**Dey on Behal, 'One Hundred Years of Servitude: Political Economy of Tea Plantations in Colonial Assam'**

Review published on Friday, July 10, 2015


**Reviewed by** Arnab Dey (State University of New York at Binghamton) **Published on** H-Asia (July, 2015) **Commissioned by** Sumit Guha

**Who Built the Empire’s Garden? The Assam Plantations and Its Labor World**

The province of Assam in eastern India saw extraordinary activity around the second half of the nineteenth century as a result of British experiments in tea cultivation. Fueled by rising Sino-British tensions over opium smuggling, finding a non-Chinese source for this valued commodity was a pressing imperial need. Around this time, the “discovery” of the tea shrub growing wild along Assam’s eastern frontier in the 1830s was historically fortuitous, and set the stage for more than a century of agrarian, economic, and social colonization.

However, local labor shortages, poor communications, and the proximity to “tribal” borderlands made recruiting workers to Assam a challenging and costly proposition for planters. As millions of “coolie” laborers were brought in from other parts of India, harsh conditions of work, sexual violence, imprisonment, wage cuts, and surveillance became notorious hallmarks of this plantation regime throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

*One Hundred Years of Servitude* tells us this story of the Assam plantation world and the laborers, planters, agency houses, and colonial administrators who shaped it. This book consolidates more than thirty years of the author’s scholarly work on these issues, and several chapters made their first appearance in the *Journal of Peasant Studies, Modern Asian Studies,* and other journals in the preceding two decades. One of the key ambitions of the book is to provide a “critical analysis of the mechanisms of economic and physical coercion, and the extra-legal authority exercised by the planters within the plantations” (p. 7). In doing so, it aims to draw historical connections between British capital investment in the tea enterprise and the mechanisms of labor control that led to unprecedented profits, acreage expansion, and demographic change in these hundred years and beyond.

The first chapter discusses the origins of British investment in tea in Assam and the process by which this led “India [to be] integrated into world capitalism as a primary producer” (p. 30). Two critical lynchpins of the tea enterprise—namely land and labor—and the role of the colonial state in aiding this industry are elaborated here. The author notes that leases of land at throwaway rates (called Wasteland Grants) led to a veritable “tea mania” (p. 42) that saw a staggering increase in acreage and production in the province between 1840 and 1865. But acquiring land was only one side of the bargain. With local Assamese and Kachari labor unsuitable for plantation work, the tea boom
demanded a steady supply of cheap and pliant immigrant workers to these sprawling estates. Beginning with Act VI of 1865, government-assisted indentured immigration became a regular feature of the Assam tea enterprise that lasted into the twentieth century. These laws fixed monthly wages, conditions of work, and terms of tenure. Breach of contract attracted penal sanctions and planters were given powers to arrest absconding “coolies” without a warrant in their respective districts.

Why did the indenture system take root in Assam? What did it mean for laborers and planters in the region? The following two chapters provide answers to some of these questions. The author suggests that, for planters, a penal indenture system provided relief (and financial return) to the “extraordinarily” high cost of recruiting labor to Assam. In terms of its actual workings and returns on investment, however, the system was a spectacular mess. As the government experimented with different mechanisms of indentured recruitment (“licensed contractor,” “arkati,” “sardari,” and “de-regulated”), numerous abuses, extralegal coercion, and covert and overt flouting of norms became routine in the Assam plantations. Additionally, the involvement of numerous middlemen bloated the per-head cost of labor, which in turn led to managerial clamor for stricter laws.

For laborers, indentured servitude resulted in high mortality, malnutrition, low birth-rates, and “non reproduction” of the labor force (p. 82). Over time, labor resistance to these conditions snowballed into organized riots and unions towards the second decade of the twentieth century. By then, and especially around 1926, the indentured system had been effectively dismantled.

The third chapter elaborates the “power structures” with which agency houses in Calcutta and London and the planters on the ground operated. Control mechanisms included partial payment of wages in kind and money advances that tied laborers to a cycle of generational debt bondage. In addition, flogging, outright imprisonment, and sexual violence formed part of the sahib’s disciplinary repertoire to “tame the jungly coolie” (p. 110). The author provides a scathing analysis of the paternalist ideology that championed such measures as avowedly “protecting the ignorant coolie from influence and exploitation by outsiders” (p. 124). Behal argues that these “immobilization” schemes ultimately masked the planters’ own insecurities about legitimate authority while stymieing possible labor alliances and unions.

Chapter 4 revisits some of the above issues, and elaborates the role of the colonial state in abetting the penal indentured system in Assam. It brings out the inherently contradictory and Janus-faced relationship between the colonial administration and planters in the province. On the one hand, labor legislations pandered to managerial calls for “freer” recruitment and penal control. On the other, however, the façade of liberal imperialism impelled authorities in Calcutta to simultaneously add “regulatory” safeguards for labor health, work, and welfare. Despite being paper tigers for the most part, these regulations were decried by planters as unnecessarily stringent and a “hindrance to the expansion of the tea industry” (p. 70). To be sure, the Assam tea enterprise registered phenomenal growth and profits even in the face of fluctuating commodity prices in the international market. The fifth chapter examines this seeming paradox, and shows how nominal wages, subsistence diet, and processes of labor intensification allowed output and profits to swell despite adverse market conditions. Consider, for instance, that while the cost of living for the Assam tea laborer went up by “at least 200 percent between 1939-45, their earnings increased by only 82 percent in the corresponding period” (p. 225).
The final chapter looks at the long history of labor resistance and protests against the Assam plantation regime. Albeit “gleaned from colonial documents” (p. 253), it seeks to recover the lives and lore of more than a million men, women, and children who migrated to the Assam gardens. Collective and individual acts of resistance—often in response to managerial violence, judicial discrimination, and sexual harassment—was an ever-present feature of the exploitative indentured system. For the management, however, these were “desertions,” “abstentions,” “cheating,” “shirking,” or other forms of “criminal” activity encouraged by outsiders. The author suggests that it was only in the last days of indenture, and especially in the backdrop of Gandhi’s civil disobedience movement in 1920-22, that worker struggles took on organized shape and were categorized as “riots,” “revolts,” and “strikes” in official accounts. The book ends by detailing the late arrival of trade unions in the 1940s that began to voice tea labor concerns in the run-up to India’s independence.

One Hundred Years of Servitude is a heartfelt and detailed labor history. As is evident, this story shares many traits with histories of Atlantic slavery and indentured labor systems in the Old World. Despite its robust research, this book suffers from some oversights—substantive and stylistic—that I highlight below.

The author’s treatment of the labor question gives one the impression—however unintended—that the tea enterprise in colonial Assam had very little influence on (or contact with) local agrarian culture, norms of sociality, politics, and economy. Relations between them were, however, permeable and messy. Jayeeta Sharma (Empire’s Garden, 2011) has argued that the sustained influx of immigrant laborers, European planters, “Marwari” traders, Bengali Hindu clerks, Nepali graziers, and East Bengal Muslim traders and peasants in the wake of the tea industry definitively altered Assam’s cultural landscape and infused notions of a dominant “Assamese” identity vis-à-vis the racialized “Other.”[1] Though this becomes a pressing reality in Assam’s sociopolitical climate after 1947, its emergence as a result of the plantation industry can hardly be overstated. The author’s passing reference to the “social and cultural distance of the Assamese middle class from the migrant labourers” (p. 310) as a factor in the former’s indifference to tea workers’ problems only makes sense in this context. These intertwined social processes are rarely examined in this book, and mostly remain outside its purview.

It is also puzzling that the book does not engage more forcefully with the vast and burgeoning historiography on indentured migration and agrestic slavery. Despite the introductory reference to some of these scholars (Walter Rodney, P. C. Emmer, Hugh Tinker, Marina Carter et al.), subsequent chapters do not return to them at any great length. Admittedly, “what happened in the Assam tea plantations is a part of a broader story of global history in modern times,” (p. 2) and its relationship with and divergence from these other histories of labor would have provided for an illuminating and much-needed conversation. This would have also contextualized the often confusing argument that labor relations in Assam “were not shaped by ‘paternalism,’ as defined by [Eugene] Genovese ... [but] were marked by features akin to the Atlantic slave plantations” (p. 105). But, as the book (especially chapters 3 and 4) amply demonstrates, these two aspects of postslavery labor systems are hard to disentangle. It shows that tea labor in Assam shared a “dependent relationship” with the plantations, and that planters were very often the final arbiters of their social and economic lives. Sometimes, the Calcutta imperial establishment took on this paternalistic role in terms of policy superintendence, welfare guidelines, and legislative ambitions. Colonial plantations in Ceylon, Fiji, Mauritius, Guyana, and the Caribbean also displayed similar characteristics.
Finally, the book would have benefited from better editing. Matters of fact and interpretation are often repeated across chapters. For instance, section discussions on “Sickness and Mortality” (chapter 1), “The Issue of Mortality and the Inspection System” (chapter 4), and “Living Conditions of Labourers” (chapter 5) could have been amalgamated into one unit. Similarly, details on the Indian Tea Association (ITA) and its role in managing emerging trade union activity in chapter 3 reappear to some extent in chapter 6.

Despite these deficiencies, One Hundred Years of Servitude is a valuable addition to the literature on the Assam tea plantations. Apart from the text, an appendix with a wealth of statistical information on wages, tea acreage and prices, food costs, mortality rates, and immigration figures makes it an indispensable resource for scholars and students of South Asian History, labor studies, indentured migration, and plantation life.

Note


This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.