

TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES

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Lecture29

Lecture 29: Exploitation, Indentureship and Plantation Economy

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Tribal Studies in India, Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Approaches. So, today we are going to discuss on the exploitation and indentureship and plantation economy. So, we will mainly talk about the tea tribes and how the tribal people have been exploited by the British officials centering the plantation economy. When we try to define indentured labour, we describe it as, I quote from Tomlin's, as cited in Hefti, a contract committing one party to make a series of payments to or on behalf of the other, settlement of transport debt, subsistence over the negotiable contract term,



and the final payment in kind or less usually cash at the conclusion of the term. In exchange, the payee agrees to be completely at the disposal of the payer or the payer's assigns for performance of work for the term agreed, unquote. So, this is largely a definition of indentured labour given by Tomlins. So it's kind of a contractual labor work. And the contract entails, you know, settlement of debt, settlement of

- Indentured labour largely describes “a contract committing one party to make a series of payments to or on behalf of the other– settlement of transport debt, subsistence over the (negotiable) contract term, and the final payment in kind or, less usually, cash at the conclusion of the term. In exchange, the payee agrees to be completely at the disposal of the payor, or the payor’s assigns, for performance of work, for the term agreed” (Tomlins, as cited in Hoefte, 2018).
- The system of indenture curtailed the freedom and mobility of the workers, who could not easily disengage from the contract when criminal laws reinforced it.
- Refusal to work, misbehaviour, or other transgressions of disciplinary codes were punishable breaches of contract that led to fines, hard labour or incarceration.



You know, the money that the payee is receiving and in exchange, the person has to be completely at the disposal of the payer. Right. And it therefore would involve, historically speaking, such a process of indentured labor would involve a lot of violence, exploitation and deprivation. We also see in the definition that payment would less usually be in terms of cash and more in terms of kinds. So there is no saying what the laborer would receive in exchange of the excruciating labor, the relentless labor that they were producing, that they were offering.

So, the system of indenture curtailed the freedom and mobility of the plantation workers who could not easily disengage from the contract. Once into the contract, one could not sever from the contract till it terminates, till it comes to an end naturally. And then we see that one cannot disengage from the contract when criminal laws reinforced it. So criminal laws would further reinforce such a contract. Refusal to work, any kind of misbehavior or other transgressions on the part of the plantation laborers.

Any transgression in terms of disciplinary codes would be considered as punishable breaches of contract that led to fines, hard labor or imprisonment or incarceration. With the British advent in India, tribals started losing their land and forests. We have already talked about that. And as the colonial rulers gained control of those vast stretches of forest lands and forest resources, they initiated various plantations in those areas, including coffee, tea, indigo, jute and so on. The establishment of plantations generated the demand for labor to cultivate these agricultural items.

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- The establishment of plantations generated the demand for labour. The Britishers found the 'tribals' most suited for such hard physical work and cleaning of forests. Large numbers of tribals were forcibly or deceptively recruited into indentured labour systems.
- Tribal groups from Chota Nagpur (Jharkhand), Santhal Parganas (Bihar), and Odisha were sent to plantations, mines, and factories. Many tribals were taken to tea plantations in Assam, coal mines in Jharkhand, and even overseas to Mauritius, Fiji, and the Caribbean.



The Britishers found the tribals to be the most suitable people for such hard physical labor and cleaning of forests. Large numbers of tribals were forcibly or deceptively recruited into endangered labor systems. So we see that the people, the tribals who were originally forest peoples and who had lived in forests ancestrally for generations together and who considered the forest as their home were now being exploited as laborers working in the same fields. You know, domicile in the same space that they considered as their domicile or their home. They had turned, they had reduced into laborers in their own home.

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Many times, it would be the local tribals working in the forests where they lived freely. Or at other times, as I will subsequently discuss, there would be tribals brought from other geographical areas in India to till the lands in another tribal area. Right. So they would be transported from one tribal area to another. And this is how the tribals were

getting sucked into the indentured labor systems regardless of their own consent or even their understanding of this system.

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So the tribal groups from Chotanagpur, which is currently Jharkhand, the Santal Parganas or Bihar, and from the Odisha region were sent to plantations, mines, and factories. Many tribals were taken to tea plantations in Assam, coal mines in Jharkhand, and even overseas to Mauritius, Fiji, and the Caribbean. So, talking about colonial exploitation, we need to understand the case of the tea tribes of Assam. The tea tribes, like other tribal groups in the northeastern Indian state of Assam, are located in certain inaccessible and remote regions. So, historically and socioeconomically speaking, the tea tribes have been an integral part of the demography and social fabric of Assam, and they have significantly contributed to the development of the region.

The tribal population in Assam is classified into two parts. So, on the one hand, we have the autochthonous tribals, and then we have the non-autochthonous tribals. So by autochthonous tribals, we refer to both the tribals of the plains and the tribals of the hills. The Indian constitution recognizes them as the STs or the Scheduled Tribes. On the other hand, the non-autochthonous tribals include the tribal groups that migrated mainly from the central and eastern regions of India during the colonial period in search of livelihoods as plantation labor in Assam's tea estates.

Here we need to understand that a large section of the non-autochthonous tribals were taken or transported from non-tribal areas to Assam to work in tea gardens against their will. However, they have not been recognized as STs, and there is a lot of contention, there is a lot of grievances among the latter centering on this issue. The British introduced

tea to the region and developed the tea industry in Assam for their own benefit. The establishment of tea plantations set into motion the colonization of Assam by European planters.

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- The British introduced tea to the region and developed the tea industry in Assam for their own benefit. The establishment of tea plantations set into motion the colonisation of Assam by European planters. Colonial officials observed the potential for tea plantations in the region. The first tea garden was established at Chabua in the Dibrugarh district of Upper Assam, and in 1840, the Assam Tea Company started commercial production.
- The setting up and expansion of tea plantations required labour. While initially people from the Bodo-Kachari tribes of Assam were recruited to work in the tea plantations, mass recruitment of local people proved difficult because these tribal groups preferred cultivating their own land and were unwilling to do wage labour.



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So, with the tea plantations, the European planters actually established and seized lands in Assam. Colonial officials observed the potential for tea plantations in the region. The first tea garden was established in Chabua in the Dibrugarh district of Upper Assam. Then, in 1840, the Assam Tea Company began commercial production.

The setting up and expansion of tea plantations required a labor force. So, manpower was required to run this establishment, this huge establishment. Initially, people from the Bodo-Kachari tribes of Assam, the local tribals of Assam, were recruited to work in the tea plantations, but mass recruitment of local people proved difficult because these tribal groups preferred cultivating their own land and were often unwilling to do wage labor. Therefore, the colonizers considered the Bodo and Kachari groups to be lazy and started looking for options beyond the western territory of Assam.

Thus, the mission to obtain suitable labor, commonly known in colonial vocabulary as tea coolies, the search for tea coolies began. The first attempt at importing cheap labour from different regions in India started in 1853 between December 1859 and November 1861. Transporting of labour from outside Assam was not very easy for the colonial planters back at that time. Diseases, lack of transportation facilities, poor roads and civil conflicts were some of the major obstacles that they faced.

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- The first attempt at importing cheap labour from different regions in India started in 1853 between December 1859 and November 1861. Transporting labour from outside Assam was not easy for the colonial planters then. Diseases, lack of transportation, poor roads, and civil conflict were some of the significant obstacles they faced. Hence, it required extensive recruiting machinery.

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Hence, it required extensive recruiting machinery. The T-District Labour Association or TDLA in short was established to systematize and coordinate the entire recruiting process and have coordinated efforts for recruiting tribals as tea coolies from other regions of India outside Assam. The British's first solution to their labor problem was importing Chinese coolies from Singapore. However, en route, the Chinese got into a brawl or a skirmish with some of the Indians.

Sixty Chinese were arrested in the process and jailed by a local magistrate and the remaining of them therefore refused to go on alone to Assam. Hence, the onus of this recruitment process, the planters' attention went to the various tribal and marginalized caste populations, mainly from Chhotanagpur region, spanning over the states of Bengal, Bihar and Odisha. To settle the labor, planters encouraged family migrations and recruited from communities where migration as family units was more common, right? There were mainly two broad reasons for such policies. The first being that when a labor would be brought down to Assam along with family, it

In a way, it ensured the permanent settlement of the hired migrant coolies in the tea plantations. And secondly, the intention was to ensure that they had no opportunities for alternative employment. So once a coolie, always a coolie—that would be the system of recruitment. A system of contract labor was established by legalizing indentured labor. In 1859, the colonial government passed the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act, which stipulated that a worker had to work for a minimum of five years once recruited.

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- To 'settle' the labour, planters encouraged family migrations and recruited from communities where migration as family units was more common. There were mainly two broad reasons for such policies. The first was to ensure the permanent settlement of the hired migrant coolies in the tea plantations, and the second was to ensure that they had no opportunities for alternative employment.



The British employers paid for their transportation and provided them with housing and medical care in return. After the completion of their contract, they had the option of returning to their original homes. However, in reality, to mitigate the high cost of recruitment, the colonial planters repeatedly demanded the abolition of all governmental regulations on recruitment and enforced greater control over time-expired laborers. So even after that span of five years was over, they would continue to enforce control over these time-expired laborers. The complete lack of transportation and dismal communication forced the migrant laborers also to stay back in Assam, to settle there beyond the expiry of their contract period.

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- However, to mitigate the high cost of recruitment, the colonial planters repeatedly demanded the abolition of all governmental regulations on recruitment and enforced greater control over time-expired labourers. The complete lack of transportation and dismal communication forced migrant labourers to settle in Assam beyond the expiry of their contract period.



So even though the contract period began with five years, for both parties, it seemed more feasible to just stay on in the contract process even beyond the completion or termination of the contract. The Both the payer and the payee thought it was the most feasible option. So the penetration of colonial capitalism in India led to the growth of a

wage-earning industrial labor force that was divided into several segments in the late 19th and early 20th century. One major segment was the plantation labor force, which had been formed and maintained essentially on the concept of unfree labor.

So labor that was rendered by someone who was not principally a free man. The colonial planters used physical violence, exploitation, as well as extreme control over the lives of the tea tribes or the tea coolies. The tribal laborers, being mostly ignorant and poor, were tricked by force as well as by fraud. to leave their homes and enter into contracts in the tea gardens. Once this was accomplished, the laborers were in the clutches of their manager forever.

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- The tribal labourers, being mostly ignorant and poor, were tricked by force and fraud to leave their homes and enter into contracts in the tea gardens. Once this was done, the labourers were in the clutches of the manager. From the 1850s until the 1920s, working conditions on the tea estates were akin to slavery.



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So they were perpetually exploited in a kind of vicious cycle. From the 1850s until the 1920s, working conditions on the tea estates were akin to bonded labor. So they were like bonded laborers or they were slaves, bonded slaves working in tea gardens. The process of transporting migrants to the TSTs in Assam involved torture, and many of them lost their lives in the process. The mortality rates of the coolies on the voyage to Assam were high, caused by overcrowding, insufficient and improper food supply, as well as total neglect of cleanliness and medical care.

Their mobility was limited within the areas of the coolie line, and this further restricted the migrant workers' contact with the local outside world. Even free movement within the coolie line was not permitted for the laborers. These migrant tribal workers found themselves living in the middle of remote forested areas, and they were allowed little to no contact with the neighboring villages. Within each tea estate, the Sahib manager and Kuli line Chowkidar formed the two layers of supervisory control. So, the highest in hierarchy would be the Sahib manager, and just below him would be the Kuli line Chowkidar, who was responsible for supervision of the Kuli line.

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- The process of transporting migrants to the tea estates in Assam was torturous, and many of them lost their lives on the way. The mortality rates of coolies on the voyage to Assam were high and caused by overcrowding, insufficient and improper food supply, and total neglect of cleanliness and medical care.
- Their mobility was limited within the areas of the coolie line, which restricted their contact with the outside world. Even free movement within the coolie line was not permitted for labourers. These migrant tribal workers found themselves living in the middle of remote, forested terrains and were allowed little or no contact with the neighbouring villagers.



The plantation hierarchy placed the English manager at the top and the Kuli labor at the bottom. The native managers, known as the Mohoris, were somewhere in the middle of this hierarchical ladder, and they had the power to control the labor in the tea plantations. The rudimentary habitation spaces and lack of basic amenities made the exhausted and overworked workers vulnerable to debilities and diseases. So, their habitations were poor; the basic amenities, such as drinking water and proper construction, were lacking, which debilitated their general wellness and exposed them to a number of diseases.

Additionally, the acute shortage of food supplies in the province, precipitated by the burgeoning population, created a famine-like situation in the gardens. All these conditions together caused widespread destruction and death among the tea laborers. Throughout the colonial regime, planters exerted extra-legal authority by practicing flogging or whipping the laborers—a form of physical coercion to control them. For the planters, it seemed natural that laborers who deserted or disobeyed them should be flogged. Whenever there was a fight for the rights of the workers, the planters would swiftly suppress their strikes with force.

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- Throughout the colonial regime, planters exerted extra-legal authority by practising flogging—a form of physical coercion to control labour. For the planters, it seemed natural that labourers who deserted or disobeyed them should be flogged. Whenever there was a fight for the rights of the workers, the planters suppressed the strike with force.
- The wages given to women, men, and children were highly discriminatory. Women were paid less than men for doing the same work. The wage rate generally varied between Rs. 2.50 and Rs. 3.50 per month in the 1840s and early 1850s.



The wages given to women, men, and children were highly discriminatory. Women were paid much less than men for doing the same work. The wage rate generally varied between 2.5 rupees to 3.5 rupees per month from the 1840s up until the early 1850s, which was a very meager wage that could hardly cover their upkeep. In 1864, while a free laborer was able to earn a wage of 7 rupees per month when employed by the Public Works Department, the going rate for wages in the Assam Company's plantations was only 4 to 5 rupees.

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- In 1864, while a free labourer was able to earn a wage of Rs. 7 per month when employed by the public works department, the going rate for wages in the Assam Company's plantations was only Rs. 4 to Rs. 5. The average wage earned in many tea gardens was even as low as Rs. 3.50 per month. Besides, child labour was allegedly used in the tea industry for plucking, weeding, hoeing, and nursery work.
- Thus, the colonial capitalist labour market was extremely exploitative towards the migrant tea garden labourers. Inhuman physical and mental torture, limited space for movement with limited resources, rape, murder, and racial discrimination and humiliation was part of their daily lives.



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The average wage earned in many tea gardens was even as low as 3.5 rupees a month. Besides, child labor was allegedly practiced inside the tea industry, and these children would be employed for plucking, weeding, hoeing, and nursery work. Thus, we see that the colonial capitalist labor market was extremely exploitative toward the migrant tea garden laborers. Inhuman physical and mental torture, limited space for movement with limited resources, rape, murder, racial discrimination, as well as humiliation were all part of their daily lives. One of the most notorious incidents of colonial exploitation and homicide occurred in the Kharial tea estate of Kachar in the year 1921, when a tea laborer was killed by a European planter because he refused to provide his daughter as a concubine for this sahib for one night.

These tribals were tricked into working in the tea plantations, as well as in the mines and factories. When capitalist colonials developed plantations in Assam and Bengal, more than 10% of the state's tribal population had migrated to other regions. And this is information we get from the 1901 census. To conclude, we see that the Santals had made

attempts to raise their voices for securing the status of Scheduled Tribes in the Northeastern states, where they were taken several generations back as tea coolies or tea laborers. And this demand for the status of Scheduled Tribes by the Santals has resulted in ethnic clashes between

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- The Santals made attempts to raise their voices to secure the status of STs in the north-eastern states, which has resulted in ethnic clashes between them and other tribal organisations of Assam, especially the Bodos. Due to the lack of representation in the socio-economic and political space, the Santal community is not able to put forward its issues. The young generation is educated and working as professionals in various fields, but there is still a scarcity of representation among them.
- Colonial planters left Assam, but the life they imposed on the tea tribes endures to this day in the tea gardens.



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the Santals and other local tribal people from Assam, especially the Bodos. So the Santal-Bodo conflict in Assam is very well known. There have been recurrent sparks of protest as well as conflicts between the two tribal groups. Due to the lack of representation in the socio-economic and political space, the Santal community is not able to put forward its issues in Assam. In Assam state, the young generation is educated and working as professionals in different fields and areas.

However, there is still a scarcity of representation among them. Colonial planters, therefore, one can say, had left Assam, but the life they imposed on the tea tribes endures to this day in the tea gardens. So in post-colonial times also, the colonial rules or the colonial impositions, the plantation economy's adverse effects come back again. to haunt the laborers, to haunt entire generations of tea tribes and tea coolies. With this, we come to the end of our lecture today.

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Let us meet with a new topic and another round of discussions in our next lecture. Thank you.