called wasteland at ridiculously low rates to European speculators and planters and by the middle of the nineteenth century; tea produced in sprawling plantations in Assam was being advertised in major dailies in London (Barbora 1998: 23).

The plantation as a production unit was made possible by a combination of factors. As mentioned above, the ridiculously low leases and outright land grabbing that was permitted by the authorities was one reason why European speculators flocked to set up plantations in Assam. The other was the import of a pliant, regimented indentured labour force. In the early stages of the tea industry, most companies experimented with Chinese labour but it was becoming more and more difficult to organise skilled

labour from China. Thereafter, planters experimented with local labour but found them too rebellious and unwilling to do wage labour (Guha 1977: 15-18). Eventually, they settled for a system of recruitment of workers from outside the region and in large numbers. Big groups of people were recruited all over India, especially in central India, in what constitute the present states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa. The workers were recruited under two systems: (a) *arkatti* (or recruitment through licensed agents) or (b) *sardari* (supervised recruitment with planter, administration and recruiter subjected to certain conditions of recruitment) (De 1990: 95-102). It was the former that is singled out criticism, since it was synonymous with trickery, exploitation, indebtedness, transportation in slave ships and deaths of many of the indentured workers (Chattopadhyay 1990: 75-83).

Once in the plantation, the workers were subjects of the management and the planter in every sense of the word. Their houses were situated within the limits of the estate, their contacts with the world outside minimised to a great extent and their lives regimented by a backbreaking work schedule that began in the early hours of the morning and ended at dusk. There existed severe punitive laws enshrined in early labour legislation such as Workman's Breach of Contract Act (1859); Transport of Native Labourers Act (1863) and also within the Indian Penal Code (1860). These coercive laws underline the conditions of the great nineteenth century labour migration in the Indian sub-continent.

The indentured working class in Assam's plantations was by and large left to fend for themselves during the transfer of power from British rule in 1947. During this time, there evolved three kinds of ownership patterns in the plantations: (a) multi-national companies; (b) proprietorships and (c) nationalised plantations. The structure of the workforce and working conditions remained the same in all three. However, in 1951, the Plantation Labour Act was passed by the central government and this act made it compulsory for employers to provide welfare measures to the workers. Scholars argue that more than fifty years after this legislation was enacted, employers continue to circumvent the provisions of the law, thereby leaving workers as vulnerable as they were in the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Bhowmick 1990: 186-199).

### **Living and Dying in the Plantation**

Baghmara<sup>11</sup> is a small proprietorship garden on the north bank of the river Brahmaputra. Part of the estate falls within Sonitpur district and a remaining portion in Darrang district in Assam. On April 22, 2000, the management's paid security guards shot several workers as they began an agitation for higher wages. The plantation employed 300 regular workers and during peak plucking season, employed an additional 700 as *casual*



*labourers*. Most of the workers belonged to Santhal, Munda and Oraon communities, whose place of origin is in central India. There were a small number of lower caste (Hindu) workers as well. Some of the Santhal, Munda and Oraon were Christians of various denominations (mainly Lutheran and Roman Catholic), with a small percentage claiming that they had retained their animist beliefs. In any case, religious differences were not a matter of concern until the management decided to build a huge Hindu temple on the factory premises. The plantation originally belonged to a European planter, who incurred huge debts and decided to sell the plantation to his debtor and leave Assam in the 1950s. The debtor was an Indian merchant based in Calcutta.<sup>12</sup> Since then, his family has run the plantation rather listlessly. The beleaguered manager of Baghmara explained:

“How can this plantation run? The owners are only keeping it as real estate. Not even one member of the family has come to see the place in over two decades. For them, this is a loss-making venture that allows them to claim tax-deduction in West Bengal.”

Arvind Kumar<sup>13</sup>

In the complicated scenario of India's tax laws, their owners can write off plantations in Assam as liabilities. While they have no direct stake in the management of the plantations, life of the workers becomes all the more harder due to the absence of interest on the part of the owners. In Baghmara, workers had not received rations for two months. Given the fact that the nearest town was 7 kilometres away, this meant arduous journeys to obtain basic amenities at market prices. To compound matters, workers had not received their wages on time. Hence, they decided to bypass the management-friendly union and agitate. On April 21, 2000 they decided to force a lockout of the factory, after a member of the trade union was forced to go on retirement. In the course the agitation, security guards fired at the protestors and killed seven workers.

The management was not the only adversary that the workers had to confront. Given the dire situation presented to them, some decided to move out of the plantations and cultivate land around the forest reserves that stretched from north of the plantation to Bhutan in the northwest. The first few families left in the middle of 1980s and immediately encountered ethnic Boro rebels who used the forests as their hideout in their guerrilla war to secure an autonomous (at times independent) Boroland<sup>14</sup>. Given the ideological contours of the Boro armed movement, any sign of settlement of the forest areas was seen as an *encroachment* by settlers and forces inimical to the securing of rights for Boros. The workers who moved there were constantly harassed and threatened by the rebels. Most of them decided to leave the forest area and return to the plantation in order to work as seasonal workers.<sup>15</sup> Upon their return, they were faced with an indifferent management, one that was already under pressure following the killing of a manager by activists of the National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB) in 1997. Life and work in the tea plantations revolve around the factory as

much as the outlying areas under tea cultivation. Every morning the workers assemble in the factory premises where work is assigned to them. Their work is regimented and closely supervised by figures of authority appointed by the management. Adult workers are paid Rs. 37.50 (thirty seven rupees and fifty paise) as daily wages. There is also a payment of Rs. 9 (nine rupees) that is given to 'children workers'<sup>16</sup>. The wage paid to 'children workers' is to try and lower the cost of production as much as it is to dissuade them from attending school. None of the workers on the Rs. 9 wage are permanent and have to wait for years before they are upgraded to another pay scale.

In March 2000, a thirty seven year old permanent worker was forced into 'voluntary retirement'. Where the workers have no access to even the basic legal advice, such practices assume larger proportions. As it is, only three hundred (300) workers are permanent employees in Baghmara. The rest of the seven hundred (700) strong workforce are either categorised as temporary labourers or child labourers. For the last few months, since their appointment, the present members of the Union have consistently sought to make more members permanent. The process is highly subjective and almost entirely dependent on the whims of the manager. However, the workers' woes run further back.

In October 1999, the assistant manager was reported to have sexually harassed some women workers in the plantation. The workers duly took the matter to the manager. It has to be mentioned here that women make up a bulk of the workforce in the tea plantations. Their economic status may well be on par with men, but in almost every other respect, they have to face a wall of prejudice and abuse from the management and staff. Even within the Unions, the representation of women workers is not proportionate to their participation in the production process. In cases such as the one reported above, the women are placed at an immediate disadvantage due to the fact that the management runs on absolute patriarchal lines, where such incidents are seen as minor transgressions. It has been common practice amongst planters, since the inception of the plantation system in Assam, to sexually exploit the workers in their place of work. Since they exercise absolute control over the regimented work process, their word is literally law. Junior assistants are groomed to take the place of the managers; hence their so-called 'indiscretions' are often overlooked and at times even encouraged. In this case as well, no action was taken against the erring assistant. Instead, the manager took the workers to task for reporting 'such a trivial issue and blowing it out of proportion'.

The again, in February 2000 some workers faced the wrath of the manager when they were 'caught' gathering old firewood from the plantation. The tea bush needs a lot of shade to grow, hence one finds rows and rows of 'shade trees' in the plantations. These trees are supposed to serve no other function. The workers are supposed to have access to firewood, as per the rules of the Plantation Labour Act of 1951. In

Baghmara the workers are not provided with even a nominal amount of fuel to make ends meet. They have to forage amongst the dead trees and bushes most of the time. When the two workers were 'caught' by the manager, they were merely taking enough (dead) wood to cook an evening meal and nowhere near enough to cause 'permanent ecological damage' to the shade trees. They were then dragged to the factory and half a kilo of salt was placed before them. The manager threatened them with dire consequences unless they ate the salt right there. Fortunately for the workers, the local *gaonburah* (village headman) appeared on the scene and prevented the manager from carrying out his threat.

There are a few resentments that workers in Baghmara reiterate in any conversation with people from outside the plantation. Firstly, they resent their invisibility in Assam's charged political milieu. Secondly, they resent their vulnerability as non-scheduled people.<sup>17</sup> Thirdly, they resent a lack of opportunities outside of the plantation complex and fourthly, they resent the manner in which their contribution to formation of modern Assam is belittled. Taken together, these are serious resentments that need to be elaborated further. The following sections attempt to engage this discourse of belonging and exclusion.

### **Tribe, Indigenes, Citizens: Contradictory Locations of Working Class Identity in the Plantation System**

On November 24, 2007 a group of protestors professing allegiance to the All Adivasi<sup>18</sup> Students Association of Assam (AASAA), staged a demonstration in Dispur, the capital of Assam. They were protesting the non-inclusion of the tea plantation labour force in the list of scheduled tribes in Assam. In the course of the protest, some of the agitators began attacking property in a commercial area of Dispur. Local residents, mainly shopkeepers, their employees and construction workers, retaliated with a brutality that shocked civil society in Assam.<sup>19</sup> Local residents beat assaulted several of the protestors and even stripped women in the bargain. This action can be partly attributed to urban lumpenisation and intolerance of protests, and partly to the capacity to shame the weakest rung in the struggle for social justice in Assam.

As Sanjib Baruah has remarked, the issue of social justice and constitutional redress for the plantation workers in Assam is one of ironical proportions.<sup>20</sup> The very people claiming their stakes as primitive peoples of India are actually those who created the economy of modern Assam in the nineteenth century (Baruah 1999). While there are larger questions regarding the ethics of social justice in Assam, what one has to underline, is the fact that this is a movement of people who once lived in the plantations and today are either forced out of the tea industry, or are willing to take a chance outside an institution that has seen bad financial days.

Some of the protestors at the November 24, 2007 rally were from Baghmara. They had come to the capital not just to protest, but to also stake a claim to social and political justice. In a conversation that was filled with anguish and inchoate anger, they lashed out at the political community. They vowed that they would not remain in the plantations, because they wanted to have the right to destroy what they had created. Their feelings are best captured in a poem written by Samir Tanti, himself a member of the erstwhile indentured labour community:

“Salaam Huzoor<sup>21</sup>

I am the indentured labourer’s boy  
 Don’t live in your lines  
 I have arrived in the town and speak from there  
 Do not hit the dog with your stick  
 Laugh huzoor, even the dead will laugh  
 It will be good  
 The company will earn fame”

--From “Salaam Huzoor, I am the Indentured Labourer’s Boy”<sup>22</sup>

### **In Conclusion...**

Comparisons are always an arduous task. In this case, the kolkhoz and the plantation offer such contrasting histories, that the task of finding common ground is all the more bothersome. Alaktalaa and Baghmara, on any given scale, are poles apart in their histories. While the former was part of a socialist ideological repertoire with a welfare agenda built into it, the latter remains an outpost of colonial history, with exploitation and extra-economic coercion built into the system. The only thing that binds them together is the fact that they have been made invisible in the new world order. Their partners – either as kolkhoz members or as workers in the plantation – have one thing in common: *resentment*. The manner in which they are made invisible has got a lot to do with the fact that people *tend to leave* places that have outlived their utility.

Also, it is not obvious that transfer of power -- from centralised states to independent members of commonwealth, or from empire to independent states – create immediate ruptures from the past. Important experiments like the kolkhoz and the plantation, given their immensely different agendas, become spaces that seem melancholic. It is this melancholia that could be tapped into to find new ways of looking at how people have coped with regimentation and mobility in disparate contexts and places.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Name of the village – earlier an important kolkhoz – and those of its inhabitants have been changed.

<sup>2</sup> Federation of different villages into a single municipality.

<sup>3</sup> Respondent's name has been changed. This interview was conducted on site by the author and his colleagues on June 11, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with the village veterinarian on site, by author and colleagues on June 12, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with the head of the *Ayl Ökhamatü* conducted on site by author and colleagues on June 12, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Respondent's name has been changed. The author and colleagues conducted this interview on June 13, 2007 in Alaktalaa.

<sup>7</sup> Interviewee's name has been changed on request. The author and his colleagues conducted this interview, on June 24, 2007 in Bishkek.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Saparmurat Niyazov in Alaktalaa by author and colleagues on June 11, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with author and colleagues in Alaktalaa, June 15, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> My colleague, who has visited migrants from southern Kyrgyzstan in Moscow, mentioned that Kyrgyz men working at construction sites, kept their reflector jackets on even after work for fear of being harassed by the Russian police. She also mentioned that many Kyrgyz are subjected to racial profiling while in Moscow (Personal correspondence, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> The name of the plantation has been changed.

<sup>12</sup> This practice of giving the plantation to the debtor is not uncommon. In the mid twentieth century, European planters who owned small estates were deeply indebted to the merchants who set up shop in the vicinity of the plantation. The *Marmari*, or his associate would be the only person who had some ready cash. The planter, often reliant on banks and investors in far off places, would take money from the *Marmari* in order to meet the weekly and monthly wage and ration payments. In time, these debts became fairly large and the planter – seeing an unfavourable climate for staying on in Assam – thought it fit to hand over the estate to the friendly debtor.

<sup>13</sup> The name of the manager has been changed. This interview was conducted after the killings of the workers, on April 25, 2000 by the author.

<sup>14</sup> The Boros are a Tibeto-Burman speaking people who live mainly along the north bank of the Brahmaputra. Being migratory, they are also found in other parts of Assam. Boros claim that they are indigenous to the land and since the 1980s have been involved in a complex struggle for autonomy from both Assam and India. A section of the movement has settled for autonomy within the existing state of Assam, while another (currently engaged in an asymmetric ceasefire with the government of India) still claim to be fighting for an independent Boroland.

<sup>15</sup> This information was given to me by David Toppo (name changed), who was one of the first people to try and make a living as a subsistence farmer and who subsequently returned to work as a casual labourer in Baghmara. The interview was conducted on September 17, 2000 in the labour lines (where the workers are housed) in Baghmara.

<sup>16</sup> Children worker is a misleading category as adults are classified as “children” in the pay roll sheet of the management. It allows the management to pay lower wages.

<sup>17</sup> “Scheduled Tribe” is an affirmative action category in India. The census determines communities that would belong to a schedule of tribes, thereby granting members of such communities certain preferential rights. The Oraon, Munda and Santhal are scheduled tribes in other states in India such as Jharkhand, Chattisgarh and West Bengal, but not in Assam. The politics of scheduling is something that one shall discuss at length in the following section.

<sup>18</sup> *Adivasi* means “original inhabitants” in most of south Asia. It is the closest approximate to the Anglo-Saxon term “indigenous”. In Assam, the term *Adivasi* is a contentious one, with other communities claiming a longer presence in the region, because *Adivasi* – in the Assam context – refers to the indentured workers who were part of the great nineteenth century movement of labour.

<sup>19</sup> “Large-scale violence in city, curfew in Beltola”, *Assam Tribune*, November 25, 2007. (Front page news). For online reference check <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/beltola>> (Last accessed on March 1, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Sanjib Baruah opines that no other category of people in Assam would qualify for compensatory justice, like those who built the tea industry. Baruah, however, also draws ones attention to the fact that notions of tribal-ness have to be rid of colonial errors and not be the sum total of movements for social justice. See: Sanjib Baruah, “Reading the Tea Leaves: The understanding of tribal status must be rid of colonial errors”, in *The Telegraph*, 11 December 2007.

<sup>21</sup> “Sir”

<sup>22</sup> Translated from Assamese by Dr. Rakhee Kalita. I am grateful to her for letting me use this section.

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