



Creating Racial Genealogies: Producing the Primitive Aborigine in the Quest for the Ideal Imperial Immigrant Labourer

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Abstract

Indian Indentured Labour Immigration was conceived as an alternative stream of labour supply in the exigencies of abolition of slavery in the British empire. In their quest for the ideal labouring body, the imperial functionaries zoned in on the figure of the 'Hill Coolie', i.e. the indigenous inhabitants of the Chhotanagpur plateau as the ideal replacement for the African slave. Accorded with putative 'primitive' virtues of industriousness and superior physical strength in colonial ethnological deliberations, the 'Hill Coolies' work efficiency was discussed as far as the British parliament in the 1830s. However, concerns regarding their high sickness and mortality in overseas voyages provided crucial caveats to this discourse. This paper examines the contradictory discursive framings of the ethnological construct of the hardy 'hill cooly' which was variedly played out and re-created multiple times in disparate migratory locations. This analysis considers how the broader political economy—including metropolitan capital, labour logistics, and disease transmission—shaped colonial ethnological discourse. Such a discourse always remained tentative, although the subjectivities it generated in the spaces of migration outlived it. The enduring label 'tea tribes', used to describe descendants of Chhotanagpur indentured migrants in Assam and North Bengal, reflects how colonial discourses continue to influence contemporary regional politics.



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1. Introduction

The history of global modernity, once we account for its specific midwifery by various colonial powers across disparate regions of the world can be chronicled as a story of people moving. Since the 19th century, European powers sought to carve up almost the entire terrestrial portion of our planet into their separate imperial domains, setting off waves of mass displacement especially of labouring people, across regions, nations and continents. The expanding capitalist world economy on one hand created colossal demand for labour especially in the rapidly expanding sectors of plantation, railroad construction and navigation while it simultaneously caused large scale disruption of erstwhile systems of production in the colonies, notably in India. The displaced workforce of these ravaged pre-colonial production systems - desperate to sell their labour power, however cheap it need be, provided the necessary supply of people for the expanding capitalist sectors.

The servants accompanying East Indiamen, the sailors, the soldiers, the railway and plantation workers in far flung British colonies in the Caribbean Islands, Africa or the Pacific were an offshoot of this conjuncture. The

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Lascars, the Ayahs, the coolies – terms denoting various labouring practices in different Indian languages got re-signified in the process to attain heightened markers of racial traits and habits.

Among these various contingents of labouring populations of the era of imperialism, the plantation workers formed the overwhelming majority of Indian migrants - a fact by virtue of which they often stood as a synecdoche of the Indian migrant labourer. Upwards of 5 million people moved from their region of origin, more often than not under contracts of indenture to work in the then burgeoning sector of capitalist agriculture – the tropical colonial plantation. Of these, over 1.2 million people went under indenture proper to work in the sugar plantations of Britain's crown colonies, namely, Mauritius, Natal, Fiji and the Caribbean colonies – Esp. Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica. A notable number also migrated to the French colony of Reunion in the Indian Ocean and the Dutch Caribbean colony of Suriname with the former receiving 79,089 and the latter 34000 workers under their respective versions of indentured contract (Haines, Shlomowitz, Brennan, 1996). These figures however dim in comparison to the 4 million workers who migrated to Malaya, Burma and Ceylon to engage in the European owned rubber plantations of Southeast Asia and the tea and coffee plantations of Ceylon (Mongia, 2018). These workers were recruited under the Kangani system. Kangani is a Tamil word meaning foreman. Under this system, the lead worker recruited his band of new workers through kin and village-based networks during his sojourns back to homeland. This made for a less formalized system, but the close surveillance exercised by the Kangani over his band and the filial trappings binding the individual worker through bonds of allegiance made up for the more institutional control ensured by indentureship (Pratap Kumar, 2015).

Indentured emigration of Indian labourers was conceived in the wake of Abolition of slavery in the British empire in the mid 1830s when planters sought a cheap and dependable source of cheap labour to replace the supply of slaves from Africa. Industries that depended on slave labour, especially the sugar plantations in the colonies, stared at imminent collapse with impending stoppage of the slave traffic. The proprietors, shareholders and financiers connected with the sugar trade thus started desperately searching for an alternative source of labour. Initially, planters attempted to recruit recently emancipated African slaves to re-engage in the same sugar plantations where they had hitherto worked under servitude but this time under Master and Servant Laws. The ex-slaves were hardly enthusiastic at the prospect of working in the plantations which were a symbol of captivity for them (Schuler, 1986).

Next, they tried their hand at recruiting European workers under indenture. Planters and administrative functionaries were indeed optimistic about the benefits of bringing in a putatively more efficient and 'superior' workforce which would also further the cause of civilization in the tropical plantation colonies, albeit for a very brief moment (Northrup, 1995). However, colonial planters could not secure sufficient supplies of Europeans to migrate and work under servile indentureship contracts in the tropical heat. Intending European emigrants had better outlets available in Australia and North American regions to work as free labourers. A few English and German workers were brought under contracts to work in Mauritius. However, the dearth of numbers and ill health of the workers who arrived made the plan unviable. Authorities read this failure within the prevalent trope of the tropics being debilitating to the health of the "white" man, who was supposed to engage himself only in managerial capacity and not as a labourer (Anderson, 1918). The fact that the tropic was inherently malevolent to the moral and physical health of the individual was noted too, as it was reported, abundance of cheap rum took away all inclination to work in case of the few European contract labourers (Northrup, 1995).

Conforming to the prevalent racial episteme – manual labour under the glare of the tropical sun ought to be performed by inhabitants of the tropics, imperial functionaries shifted their recruiting efforts to the lands of the tropics. Thus, upwards of 3 and half hundred thousand Chinese migrants crossed the Pacific to work in the sugar plantations of the Americas (Northrup, 1995). However, the most dependable source of indentured labour supply and thereby the largest supplier of such emigrants for the British empire was India.

It was easier to maintain a stable flow of new recruits from India and exert more regulatory control by dint of it being a British possession. Consequently, the indentured scheme was elaborately regulated by a slew of imperial apparatuses – the British Indian Government, the colonial governments of the various destination locales and apex imperial bodies located in metropole like the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission. It was designed to provide a dependable and "steady" workforce to the planters aka the previous slave labour force while at the same time seeking to negate abolitionist criticism of it being a resumption of slavery under a new name. The contract of indent which the prospective labourer needed to sign, thereby agreeing to work for a certain duration in a particular colony, upwards of 3 years in most cases with transportation to the location included as advance payment was espoused to embody civilizing mission of inculcating 'industrious' habits among degenerate subject populations (Papers Respecting the East Indian Labourers Bill, 1838). The migrants' lives were regulated

through the general “Terms of Engagement of Intending Emigrants” which laid out the conditions of labour for the duration of the indentureship period.

It is noteworthy that the then prevailing economic doctrine of *Laissez Faire* which advocated freedom of commerce uninhibited by tariffs or any other mode of external intervention upon market forces, had consistently advocated for increasing strictures on the freedom of labour contract. At the height of *laissez faire*, the supposedly non-interventionist metropolitan British state was deeply involved in regulating the terms of contract between employers and employed. Ensuring subsidized labour recruitment for the planters in the colonies, laying out beneficial terms for the planters to employ the said labourers, indentureship thus became an enduring aspect of the social relations of the British Empire.

This section traces the emergence of the discursive consensus that underpinned the normalization of the practice of using indentured labour for agricultural production as a vital appendage of the imperial economic system. The contingencies of imperial trade, production, public opinion and the policy considerations consequent of them, which brought forth this particular configuration - of labour under bonds of indenture aiding expansion of free market agrarian capitalism invoked a phenomenology of labour which by historical practice and contemporary doxa of enlightenment was racialized at the outset. An exploration into the changing demographics of the Indian indentured traffic both synchronically across different overseas and inland locations and diachronically – charting the vicissitudes of various people groups as they caught the fancy of imperial functionaries to be discursively fashioned into the ideal laboring body or fell out of favour for supposed innate traits of physique and temperament as often, would reveal the constitutive role of race in shaping practices of production, migration and determining the place of the individual and her/his level of access within the empire. The remnants of such erstwhile imperial configurations in disparate regions of our world, be it the relation between the indigenous population and Indians in Fiji or Malaysia, the chequered history of discord and cooperation between Blacks and Indians in the Caribbean or South Africa, or the complex demographic equation existing between indigenous inhabitants, the Bengalis, Assamese and the members of the ‘tea tribes’ in submontaine Eastern Himalayan regions of North Bengal, Assam and the division of Sylhet in Bangladesh are determinative in shaping the contours of ethnic relations and sociality in the particular locations.

2. Advent of the Indian Indentured Emigration Scheme

The anxiety generated by the impending Abolition in the 1830s was particularly felt in the colonies whose economies depended largely or chiefly on the production of sugar. Sugar was the “white gold” that fuelled colonial expansion and for the British in particular was the chief source of colonial revenue before their conquests in India in late 18th century (Taylor & Woroniecka, 2024). It shored up the finances of Britain’s first colonies in America and funded further colonial expansion.

Marc Aronson and Marina Budhos write “sugar had done more to reshape the world than any ruler, empire or war had ever done” (Aronson & Budhos, 2010). Sugar was the prime impetus for the infamous Atlantic triangular trade in slavery - Where money and manufactured goods from Europe were exchanged for slaves in Africa on one hand and used to procure and upkeep the sugar plantations in the American colonies on the other, where the slaves were transported across the Atlantic to work in. The profits and the sugar produced in the colonies then moved back across to Europe. The European empires profited in each of the nodes of this triangular network until the spectre of Abolition in 1830s made them despair for a future source of labour.

Philip Curtin had shown that there is little evidence of large-scale sugar cultivation anywhere on earth before the late 17th century. He explains, as a food source it can provide little nutrition apart from excess of glucose. Agrarian societies thus did not concentrate on producing sugar as much as they did on producing staple food crops like paddy, wheat, maize or manioc. Large Scale production of sugar was feasible only when an export market for the crop was available – that is precisely what European colonial expansion in the post-Columbian era made possible (Curtin, 1998).

Moreover, Stanley Engerman (Engerman, 1983) points out that sugar had always been both capital and labour intensive. This is because the heavy weight of cane stalks needs to be manually cut and immediately grinded as otherwise it will become sour and worthless. Preparation of the field for cane cultivation also required more man time than paddy or any other staple crop, because ditches and canals need to be made for proper irrigation and avoid inundation of the fields. After harvesting, a huge quantity of firewood is required for fuelling the burner for boiling cane juice. So, the plantations needed to have their own mills inside the estate to reduce freight cost and to extract the juice immediately after the harvest. After the crystalline white sugar had been produced it still needed to be transported for long distances over land to reach the nearest port for export, that is one reason for

sugar plantations to be located near the coast or near a navigable river. Thus sugar, from its first introduction to the Asian mainland, 10 millennia ago to its journey through the Indian subcontinent and onwards through the silk route to the southern Mediterranean region was a luxury good, used as a precious condiment or what was called in Early Modern parlance, a Spice, conceived to be a stimulant, like cardamom or nutmeg, precious and rare commodities of the East, at times used as a medical stimulant and prohibitively expensive for most people apart from the super-rich. It was only since the 16th century initiation of the African slave trade, sugar could be produced in large quantities and became a mass commodity on which financiers could invest, speculate and make a profit (Aronson & Budhos, 2010).

Curtin and Engerman's specific points regarding the particular costing factors of sugar production holds true for certain other crops which only started to be cultivated large scale in plantation mode of production in the era of empire, such as tea, coffee or rubber. Crops for which large numbers of Indian immigrants were transported overseas as cultivators.

The abolition of slavery threatened disruption of this lucrative profit-making arrangement. Though the act of abolition provided handsome monetary compensation to slave owners and provided for an extended period of transition for proprietors to shift to the new system based on wage labour, it set off alarm bells (Butler, 1995). Planters and merchants with stakes in the trade intensively lobbied for an alternative cheap source of labour. They raised the bogey of impending labour shortage as the ex-slaves were perceived to be reluctant to continue as wage labourers in the plantations.

3. The Discourse of Labour Shortage

The planting lobby posed the issue of labour shortage in the rhetoric of Wealth of the Nation. They argued that without the peculiar advantages provided by the guarantee of slave labour, British sugar will be unable to compete with slave produced Brazilian and Cuban sugar in the metropolitan and European market. The evidence on the ground however was far more complex than the portrayal of ex-slaves abandoning plantations en masse. As the American journalist William Sewell, visiting the Caribbean just after Abolition set in noted, "emancipation was an isolated experiment in each of the different colonies. Precedents and rules of action for one were no precedents and rules of action for another. Here there were obstacles to overcome and difficulties to surmount which there did not exist, or existed only in a mitigated form". Colonies where land was in plenty, there was a large-scale movement of ex-slaves from the plantation and development of a subsistence agriculture and blue-collar workforce as was the case in Trinidad and Tobago and Antigua. Such movement were not observed in places with scarce land like the Leeward Island colonies. Ex-slaves generally insisted to be paid according to a wage-rate mutually agreed upon by both planters and the labourers and wanted stipulated understanding for other works in plantations which were not directly related to cultivation or production of sugar, like tending cattle or cutting wood for the proprietor or supervisor's personal use. Ex-slaves also wanted to own or obtain small plots of land in lease from the large plantations where they engaged in market gardening and cultivating provisions for their subsistence, apart from which they also cultivated sugar (Haraksingh, 2003).

None of these factors are supposed to diminish productivity of sugar theoretically and indeed might have increased the acreage under sugar cultivation. Indeed, the anxiety was, as expressed by William H. Burnley, a planter with large holdings in Trinidad, to the Parliamentary Select Committee instituted in 1836 to deliberate about land in British colonies was that the ex-slaves after "full emancipation" cannot be made to work "steadily" in the sugar plantations (Kale, 1998). The euphemism required no further explanation to those familiar with the coercive regime of slave produced sugar, where workers were considered, expendable human chattels having no claims on their bodies and routinely subjected to physical violence.

Historian Kusha Harakshingh in her work on Trinidad had shown that far from ex-slaves fleeing the plantations the reality was that a large number of just emancipated labourers were pushed off the plantation by planters seeking to rationalise their workforce by eliminating those people whom they considered least productive - women, the elderly, children and the infirm (Haraksingh, 2003). Madhavi Kale had argued that more than a fear of labour shortage it was a quest for a labour force on which the planters in cahoots with the planter controlled colonial legislatures in these colonies can exert monopoly control in terms of supply and consequently wage-rate, that drove them to find an alternate cheap source of immigrant labour (Kale, 1998). Labour was needed to aid capital accumulation. Burnley told the Parliamentary Select Committee that in view of the extensive amount of fertile land available in the colonies and the large number of apprentices on the threshold of full emancipation who would be keen to obtain their own tracts of freehold land it would be judicious on part of the imperial government to fix both a high price and a high minimum acreage for the sale of such lands (he proposed 600

acres). This is because he considered the Blacks as opposed to the White people are not ambitious enough to prosper and gain a social standing.

As John Gladstone prominent merchant and slave owner expressed in his correspondence with Lord Glenelg, the Colonial Secretary about the lack of “pressure” upon the labourers to seek employment as vegetables like plantains are freely available in British Guiana which would satisfy their necessity for food (Papers Respecting the East Indian Labourers’ Bill, 1838). This racist assumption of the lazy and indolent African is a well-trodden imperial discursive trope honed in the crucible of African slavery for 300 years, which would soon be extended to their post abolition counterparts – the indentured Indian emigrant labourer.

4. Discovering the ‘Hill Coolie’ - The Industrious Indian Labourer

Gladstone was pressing his case to be allowed to transport Indian labourers of a particular group from India who are described as “Hill coolies” or “Dhangurs” in British Indian official correspondences to work under contract in his plantations of British Guiana. For that he had engaged the Agents - Gillanders and Arbuthnot to recruit such labourers as they had already been in the trade of recruitment and transportation of this group of labourers on Five Years contract to work in sugar plantations in Mauritius. In Mauritius largescale cultivation of sugar had started only in the 19th century. Consequently, the brunt of abolition had not been felt so severely. However, the bogey of labour shortage haunted the Mauritian sugar planters as much as it did to their counterparts in the Caribbean. The planters first tried to recruit liberated African slaves to work in the plantations under wage labour, followed by an attempt to recruit European labourers under indenture – both of the schemes failed to ensure a sustainable supply of labour for reasons discussed earlier. It is under these circumstances the Mauritian planters turned towards India. Mauritius was close to India at a distance of 3 weeks by sailing ships in good weather. It was also not completely unfamiliar to Indian labour as British Indian army soldiers were regularly posted there as were convicts transported under sentences of hard labour (Carter, 2000).

On 9th September, 1834, Hunter, Arbuthnot and Co. contracted 36 men, mentioned as “Hill Coolies”, in the presence of D. Mac Farlane, the then Commissioner of Police of Calcutta to work in Mauritius for 5 years. These 36 men who were joined by 39 more from Bombay in the ship Atlas can possibly be the first emigrants from India to go to work under contracts which would be later formalised into the Indentured Emigration scheme. Governor Nicolay of Mauritius however mentions of 29 men from Bombay taken by one Mr. Bickajee to Mauritius under similar contracts in 1831-32, who later voluntarily re-contracted after the completion of their first contract (Despatches from Sir W. Nicolay on free labour in Mauritius, and introduction of Indian labourers, 1840). Either way these were the pioneer migrants to go overseas under contracts to do agricultural field work.

These recruitments were being done completely under private arrangement between individual agents and proprietors who intended to recruit such labourers. There was no special legislation to regulate the scheme. The labourers after disembarkation from the ships were registered by the Mauritius police and came under purview of the general contracts governing master servant relations in the colony, which were coercive pieces of legislations extant since the days before Abolition (Kale, 1998).

Getting wind of this Indian channel of migrant labour, Gladstone wrote to Gillanders and Arbuthnot. They assured him that recruiting and supplying labourers to British Guiana won’t cause additional difficulty. They informed this particular set of labourers to be able bodied and adept at agricultural labour, often seen to finish their work even before the “negroes”.

These people termed as “Hill Coolies” by the British in India were the indigenous people of Chhotanagpore plateau region which is today part of the Indian state of Jharkhand. They used to travel to the districts of Bengal for agricultural field work during the planting and harvesting seasons since pre-colonial times (Papers Respecting the East Indian Labourers’ Bill, 1838). Being migrant agricultural field labourers in search of employment these people were the first to be recruited by the contractors of the agents for Mauritius. Looking at the particular racialized portraiture of these people by Messrs. Gillander and Arbuthnot gives us an idea about what kind of labour force the planters were searching for. They gleefully stated about the “perfect ignorance”, of the men about their destinations, appraised their strong body, docility and as they perceived - their lack of kinship bonds, in language reminiscent of mercantile correspondences regarding consignments of slaves. They also expressed assurance that by taking these people to West Indies they are not “in any way acting a cruel part” because apparently these “Dhangurs” as they are called are despised “by the more cunning natives” of Bengal as closer to monkeys than men. (Kale, 1998) The implication is that by taking them out of India would not be detrimental to their interests but rather be an act of aid of which they will also greatly benefit.

In these formative days of overseas indentured transportation, 80 percent of intending emigrants in most ships belonged to this group of people - a trend that will continue for the first decade after which the number of indigenous people of Chhotanagpur plateau travelling on emigrant ships will diminish to become a very marginal presence.

Examining the discursive underpinnings that determined such demographic shift among the contingents of intending emigrants would demonstrate a significant aspect of 19th century colonial ethnography's epistemic transformation and the racial anthropology in operation effecting that shift. Such an examination need to take into account the agency of all the parties involved along with the particularities of the various locations - i.e. not just the regions of origin of the migrants and the various distinct indentured recruiting colonies and regions but also the spaces inhabited by the migrants in transit - the waystations, the holding depots and the shipboard enroute to their destinations. It is in the contingencies of such a typically polyvalent domain shaped by the presence of multiple agents spanning disparate spaces that discursive transformations take place.

The study explores this transformation in the demographics of indentured immigration in two distinct migratory routes - one overseas and the other to the sub-montaine Himalayan regions of North Bengal and Assam for tea cultivation in both chronological and synchronic frame. This would reveal an interesting contrast between the discursive constructions of racialized migrant bodies formulated in these two separate migratory regimes.

5. Recruiting Junglies overseas for 'Company work'

Gladstone's correspondence with Gillander and Arbuthnot set the precedent for the recruitment of indigenous inhabitants of Chhotanagpur as the most preferred group of people for overseas indentureship. By recruiting these people, the British labour contracting firms were indeed tapping into an established stream of labour migration. Migrants from Chhotanagpur were a familiar presence in the districts of lower Bengal during the harvesting season working as agricultural labourers for hire. They were seasonal migrants travelling in groups who went back to their homes in Chhotanagpur after harvest. As the pioneer Indian entrepreneur testified to the Committee set up for investigating the abuses in the overseas indentured labour migration system in 1839 (henceforth the Dickens Committee) about the transitory nature of their sojourn. He mentioned that although these people worked as free farm workers, some of them had also started working as construction labourers in and around Calcutta.

Thus, it was convenient for recruiters to convince the Chhotanagpur migrants to migrate further for agricultural labour with the promise of better and regular wages overseas, albeit under contracts of indenture. The Calcutta clergyman, Thomas Boaz in his deposition to the Dickens Committee stated that recruiters told the intending migrants that they were to be recruited for 'company work' - the Company in question being the East India Company, which gave the impression that they were being hired by the government. The impression was reinforced by the fact that the licensed indentured labour recruiters carried tin badges, not unlike personnels on government duty like peons or constables (Papers Respecting the East Indian Labourers' Bill, 1838).

That being said, the indentured labour recruits were not all victims of deception who were duped into contracts of servitude to work across an ocean voyage away from home. Such an approach with precedents in Hugh Tinker's 'New System of Slavery' thesis and works of other nationalist scholars of indenture which with otherwise remarkable analytical insight, risks disregarding the agency of the immigrants (Tinker, 1974). Conversely another significant branch of scholarship had upheld the capacity of choice of the intending immigrants to a degree that the labouring migrant had been fashioned into the figure of the archetypal Homo Economicus of neo classical thought - perfectly rational and completely cognizant of all the fine points of law regarding indentured contract to sign up for backbreaking field labour overseas, thereby validating their agency. Rachel Sturman had claimed the origin of international labour rights lie in the provisions of scrutiny and state intervention contained in indentured labour law of the 19th century which apparently protected the worker from abuse. Such an approach belies the coercion, the legalized acknowledgement of the workers' subordination to the master in the Master and Servant Laws which provided the legal rationale of the indentureship contract (Sturman, 2014).

The intending immigrants' capacity of economic maneuver and range of choice available in the deeply hierarchized labour market of colonial India might lie midway between the two extremes of the servitude-free choice continuum advocated by the respective group of scholars. As Brij Lal in his study of indentured immigration to Fiji had argued that in deciding to emigrate to a distant land under contract of indenture the migrants were exercising their freedom of choice, nonetheless he acknowledged the agrarian distress, famines and factors of debt bondage as push factors driving the individuals to take such a crucial decision (Lal, 2012). In fact, colonial policies were prime contributors to this complex of distress factors.

In the particular case of the immigrants from Chhotanagpur, anthropologist Kaushik Ghosh had shown that the British conquest of Chhotanagpur caused widespread economic and social dislocation often in physical terms as whole villages were burnt and inhabitants evicted from their ancestral lands. The ensuing rebellions – first by the Kols in 1831-33 and Santhals in 1855-56 were brutally suppressed and what followed was a long painful process of depeasantization. It is these displaced people eager to find work who made up the bulk of such migrant labour force, be it in India or in the larger British empire (Ghosh, 1999).

Examining the agrarian context of labour migration from the Chhotanagpur plateau region, Prabhu P. Mohapatra reveals, an interesting inverse correlation existed between the rate of harvest and the consequent price of rice at origin with the rate of outmigration, with a lag of one year. He observed that the indentured recruitment system with its slave and convict connotations was designed to exploit this condition of distress migration by the planters. Their aim was to reduce the troughs and increase the peaks of the migration cycles through the indenture system. He shows that throughout the period of overseas and inland indentured migration, the rate of emigration was relatively more elastic than harvest, i.e., in a bad year emigration rose more sharply than the fall in output, while in a good year the level of emigration fell more sharply than the rise in output which testifies to the distress nature of migration (Mohapatra, 2004).

In 1864, the Commissioner of Chhotanagpur listed the reasons for migration to be a mixture of drought-induced poverty, exorbitant rents and also the lures of recruiters - ".....in bad seasons the ryots are unable to meet the heavy rent demand in some parts of it and are reduced to poverty.... They are in that condition easily persuaded to accept the tempting offers of the agents of the emigration companies." As Marina Carter in her pioneering narratological study of emigrants' testimonies observed "individual explanations for migration reveal an intriguing blend of economic necessity, chance encounters, trickery and tradition of labour mobility" (Carter, 1996)

Thus, such facile racial explanations of supposed primitive industriousness of the Chhotanagpur immigrants as M/S Gillanders and Arbuthnot indulged in their correspondence with Gladstone need to be read against the grain to understand the underlying political economic process of subjugating and shepherding of Chhotanagpur's population as imperial labour reserve.

New scholarship had explored the place of the 'coolie' in the imagination of the civilizing mission of colonial capitalism. It has been pointed out that the 'coolie' needed to be simultaneously mobile and fixed. All his previous moorings at the place of origin – land, property, debt (opposite of property but equally binding), community, kinship, family had to be sundered to turn him into the essential migrant who responded effortlessly to the stirrings of the market – becoming the ideal free human subject of classical economic thought - a symptom of his abject vulnerability perhaps. Such a migrant after reaching the logical destination – the plantation, needed to be reinvested with as many roots in the plantation system as possible. Indenture was the most blatant form of affecting the latter (Ghosh, 1999). Eric Hobsbawm had elaborated on this predicament of indentured labour thus "their roots are in the land and the homestead, and there they must stay like trees, or rather like sea-anemones or other sessile aquatic animals which settle down after a phase of youthful mobility" (Hobsbawm, 2015).

The primitivism that was elaborated in the commission reports and the planters' correspondences, constituted the 'Dhangar' in precisely these terms. The supposed lack of caste, kinship and the tractability of the Dhangar ensured the simultaneous mobility and fixity that was demanded of the 'coolie'.

6. Discovering Racial Disadvantages: The End of the Hill Coolie Rush in Overseas Recruitment

As stated earlier, the share of recruits from Chhotanagpur plateau formed more than 80% of all indentured emigrants in the formative days of the system (Shlomowitz, 2024). In 1839, when reports of sundry acts of coercion against emigrants, inadequacy of provisions and high rate of contagious diseases in depot and shipboard led to public outcry, the colonial office suspended indentured transportation from India, pending report of judicial enquiry. Given Indian indentured emigration's originary links with slavery - the scheme having been formulated to provide an alternate source of cheap labour to the traffic of slaves in the aftermath of Abolition, it was susceptible to allegations of being a new system of slavery from Abolitionist commentators. Thus, in August 1838, the government of India constituted an enquiry committee headed by the judge T. Dickens to look into the abuses in the system and suggest whether resumption of the traffic with heightened regulatory and welfare provisions for the immigrants was advisable or not. This was a measure undertaken by the government to counter abolitionist charges against its supposed connivance in resuming and salvage its locustandi as the benevolent imperial protector. Following the constitution of this committee, the labour importing colonial governments of

Mauritius and British Guiana also instituted their own enquiry commissions (Papers Respecting the East Indian Labourers' Bill, 1838).

The strategy adopted by the enquiry committees was to shift the blame of the high rate of sickness and mortality of the immigrants on shipboard and in the destinations on the poor physique and lack of hygiene of the Indian labourers themselves. Individual cases of flagrant corporeal abuse of Indians were explained away as aberrations perpetrated by particularly abusive individual ship captains, surgeons, plantation managers or other officials, however the supposed lack of discipline and intelligence of the Indian labourer supposedly straining the patience of officials was a constant refrain in attempts of explaining away perpetration of such abuses. An array of racial arguments was set to rationalize the alarmingly high rate of mortality among the "Hill Coolies". Regarding the outbreaks of dysentery on shipboard and allegations of sub-standard food rations provided to the immigrants, ship captains argued that the 'Dhangaurs' or 'hill coolies' are used to partaking very little food and the excess of food apparently provided to them on shipboard resulted in a process of repletion to which a large number of them succumbed (Report of the Dickens Committee, 1840). The high rate of sickness and mortality suffered by these people in the plantations was explained by the manager of Mr. Gladstone's Vried en Hoop plantation in British Guiana, to be an effect on their constitutions due to a change from a life used to living outdoors to a largely indoor regimen outside the hours of field labour. On top of that it was argued that sentimentality was a predominating racial trait of these people and thus a significant number of them were surmised to have succumbed to pure 'melancholia' (Correspondence Relative to the Condition of the Hill Coolies and Other Labourer Who had been Introduced into British Guiana, 1839).

It should be noted that these colonial governments depended heavily on the revenue from sugar trade, thus the influence of the planters and merchants on their executive legislative processes was paramount. They could wield their influence in London, in the British parliament and colonial office through lobbies like the ironically named Free Labour Association and wring Indian governments' hands to get a favourable outcome of its enquiry (Select Documents Relating to Indian Immigration to Mauritius - 1838-1874, 2006). The dire state of hospitals in the plantations which were used more as spaces of incarceration and punishment of recalcitrant workers than of therapy was exposed in the private investigation carried out by John Scoble of the Abolitionist group British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society. The minority report of Mr. Anderson who was part of Mauritius enquiry committee also painted a bleak picture regarding accommodation, working conditions, corporeal punishment and hospital provisions of workers in the plantations. Such reportage was not included in official enquiry committee reports, however. Imperial rationalization of "Hill coolies'" physical debility rested on racial rationalization of their corporeal traits.

Race however was not a discounted concept in the extant episteme of the time, it commanded significant scholastic credence, constituting the mainstream of biology and anthropology. The fact-finding reports of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society to which credit must be given for the initial exposé of the prevailing abuses and undertaken with significant risks to the activists' lives and persons also acknowledged the racial distinctiveness of the "Hill Coolies". Indeed, their principal charge against the advocates of the indentured immigration system was that it sought to profit from the 'meek' and beastly "industriousness" of the 'hill cooly' in place of the supposedly more "assertive" African slave. By conforming to the established racial consensus, the Abolitionists thus contributed to the racialization of the "hill cooly" as a constituent category of the racial doxa of colonial anthropology, which was rapidly gaining hegemonic valence.

When overseas indentured emigration was resumed again in 1841 with regulatory legislations passed by the British Parliament, there was reduced enthusiasm for recruiting "Hill Coolies" among planters (Shepherd, 2007). Planters shifted their gaze northwards to the Gangetic districts of Bihar and the erstwhile United Provinces. Nonetheless the percentage of indigenous inhabitants of Chhotanagpur remained high among recruited migrants in the decades of 1840 and 1850, after which it reduced to become a marginal presence among intending immigrants.

Table-1:

Emigration of Indian Labourers under Contract System to various destinations and share of Indian population thereof.

Destination	Period	Indian Immigrants	Indian Population	% of Indian Population to the Total Population
Mauritius	1834-1912	453,063	269,885 (1938)	64.9
British Guiana	1838-1917	238,909	142,978 (1937)	42.4
Natal	1860-1911	152,184	219,691 (1936)	2.3

Trinidad	1845-1917	143, 939	161,076 (1936)	33.9
Fiji	1879- 1916	60,969	85,002 (1936)	42.9
Jamaica	1854- 1885	36, 420	19,669 (1936)	1.8
Burma	1852-1937	2, 500, 000	1, 017, 825 (1937)	6.9
Malaya	1852-1937	2, 000, 000	748, 829 (1940)	13.6
Ceylon	1852-1937	1, 500, 000	750, 000 (1942)	12.3

Source: Adapted from Northrup (1995) and Clarke et al. (1990).

Regarding the high rate of disease and sickness suffered by the migrants from Chhotanagpur, Ralph Shlomowitz and John Mac Donald had observed that they had very low level of natural immunity to the disease environment of Calcutta and the lower Bengal districts, as a result of which they suffered severely in transit to the colonies. For instance, their susceptibility to particular kinds of ailments, which were generally described as dysentery or diarrhea in surgeons' reports might be evidence of their sufferance from Cholera. Shlomowitz and Mac Donald points out this epidemiological factor behind the shift in the recruiting areas for future indentured emigrants in the mid-19th century (Shlomowitz, 2024).

Verene Shephard and A E Smith give priority to the Chhotanagpuri migrants' agency in explaining this shift. According to them it was the increasing demand for labour in the tea plantations of Assam and North Bengal to which the Chhotanagpuri migrants responded because of comparatively lesser distance. The consequent shift in the demographics of overseas immigrants might be an offshoot of the prior act of Chhotanagpuri migrants' exercise of agency (Shepherd, 2007).

The events on the ground might have unfolded in the dynamic of both the charges - the epidemiological reason of lack of immunity to the endemic diseases of lower Bengal which made the Chhotanagpuri emigrants suffer making the recruiters less enthusiastic to recruit them overseas and the migrants' act of maneuver in looking towards Assam and North Bengal as new destinations for migration.

In these nascent zones of plantation agriculture with a promising new cash crop, many of the old socio-political processes witnessed time and again in the Caribbean and other colonies during the onset of large-scale plantation agriculture were repeated ad nauseum. Rapid depletion of the green cover due to destruction of forests followed by widespread monoculture of tea, displacement of the native population and reduction of available cultivable land, resulted in permanent ecological transformation and laid the groundwork for the outbreak of new contagious diseases which were alien to the existing aetiological environment (Dutta, 2018). It also set off the usual search for the ideal agricultural wage worker, who is efficient and amenable to the industrial work regime of plantation agriculture and at the same time tractable to the dictates of the colonial managerial hierarchy.

Here we would trace the process of the search for this archetypal agricultural labourer in the tea plantations of Assam out of which the colonial state eventually zoned in on the figure of the "Jungly" - as the Chhotanagpuri immigrant labourer was referred to as a laudatory acknowledgement of their primitive industriousness. The tea industry in North Bengal which developed couple of decades after its start in Assam were following the precedents of their Assamese counterparts when they started recruiting Chhotanagpuri immigrants from the same channel of migration. It remains an irony that when the overseas recruiters were becoming disinclined to recruit Chhotanagpuri migrants for their supposed physical failings, the planters of Assam and North Bengal were re-discovering attributes of their supposed innate racial dexterity.

7. The quest for the Ideal Plantation Labourer in the Himalayan foothills

Tea was discovered to be growing in the wild in the hills of Assam in the 1840s right after Assam was incorporated within the domains of the East India Company. Fears that tea would only grow in the unique climatic conditions of China were soon dispelled when it was ascertained that the only necessary requirement for successfully growing tea is the right altitude for cultivation. One observer summed up the prevailing mood among the British, "We can scarcely doubt that when the skill and science of the Europeans, aided by thermometers etc. should once be applied to the cultivation and preparation of tea in favourable situations, the Chinese tea will soon be excelled in quality and favour." When the indigenous Assamese tea was acculturated with varieties of Chinese tea, the resulting Assamese variant was heralded as an object of British imperial pride. What remained to be done was its largescale production with a suitable labouring population to bring an end to the monopoly of Chinese tea in the British and European market.

Governor General Lord Bentinck, who was a votary of settling Europeans in India for the development of imperial resources, formulated the Wasteland Grants Rules in Assam which provided for long-term leases to individuals and agencies who had sufficient stock and capital worth at least Rs.3 per acre and who applied for not less than 100 acres. Though the law did not explicitly discriminate against Indians, the high capital bar set for

availing the provisions effectively debarred Indians. Such policy bolstered by a congenially racist legal structure oversaw the entry of hundreds of British speculators into Assam who bought up large tracts of land at ridiculously low prices. This resulted in increased pressure on non-wasteland designated cultivable land and considering the increased rate of revenue fixed by the government, the ensuing abandonment of cultivation and depeasantization of Assamese farmers in the subsequent decades came as no surprise (Sharma, 2011).

However, the planters were not very keen to recruit Assamese peasants as cultivators, the usual trope of the indolent native labourer honed earlier in so many imperial locations characterized by plantation agriculture from the post Abolition Caribbean to Ceylon to Fiji and Malayasia later on, was discursively played out anew. The habit of opium smoking of the Assamese peasant and the resultant disposition of *Lahe' lahe'* or casual laziness supposedly resultant from it was projected as symptoms of racialized moral debility making them unfit for the industrial requirements of plantation work. The need for Chinese skill and botanical knowhow was deemed essential for successful cultivation (Saikia, 2011).

Lord Bentinck thus stressed the need for observing the Chinese 'character' echoing the bio-genealogical assumptions of 19th century racial ethnology when he visited the EIC settlements in the straits of Malacca and Singapore. A set of Chinese labourers were recruited from among the Chinese immigrant workers of Penang and the Straits Settlements. They were referred to as 'tea planters' or 'tea growers' in contemporary British deliberations, indicating a heightened degree of regard for their abilities unlike the all-encompassing and pejorative denotation of 'coolies' used to describe Chinese workers. Little is known about what happened to these workers, apart from the fact that they were soon reported to be obstreperous regarding working for such a low wage. Doubts were soon raised about their Chineseness, reflecting the contemporary ethnological obsession with racial authenticity of migrant populations. As the botanist William Griffiths, an earlier advocate of importing Chinese tea cultivators opined "that among all the so-called Chinese" he did not find a "single genuine Chinaman" (Biswas, 1950). Thus, the botanical deliberations about the wild Assam tea, regarding which questions of 'genuineness' were first raised, coalesced with ethnological concerns. This was an anticipation of the later dictum of European racial science which considered people distanced from their location of origin by sundry processes of migration to undergo racial degeneration (Drayton, 2000).

Attention now shifted to the indigenous people living in the hills of Upper Assam, who were regarded to be amicable and thus worthy for recruitment in the tea plantations. Being Experienced slash and burn cultivators their labour was especially found to be useful for clearing the thick Assamese jungles before cultivating tea. Moreover, as these people were used to a barter economy and had little knowledge of monetary worth, British planters and administrators were delighted at the prospect of tapping a labour pool that was content to be paid in "shells, beads, rice &c." (Assam Company Reports of the Local Board in Calcutta, 1840-44). However, they were also judged to be "a wild people" who seldom worked steadily, being in the habit of appearing and disappearing at their sweet whim (Ibid.).

In addition to the tribes of Upper Assam and the Chinese, the British also tried to employ people from the villages of the Brahmaputra valley, but given the punishing regimen of work and inhospitable etiological environment of Upper Assam, these people were reluctant to work in tea plantations and often deserted. As in 1841, the Assam Company acknowledged that "on every payday a general strike among the taklars, i.e. local tea makers, and some have left the employ, refusing to sign a covenant" (Sharma, 2011, p. 114).

An early British report honestly evaluated the reasons of failure to recruit local labour for tea cultivation "“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”" (Sharma, 2011).

With the subsequent entrenchment of colonial rule, such clear-sighted assessment of policy failures became a rarity as the British sought to identify the reasons of putative Assamese 'indolence' to rest upon climatological or racial factors. The British can thus be said to 'discover' the lazy native of Assam with their racial trait summed up by the epithet *'Lahe lahe'* (slowly slowly). This essentialist reasoning of indolence drew medical and scientific credence from the fact of peasant's easy access to opium, which the authorities sought to control.

Discourses of labouring traditions in colonial India need to be located within the context of colonial construction of racial difference. Race – the prime determinant of post enlightenment ethnography underwent modification in South Asia in order to incorporate local inductive input from colonial administrators who visualized the people in terms of tribes and castes. The discourse of tribe stressed the putative factors of hunting, pastoralism, nomadism and in the process led to a discovery of the 'savage' and the 'primitive'. Ajay Skaria in

his work on colonial racial construction of tribe had shown such categorization was created by seizing upon and magnifying certain cultural and physiological distinctions of concerned groups, who in almost all cases shared much more cultural, social and economic similarities with their caste neighbours than with distant tribes with whom they were lumped together in this purported ethnological classifier. Significantly, the discovery of ‘primitive virtue’ of industriousness of tribes happened at the same time when the tea industry abandoned its hopes of a “skilled and civilized” labour force (Skaria, 1997).

In the case of Assam, it was the Kachari people who were deemed to be best suited to meet the desirable criteria of ‘primitive’ industriousness. Several colonial commentators distinguished them from the other inhabitants of Assam by virtue of their supposed capacity to perform more work. The “aboriginal race of Assam”, residing in the lower Assam districts of Kamrup, Lakhimpur, Darrang and Goalpara described to be “cheery, good-natured, semi-savage folk” (Endle, 1911).

The classification of Kacharis was influenced by an older vogue of colonial race science which accorded primacy to linguistic classification. Brian Hodgson being its chief proponent. From his base at Kathmandu, Hodgson was a prolific contributor to The Transaction of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, he sought to classify the different peoples according to language. In terms of vocabulary, he propounded that the ‘non-Caucasian’ inhabitants of the Himalayan foothills belonged to a distinct race – the ‘Tamulians’, whom he considered to be the original inhabitants of the country (Hodgson, 1847). As David Arnold had noted, such early colonial ethnographers with their first access to the interiors of the subcontinent considered the plain-dwelling inhabitants to be of Caucasian descent as distinct from the people of the highlands believed to be tribal or aboriginal. Hodgson ascribed certain cultural and behavioural traits to tribes – a minimal use of clothing, prevalence of hunting and shifting cultivation and residence in jungle habitats (Arnold, 2004).

However, the British enthusiasm with the primitive dexterity of the Kachari workforce soon faded. The Kachari workers were reluctant to adapt to the long stretches of continuous work required in tea plantations. They preferred to go home every once in a while, as was their custom previously, working for upper caste landlords, monasteries or being engaged in government public works. In 1854, all Kacharis struck work together demanding an increase in pay. About their legitimacy of demand, even the capital minded Times criticized the Assam Company’s policy of maintaining “rather too strict a control over its rate of wages.” Then in 1861 when protests started in Phulaguri against the exorbitant rate of income tax fixed by the colonial government, Kacharis participated in it widely. After a British official was killed, there was a prompt shift of emphasis in colonial appraisal from the Kachari’s primitive dexterity to the other enduring trait associated with being primitive, their “bloodthirstiness” (Saikia, 2011).

8. Inventing the Tea Coolie

As with the indentured workers recruited to work in the sugar plantations of Britain’s crown colonies in the wake of abolition of slavery, most of Assam’s tea garden workers subsequently were indigenous inhabitants from Chhotanagpur. Their sturdy and obedient disposition had already been praised as far as the British parliament in the 1840s, when they were sought after as premium primitive labourers to work overseas (Papers respecting the East Indian Labourers’ Bill, 1838).

In early 19th century Brian Hodgson had classified the Chhotanagpur and North Eastern tribals within a single racial category – the ‘Turanian aboriginals’ belonging to the ‘Tamulian’ race. Later racial taxonomy distinguished between them to reflect the updated colonial perception of the two groups’ respective labouring disposition. George Campbell, the later Bengal Lt. Guv. Pioneered this modification. He considered the two groups residing in different places to constitute distinct groups of aboriginals – the Kolarians of Chhotanagpur and the Kacharis of Assam. He identified the Kolarians who were already being employed as ‘coolies’ in the railways, for indigo cultivation and road building works to be definitely superior for tea cultivation than the Kacharis. He reasoned it is so “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.” The earlier failed attempt of enlisting Kachari workers for tea cultivation, a prime reason for which was deemed to be the Kachari cultivators’ frequent absence from the plantations for cultivating their own lands, was conveniently elided. Thus erasing history, especially the violent role of the colonial state, Campbell’s racial ethnology advocating suitability of ‘Kolarians’ for tea cultivation sought to reify social reality, in the process bestowing scientific legitimacy to protean racial distinctions such as between ‘Kolarians’ and Kacharies (Campbell, 1865).

In the 1830s and 40s Assamese recruiters barely stood a chance in enlisting adequate numbers of migrant labourers from Chhotanagapur region competing with labour recruiters of the sugar producing colonies. It is in the subsequent context of high shipboard mortality faced by these migrants which dented the initial enthusiasm of overseas planters to recruit them that recruitment for tea cultivation work in Assam and North Bengal picked up steam.

The subsequent scale of immigration was revealed in the significant uptick in the population of Assam reported in the first census of 1881 compared to the estimate of 1872 - a balance of 4,881,426 (Guha, 2014). The prime share of the increase was contributed by the Chhotanagpuri contingent of tea cultivators. This demographic trend would only accelerate for the next half a century. The British rationalized this movement to be natural, as one colonial commentator wrote “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.” Such statements ignore the fact that it was colonial policies in the first place which had left the inhabitants of Chhotanagpur with no choice but to migrate. The migrants considered the regimented and coercive nature of plantation work symbolized by their red jackets to be a form of servitude. They referred to Assam as an unknown wilderness, “the end of the world” (Ghosh, 1999).

Table-2:

Emigration from Chhotanagpur to Assam, Vis a vis Total No. of emigrants in Assam

Year	Total Adult Emigration to Assam	Adult Emigrants from Chhotanagpur
1879	18,286	10,824
1880	12,841	7,549
1881	14,548	6,379
1882	18,952	8,980
1883	26,390	11,577
1884	32,747	16,795
1885	21,144	9,790
1886	22,715	12,160
1887	29,090	16,385
1888	33,317	20,252
1889	37,548	22,877
1890	26,205	13,162
1891	37,939	16,557
1892	41,802	17,910
1893	37,143	17,837
1894	35,706	17,833
1895	56,501	18,369
1896	61,301	16,122
1897	66,328	28,078
1898	35,516	18,954
1899	25,872	11,192
1900	45,044	17,605
1901	19,897	7,558
1902	12,199	6,661
1903	17,769	6,513
1904	19,050	7,848
1905	24,209	9,928
1906	12,643	7,259
1907	58,934	16,667
1908	42,524	16,367
1909	29,398	7,800
1910	34,292	9,352

Source: Mohapatra (1985)

The transformed demography resulting from the large-scale importation of Chhotanagpuri immigrants would have lasting effect on society in Assam. Altered demography would lead to new kinds of cultural identifications and alterities which would often be reified by colonial bureaucratic ecriture. Such as the descendants of Chhotanagpuri immigrants in Assam who carry the appellation of being Tea Tribes in Assam even today (Lakra, 2024).

9. Conclusion

The abolition of slavery in the British Empire led to widespread anxiety over potential labour shortages in colonies that had relied on enslaved people for agricultural production. This fear prompted an empire-wide search for an alternative source of cheap and dependable labour. India, as a British colony, was considered best suited to meet this demand. In 1834, the first group of Indian labourers was recruited by British contractors and transported to

Mauritius to work on sugar plantations. This initiative marked the beginning of a recruitment model in which overseas planters relied on India-based agents, later institutionalized as the Indian indentured labour scheme.

Among the earliest and most heavily recruited were the indigenous communities of the Chhotanagpur plateau, identified in colonial records through racialized labels such as “Hill Coolies” and “Junglies.” These groups were initially valorized for perceived traits of physical endurance and docility, traits supposedly rooted in their ‘primitive’ ethnological status. However, their high rates of sickness and mortality during transit and in destination colonies led to waning enthusiasm among overseas recruiters. At the same time, colonial mercantile actors within the Indian subcontinent, particularly tea planters in Assam, began to revalorize these same populations, again citing their so-called racial aptitude for hard labour.

This paper contributes to existing scholarship by showing how the ethnological figure of the Chhotanagpuri labourer underwent a marked discursive shift across colonial contexts—initially idealized, then problematized, and later re-idealized under new plantation regimes. In doing so, it builds on the works of Kale (1998), Ghosh (1999), and Mohapatra (2004), while also complicating the legalist and agency-focused frameworks offered by scholars such as Sturman (2014). It foregrounds the mobility of racial discourse and its entwinement with both political economy and public health rationales in shaping the long-term configuration of labour migration and identity production in the colonial world.

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The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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