

Tea Plantations as Technologies of Empire: Colonial Capitalism, Labour Regimes, and the Remaking of North-East India, 1826-1947

Partha Banerjee

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Asannagar Madan Mohan Tarkalankar College

Abstract: *The majority of current narratives regarding the Assam tea estates predominantly focus on workforce recruitment, migratory patterns, or large-scale economic exploitation. This essential literature, however crucial for historical analysis, frequently perceives the plantation as a localised economic venture instead of a systemic driver of imperial dominance. This article presents a theoretical framework that views the tea plantations of colonial Assam as interrelated mechanisms of imperial administration. This tangible and organisational framework facilitated the functioning of the British colonial regime, encompassing accumulation through dispossession, the governance of labour and human movement, the establishment of racialised colonial epistemology, and significant socio-ecological transformations. The plantation functioned as both a commercial enterprise and a comprehensive spatial apparatus that redefined land ownership, coerced human labour, commoditised non-human nature, and reconstructed regional identities within the broader capitalist framework. This paper critically examines the theoretical frameworks of David Harvey, Michel Foucault, Ann Laura Stoler, and Jason W. Moore, positioning Assam within ongoing discussions of global plantation capitalism and contending that the colonial plantations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries must be recognised as a complex infrastructure whose social, spatial, and environmental legacies persist in shaping the structural realities of modern North-East India.*

Keywords: Assam, Tea Plantations, Technologies of Empire, Accumulation by Dispossession, Govern-mentality, Racial Capitalism, World-Ecology, Indenture

1. Introduction

From Descriptive History to Theoretical History

One of the most important and at the same time most violently executed projects of British colonial capitalism in South Asia was the radical transformation of Assam from a semi-autonomous frontier borderland into the largest contiguous tea-producing zone in the world after the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826. This tremendous ecological and social disturbance Official colonial historiography lauded this tremendous ecological and social disturbance as an icon of civilisational development, modernisation, and economic progress. Official colonial historiography portrayed this tremendous ecological and social disturbance as an icon of civilisational development, modernisation, and economic progress. By contrast, early nationalist and postcolonial scholarship inverted this story but kept a tight economic focus. These seminal works meticulously chronicled structural exploitation, capital flight, profit repatriation, and the planned underdevelopment of the Brahmaputra Valley. For almost four decades, three key overlapping pillars of research have characterised the historiographical field.

The labour history tradition is represented by Amalendu Guha's seminal *Planter Raj to Swaraj* (1977/2006) and Rana Behal's rigorous studies on the political economy of tea, which reconstructed systems of indentured recruitment, legal coercion and workplace control. *Migration and Diaspora Studies: Recording the forced, semi-forced and desperate migration of tribal (adivasi) and lower-caste populations from the Chota Nagpur Plateau, Santhal Parganas, Odisha and Chhattisgarh into the malarial hills and valleys of Assam.*

Global Economic Histories

A significant and brutally implemented initiative of British colonial capitalism in South Asia was the drastic conversion of Assam from a semi-autonomous frontier region into the largest contiguous tea-producing area globally following the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826. This significant environmental and societal upheaval: Official colonial historiography celebrated this significant ecological and social upheaval as a symbol of civilisational advancement, modernisation, and economic growth. Official colonial historiography depicted this significant ecological and social upheaval as a symbol of civilisational advancement, modernisation, and economic growth. In contrast, early nationalist and postcolonial studies reversed this narrative while maintaining a stringent economic emphasis. These foundational texts thoroughly documented structural exploitation, capital outflow, profit repatriation, and the intentional underdevelopment of the Brahmaputra Valley. For nearly forty years, three fundamental and interconnected research pillars have defined the historiographical domain. The labour history tradition is exemplified by Amalendu Guha's influential work, *Planter Raj to Swaraj* (1977/2006), and Rana Behal's thorough investigations into the political economy of tea, which re-examine the mechanisms of indentured recruitment, legal compulsion, and workplace regulation. *Migration and Diaspora Studies: Documenting the coerced, semi-coerced, and desperate relocation of Adivasi and lower-caste communities from the Chota Nagpur Plateau, Santhal Parganas, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh into the malarial highlands and lowlands of Assam.*

The Colonial Frontier and the "Discovery" of Indigenous Tea

The modern industrial tea system in Assam was instigated by calculated British geopolitical concerns. Calculated British geopolitical concerns instigated the modern industrial

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tea system in Assam. by calculated British geopolitical concerns. Calculated British geopolitical concerns instigated the modern industrial tea system in Assam. by calculated British geopolitical concerns. The First Anglo-Burmese War (1824–1826) exposed the fragility of Britain's eastern territorial frontiers. The Yandabo Treaty resulted in the incorporation of Assam, placing it under the governance of the East India Company. Colonial authorities swiftly identified the Brahmaputra Valley as an essential security buffer region along the unstable borders with Burma, Tibet, and Bhutan, as well as a prospective terrestrial economic conduit to the profitable markets of China.

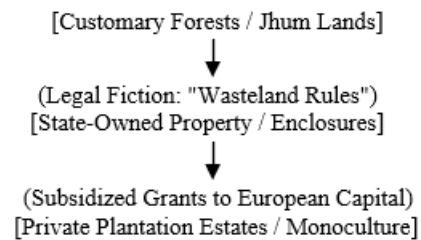
The identification of native tea plants (*Camellia sinensis* var. *assamica*) among the Singpho villages in the early 1830s attracted significant imperial attention. British authorities, including Robert Bruce and his sibling Charles Alexander Bruce, observed regional methods of agriculture and production. However, official colonial accounts systematically disregarded the expertise of the Singpho and Khamti, attributing the discovery solely to European scientific efforts and foreign Chinese experts. This cognitive appropriation was characteristic of the "empire's garden", as Jayeeta Sharma (2011) contends, where native ecological wisdom was forcibly gathered, documented, and assimilated while its creators were sidelined.

By the late 1830s, the East India Company transitioned from experimental cultivation to commercial integration. This resulted in the establishment of the Assam Company in 1839, recognised as the first joint-stock tea plantation enterprise. The cultivation of tea was not solely an agricultural endeavour or a localised beverage crop; it functioned as a strategic geopolitical instrument to mitigate Britain's considerable trade imbalance with the Qing Dynasty in China, maintain imperial oversight over production, and monopolise international commodity markets.

Accumulation by Dispossession: Land, Wastelands, and Property Regimes

David Harvey expands upon Marx's fundamental theory of primitive accumulation by asserting that capitalism is sustained not only through peaceful market transactions but also, at times or in prolonged instances, through systemic dispossession. Current instances of capitalist growth encompass the privatisation of communal resources, the legal erosion of traditional and collective rights, and the use of governmental power to convert public assets into private corporate ownership. The colonial administration in Assam achieved this transformation primarily via the legal construct of "wasteland. Officials proclaimed extensive areas of fertile land used by indigenous communities for jhum (shifting agriculture), communal pasturing, and harvesting forest resources as unproductive, unclaimed, and vacant wasteland. A succession of legislative measures, commencing with the Wasteland legislation of 1838 and succeeded by more comprehensive statutes in 1854, 1862, and 1876, transformed these customary lands into sole state ownership. These recruiters consistently deceived migrant labourers regarding their remuneration, environmental conditions, job demands, and contract durations. These territories were then sold or rented to European capitalist consortiums at minimal

prices through extended concessions, exempt from land taxes during the development stages.



The Spatial Infrastructure of Dispossession

The plantation economy in Assam exemplifies Harvey's concept of accumulation by dispossession. The systematic transformation of ancient woodlands, communal village lands, and native hunting territories into profitable plantation estates transferred vital natural resources directly from indigenous populations to urban capital. The Wasteland Rules did not merely regulate property; they intentionally established novel legal property frameworks to facilitate extensive capital extraction. Colonial legal systems served as a significant mechanism for dispossession, transforming social relationships into commodities linked to land.

The enhancement of physical infrastructure bolstered this extraction rationale. Railways, inland river vessels, paved roads, and subsequently the Assam Bengal Railway The residents of the frontier did not benefit from the development of railways, inland river vessels, paved roads, and, later, the Assam Bengal Railway as public assets. as public assets for the residents of the frontier. Conversely, they served as heavily state-funded channels for the swift transportation of tea chests from Assam plantations to the harbours of Calcutta and London. Tirthankar Roy asserts that colonial capitalism in South Asia heavily relied on these state-facilitated asset transfers. Ulbe Bosma's comparative research shows that both British India and the Dutch East Indies established agro-industrial plantations based on state-constructed private property rights.

Labour Discipline and Govern-mentality: The Plantation as a Disciplinary Space

Scholars of Assam have thoroughly chronicled the intense physical brutality associated with plantation existence; nonetheless, mere coercion does not adequately account for the persistent structural stability of plantation hegemony. Michel Foucault's theoretical ideas on governmentality and disciplinary power provide essential understanding of the processes of colonial authority, which operated through systematic administrative methods that made human populations understandable, obedient, and controllable.

The indigenous Assamese farmers mostly opposed wage employment under European circumstances, refusing to be converted into a working class inside the rigid boundaries of tea estates. Following the failed endeavours with imported Chinese labourers, landowners established a comprehensive and resilient domestic migration framework. Fraudulent recruiters and plantation supervisors used unscrupulous methods to recruit hundreds of thousands of vulnerable workers from the 1840s to the 1920s. Recruiters of migrant labour often misled workers about compensation, working

conditions, job requirements, and contract lengths. Recruiters often misled migrant workers about compensation, working conditions, job requirements, and contract lengths. The expedition by waterways and terrestrial routes through Dhubri and Goalpara was challenging, marked by significantly high mortality rates, especially in the 1870s.

The Foucauldian Apparatus	
Administrative Tool	Disciplinary Objective
Medical Inspections	Physical fitness & body sorting
Barrack Housing	Spatial confinement & surveillance
Penal Contracts	Criminalization of mobility
Census & Registers	Population legibility

The Production of Docile Bodies

Once the body was confined within the estate's boundaries, the plantation transformed into a comprehensive disciplinary establishment. The labourers were carefully enumerated, evaluated for health, accommodated in isolated barracks, documented, monitored, and severely penalised for any unapproved actions. The main objective was to establish the passive entities that Foucault delineates. The administration of plantations transcended mere financial factors; it embodied a form of bio-politics. Recruitment documentation, health assessments, prison labour agreements, barrack design schematics, and oversight of private estates constituted an extensive governmental framework designed to render employment entirely observable and controllable.

The legal architecture enforcing this regime was extraordinarily rigid

As a result, these laws classified every violation of plantation workers' labour agreements as a criminal offence, transforming civil employment contracts into criminal infractions. Furthermore, abandonment was strictly punished by means of arrest and imprisonment. The cultivators own the genuine power to identify and apprehend workers who have absconded from their jobs. The dwelling arrangements created in the "coolie lines", whose layout was strictly structured by caste, race, and gang connections, facilitated constant monitoring of the dwelling arrangements. by caste, race, and gang connections, enabled constant monitoring due to their layout. The sardari system, insufficient rice distributions, and debt bondage jointly confined families to specific regions for generations.

Foucauldian governmentality clarifies this occurrence by highlighting how tea plantations managed populations via nuanced administrative techniques rather than merely through coercive power. Labour historians such as Rana Behal demonstrate that this perspective does not diminish the significance of physical violence; rather, it contextualises it within a wider bureaucratic and legal structure. Sven Beckert (Empire of Cotton, 2014) and Sven Beckert with Seth Rockman (Slavery's Capitalism, 2016) argue in their concurrent analyses that contemporary global capitalism intrinsically combines liberal market ideologies with deeply illiberal and coercive labour management techniques derived from nineteenth-century plantation frameworks.

The Making of the "Coolie": Colonial Knowledge and Racial Govern-mentality

Colonial knowledge systems and racial administration racial stratifications often manifest in historical accounts of Assam; however, race is infrequently examined systematically as a governance tool. Assessments frequently emphasise pejorative colonial tropes regarding Assamese "indolence" or tribal "primitiveness", neglecting to investigate the significance of racial categorisations as essential tools of administration. Ann Laura Stoler's seminal research illustrates that colonial empires persist not just via military dominance but also through the creation of authoritative knowledge that continuously classifies, ranks, and normalises human variation. British officials instituted stringent anthropological and economic categorisations: the submissive yet manipulable "coolie", the resistant "native", the "savage lazy Assamese", the "industrious Chinese", the "martial tribal", and the "childlike Oraon". These racial classifications provided the conceptual basis for the enlistment of enslaved workers, the creation of rigid wage structures, the violation of essential civil rights, and the enforcement of paternalistic rule.

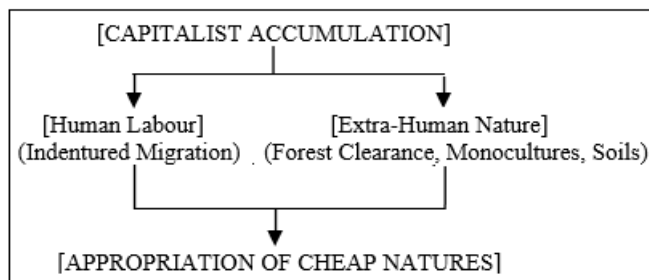
Colonial governance relied on classification frameworks that converted social and cultural differences into practical administrative knowledge. Stoler asserts that racial categorisations should be viewed not just as ideological prejudices but also as mechanisms of administration. The "coolie" designation offered the colonial administration a distinct legal framework to recognise, regulate, and punish labour groups, while rationalising abuses that would have been unacceptable for an autonomous European worker. The coolie was officially acknowledged as a racialised and gendered individual who might be employed, confined, subjected to medical scrutiny, and physically punished. Labour inquiry panels and planter guides formally portrayed migrant workers as unrefined but amenable to enhancement under rigorous European supervision. Concurrently, native Assamese agriculturists were portrayed as indolent and opium-dependent, rationalising their exclusion from plantation employment and the significant influx of foreign indentured workers.

This racially charged government had a direct impact on agricultural science. The examination of tea was envisioned as the utilisation of logical European reasoning to impose order on a tumultuous and hazardous frontier, leveraging botanical knowledge from the Calcutta Botanic Garden, cinchona trials, and later, the founding of the Tocklai Experimental Station in 1911. Indigenous expertise in agro-ecology, encompassing multi-cropping, forest conservation, and shade control, was methodically eradicated. Stoler notes that individualised scientific knowledge was crucial for colonial administration, reinforcing European supremacy through constant claims of advancement and rationality.

Plantation Ecology and Capitalist Nature: A World-Ecology Perspective

In this context, the document can truly exhibit creativity. The predominant historical narratives concerning Assam tea emphasise land and labour. Few effectively amalgamate ecological principles with capitalist frameworks. Jason Moore's world-ecology paradigm facilitates this synthesis.

Moore's fundamental concept is misleadingly straightforward. Capitalism does not function in accordance with nature. Capitalism organises the natural world. A singular historical framework: environment, workforce, and resources. The expansion of commodity frontiers occurs not solely via labour exploitation but also through the acquisition of inexpensive natural resources, encompassing affordable labour, food, energy, and land. The estate deforested woodlands, modified waterways, changed ecological diversity, brought in labour, and instituted monoculture. The cultivation of tea relied on the alteration of both human and non-human elements.



From a world-ecological perspective, tea plantations were not merely sites of commodity generation but mechanisms through which capital reorganised the interactions between humanity and the natural environment. Woodlands were transformed into plantation farms, ecological diversity was supplanted by single-crop farming, and workforce migration supplied the 'inexpensive labour' necessary for commodity generation. Assam's incorporation into global tea markets signified both an ecological and an economic shift. This alteration was pronounced in Assam. Thick mixed woodlands and wetlands facilitating shifting agriculture, fishing, and the gathering of forest resources were examined and categorised as wasteland and clear-cut. A biodiverse environment was replaced by systematic plantations of *Camellia sinensis*, dependent on foreign workers and subsequently on synthetic fertilisers and pesticides. Rivers were redesigned as channels for goods. In the 1880s, specialised steamers and railway branches connected the gardens of upper Assam to Dibrugarh and Calcutta.

This ecological restructuring was embedded in the accumulating process. The viability of plantations would have faltered without the exploitation of forests as inexpensive land and tribal (adivasi) migrants as low-cost labour. Moore (2015, 2016) enables us to perceive environmental history and labour history not as separate narratives but as a unified account of capitalism's global formation. This enhances Beckert's (2014) worldwide account of cotton and Bosma's (2013) comparative analysis of sugar, both of which demonstrate that plantations constituted ecological revolutions alongside economic transformations.

Resistance and the Limits of Colonial Power

The instruments of colonial domination were never entirely unchallenged or absolute. Desertion, work slowdowns, deliberate machinery sabotage, arson of tea factories, and the covert maintenance of family connections beyond the oversight of planters exemplified the prevalent subversive tactics employed by plantation labourers to sustain their

defiance. A notable rise in desertions transpired during periods of severe illness outbreaks and substantial workloads. Women workers frequently spearheaded collective demonstrations, verbal disputes, and appeals to visiting government inspectors or Christian missionaries, enduring the harsh realities of demanding tea plucking while receiving diminished piece-rate compensation. Women workers frequently spearheaded collective protests. It is widely accepted that urban humanitarian efforts were solely accountable for the eventual decline of penal contracts post-1908 and their official cessation in the 1920s. Conversely, contemporary critical literature highlights the structural limitations imposed by economic and political frameworks. Due to the alarming death tolls, escalating recruitment expenses, ongoing employee opposition, and the rise of violent nationalist criticisms, compulsion became progressively untenable.

In "Insurgent Empire", Priyamvada Gopal contends that grassroots anti-colonial resistance in colonies like India and radical political opposition within the imperial centre continuously influenced the evolution of official imperial policy. In the early 1920s, the Non-Cooperation Movement saw thousands of tea garden labourers engage in significant mass migrations referred to as "mulluck uthao". They undertook this action due to their belief that Mahatma Gandhi's concept of "Swaraj" would restore their heritage lands. The profound and entrenched relationship between governmental power and private investment was revealed through the severe police crackdown initiated against the striking labourers by the colonial regime in conjunction with European landowners. Guha contends that the transition from Planter Raj to electoral politics did not lead to the disintegration of the foundational plantation hierarchy. Instead, it led to the emergence of new, restricted domains for organised labour politics that were previously inaccessible under illegal indenture.

Postcolonial Durations

The Afterlives of Empire

The structural remnants of the plantation as an imperial technology are still very much obvious throughout the state of Assam in the present day. Nearly one-fifth of Assam's total population is comprised of tea tribes or ex-tea garden communities, which are officially designated as tea tribes. These communities are descendants of indentured servants and indentured labourers. Despite this, they continue to be among the socio-economic groups that are the most marginalised in the region. Despite the fact that they lack formal property rights, are locked in low-wage cyclical employment, and are suffering from acute shortfalls in healthcare and educational infrastructure, the vast majority of these communities continue to reside in crumbling "coolie lines" that date back to the colonial era. The ongoing struggles that they are engaged in for political representation, fair statutory daily minimum wages, and Scheduled Tribe (ST) status are direct postcolonial afterlives of colonial racial classification and spatial confinement. Despite the fact that the legal category of the "coolie" was formally eliminated, the persistent administrative construction of this population as perpetually foreign, perpetually migrant, and permanently bound to manual

labour continues to shape contemporary regional politics. This includes exclusions that are associated with the National Register of Citizens (NRC).

Ecologically speaking, the fragile mono-cultural landscapes that were engineered in the nineteenth century are now facing severe systemic crises that are characterised by severe soil exhaustion, chemical degradation as a result of decades of heavy pesticide use, and acute vulnerability to regional climate variability. This economic fragility, which was initially designed to service a distant imperial export market, persists in the present day in the form of severe global price volatility and unequal value capture by multinational corporate conglomerates, which have supplanted conventional agency houses. The integrated theoretical framework that is offered in this study is necessary in order to make sense of these interconnected contemporary crises. It is impossible to evaluate labour exploitation, environmental degradation, and racialised citizenship in isolation. It is necessary to investigate the accumulation of wealth through dispossession, governmentality, the development of racialised knowledge, and the alteration of the world's natural system as interconnected facets of a unified historical mechanism.

Postcolonial Durations

Architectural vestiges of the plantation as an imperial apparatus remain conspicuously evident across the state of Assam today. Approximately 20% of Assam's overall population consists of tea tribes or ex-tea garden communities, which are formally recognised as tea tribes. These groups are the progeny of indentured and contracted labourers. Notwithstanding this, they remain one of the most marginalised socio-economic groups in the area. Notwithstanding their absence of formal property rights, entrapment in low-wage cyclical employment, and severe deficiencies in healthcare and educational facilities, the overwhelming majority of these communities persist in inhabiting dilapidated "coolie lines" originating from the colonial period. The persistent challenges they face regarding political representation, equitable statutory daily minimum wages, and Scheduled Tribe (ST) designation are direct legacies of colonial racial categorisation and spatial restriction. Although the legal designation of "coolie" has been officially abolished, the ongoing administrative portrayal of this demographic as eternally foreign, perpetually migratory, and irrevocably tied to manual labour continues to influence modern regional politics. This encompasses exclusions linked to the National Register of Citizens (NRC).

From an ecological perspective, the delicate mono-cultural environments created in the nineteenth century are currently confronting significant systemic challenges marked by extreme soil depletion, chemical deterioration due to prolonged pesticide application, and heightened susceptibility to regional climate fluctuations. This economic vulnerability, originally intended to cater to a remote imperial export market, continues today as pronounced worldwide price fluctuations and disproportionate value appropriation by multinational corporate conglomerates that have replaced traditional agency firms. The comprehensive theoretical framework

presented in this research is essential for comprehending these interrelated modern dilemmas. Assessing labour exploitation, environmental degradation, and racialised citizenship in isolation is unfeasible. It is essential to examine the aggregation of wealth via dispossession, governance, the evolution of racialised knowledge, and the transformation of the natural world as interrelated components of a cohesive historical framework.

2. Conclusion

In this article, the history of Assam's tea plantations has been rethought. It goes beyond the conventional narratives of labour recruitment and macroeconomic exploitation to conceptualise the plantations as central technologies of empire. Through the integration of political economics, Foucauldian governmentality, postcolonial racial theory, and world ecology, this study reveals that plantations functioned as whole spatial apparatuses that simultaneously enacted the following:

- 1) Accumulation through the use of colonial property laws to prevent dispossession,
- 2) The government's control over labour organisations and the movement of people in space
- 3) The creation of racial knowledge systems that are hierarchical
- 4) Environmental shifts that are completely irreversible and radical.

When the state of Assam is positioned within the context of larger world histories, along with the contributions of Sven Beckert, Ulbe Bosma, Tirthankar Roy, and Priyamvada Gopal, it becomes clear that the Brahmaputra Valley was never a particularly isolated geographical exception. On the contrary, it was a representative example of the global plantation capitalism that was being tested. Its historical trajectory informs contemporary discussions on colonial extractivism, environmental justice, labour rights, and postcolonial citizenship. These discussions are directly influenced by its historical trajectory. The cup of tea that was consumed in drawing rooms in London during the nineteenth century was powered by a multidimensional imperial apparatus that restructured an entire region's land, labour, nature, and human identity. These legacies continue to resonate deeply across North-East India even today.

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