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The Plantation Labour, Planter's Raj and Gandhi Maharaj: Exodus of "Madrasee" Coolies from Tea Gardens of Assam (1924-25)

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Abstract

In 1924-25, large number of plantation labour from tea gardens of Assam, recruited from Madras Presidency collectively withdrew and proceeded on a long march with the objective to go back to their homes and after many hardships, delays and vicissitudes ultimately reached their destination some 3000 kms away.

Faced with a determined combination of coolies who took recourse to a broad spectrum of evasive modes of resistance, to thwart any attempt to send them back to the plantation, the colonial authorities were compelled to repatriate many of the coolies much against the wishes of the planters, leading to prolonged negotiation and acrimonious debate between the officials of Government of Assam and planters. The discourse between the two provides useful insights about conflict of interest and often contradictory interplay between various stakeholders that informed the colonial policy and thus suggests that reducing colonial rule in Assam to planter's Raj, is to overlook this complexity. It also shows emergence of collective withdrawal as a mature and effective mode of non-confrontationist protest wherein by adopting wide-ranging forms of action, which minimized direct conflict with the colonial rule, including invoking the authority of Mahatama Gandhi, plantation labour achieved their objective.

I. Introduction

In 1924-25 large number of plantation labour collectively withdrew from the tea gardens of Assam in batches and proceeded on a long march with a resolve to go back to their home districts. Recruited from the ceded districts - Bellary, Ananthpur, Cuddapah and Kurnool- of Madras presidency the previous year (1923), some 2500

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of them left gardens located in Lakhimpur and Sibsagar districts of Assam Valley,² and after many delays, hardships and vicissitudes, ultimately reached their homes more than 3000 km away. The same story was repeated in tea gardens of Cachar district of Surma Valley which also witnessed exodus of plantation labour between December 1924 and January 1925 recruited from ceded districts.³

The official report on large scale withdrawal of plantation titled as “Exodus and repatriation of Madrased coolies from the garden of Assam⁴ despite its statist overtone provides a rare instance in which dissent of the participants was not only recorded by the Government officials but they were also given the opportunity to explain their version of event. While fraudulent and hasty recruitment, undue influence and misrepresentation in recruitment, appalling working conditions in the tea gardens and mistrust for colonial bureaucracy etc. are all highlighted in their accounts (about which much has already been written), what is unique is emergence of exodus as an effective and mature form of evasive and non-confrontationist form of resistance.

Faced with a serious situation the colonial government was forced to repatriate many of the coolies, not out of any benevolence but sheer expediency, generating an acrimonious debate between the tea industry of Assam represented by Indian Tea Association (ITA) and their associate Tea District Labour Association (TDLA) on the one hand and the Government officials of Assam on the other. Though the Tea Industry alluding to its adverse impact on labour supply opposed repatriation, officials defended it on the grounds of adverse public opinion, maintenance of law and order and even rule of law, suggesting that reducing colonial rule in Assam to planter’s raj is to overlook the complex and often contradictory interplay between various stakeholders including negotiation, antagonism of interests and differences of stand points which actually informed colonial policy. Also it was evident that despite centrality of tea interest and as much as the planters desired, the colonial bureaucracy resisted any attempt to put state power at the disposal of tea industry, not out of any concern for the coolies put to salvage its legitimacy.

An interesting aspect of exodus was that though repatriation of coolies was done by Government officials, many of the repatriated coolies during an enquiry conducted by Government of Madras stated that they were sent home by Mahatma Gandhi or Sarkar Gandhi Maharaj- an indication of emergence of Gandhi as a counter to the powerful colonial state- a protector and saviour.

² Ceded districts are the name of area in the Deccan India that was ‘Ceded’ to the British East India Company by the Nizam of Hyderabad in 1800. It was used widely even though it had no official relevance for legal or administrative purpose

³ Tea was commercially cultivated in two valleys of Assam - Assam valley and Surma or Barak valley. Both the valleys are divided by long lines of hills and mountain and were detached from each other. The river Brahmaputra flows through Assam valley, while river Surma with its tributaries flows through Surma valleys. Major part of Surma valley now falls in Bangladesh.

⁴ There are three such reports of Finance Department, Immigration Branch, Assam Secretariat

II. The Exodus

The exodus took place from a number of gardens of two upper Assam Valley districts of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Surma Valley district of Cachar. 'Trouble' originated in Assam Valley with the exodus of 129 'Madrsee' coolies of the Tipuk Tea Estate into Dibrugarh on 7th July, 1924, who refused to return to the tea gardens. Before the Deputy Commissioner (administrative head of the district) they stated that they have been frightened by the scare of head hunters, disliked both climate and work and wished to return to their homes. It was decided to repatriate them as the coolies could not be allowed to remain indefinitely in the Dibrugarh bazaar. The Tipuk coolies had in the meantime been joined by 70 coolies from the nearby Ethel wood tea estate. Though some of them were persuaded to return to their gardens, the majority refused to do so and most of the coolies left Dibrugarh by road to Sibsagar with the intention of marching home by road. The Deputy Commissioner sent men after them and they were overtaken and repatriated from nearest railway station. Subsequently, small batches of coolies from these two gardens also came into Dibrugarh and some of them were repatriated by the local district authorities⁵.

The next scene of "drama" opened with exodus of 1000 'Madrsee' coolies from Lukwatea garden who reached Jorhat on 29th August and were joined subsequently by 400 coolies from Meleng tea garden. A certain number of these coolies were persuaded to return to their garden but the main body refused to do so. In their case too the complaint was that they disliked the climate and desired to return home. Failing to get any assurance of repatriation, the coolies left Jorhat and proceeded on their march by road, eventually reaching Nagaon district. From the time they left Jorhat there had been at least 11 deaths and 4 births. One newly born child had been thrown into the jungle and two orphan children had been abandoned on the march. In addition there had been sick in the place of halt, and on the march many of them had been left behind on the road. Given their extreme physical condition authorities repatriated them.

The news of repatriation traveled fast and within a few days the remaining 'Madrsee' coolies from Lakwa walked off; as also did 200 from Meleng and a batch of 85 from Ethel wood and Tipuk, including small batches from a number of tea gardens⁶.

After a lull, just when it was thought that the exodus crisis was over and administration should not be further troubled about 'wandering gangs of coolies still left as gleanings from the harvest that is over', 350 Santhali coolies under Assam Railway and Trading Co. at Tipongpani left on 12 September 1924 by road⁷.

⁵Letter from Chairman, Indian Tea Association to the Second Secretary to the Government of Assam, 1st October, 1924, No. 1281, Finance Department, Immigration Branch B, Assam Secretariat

⁶Letter from Chairman, Indian Tea Association to the Second Secretary to the Government of Assam, 1st October, 1924, No. 1281 Finance Department, Immigration Branch B, Assam Secretariat

⁷Letter from A. Phillipson, Deputy Commissioner, Lakhimpur to the Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, Gauhati 14th September, 1924, No. 76, Finance Department, Immigration Branch B, Assam Secretariat

In the meanwhile the remaining non-patriated “Madrasee” coolies marched towards Nagaon and hired lorries making own arrangement for food and shelter. Prior to this on 15th October they had approached the District authority for the authorities remained indifferent. Their main grievance was unsuitable climate and low wages. In the same month many coolies of Barbari and Rajagour left tea gardens and arrived Sibsagar requesting Deputy Commissioner, Lakhimpur for repatriation. Upon his refusal, many of them proceeded by train for home⁸.

The exodus continued following year and on 5th March, 1925 about 120 Bellary coolies from Amguri Tea Estate left by road towards Sibsagar complaining about high causality, with the intention of returning home⁹.

This was followed by desertion of about 290 coolies of Kutchujan Tea estate in April¹⁰. Besides these gardens of Lakhimpur and Sibsagar districts of Assam Valley, a parallel exodus in the meanwhile was taking place from tea gardens in Cachar district of Surma valley though at a low scale, a number of coolies leaving Kukichera and Kumbhir tea gardens in December’ 1924 and January’ 1925 respectively, complaining about less than promised wages and adverse working condition before the sub-divisional officer (SDO) of Hailakandi. Though the SDO assured them that the tea garden management would be requested to look to their “comfort and convenience”, the coolies refused to go back. On being refused repatriation they marched on arranging train tickets to reach the nearest embarkation depot and were finally dispatched to their home by the authorities¹¹.

To conclude between July 1924 and April 1925 an estimated 2500 coolies from various far-flung and unconnected tea gardens had left either on foot or by train, bus or truck for their home and while many of them had been repatriated by the government, a section were struggling their way, sometimes at the pain of extinction.

III. Contextualizing Exodus – Making “Externally Mobile” Labour “Internally Immobile”

Planters and the Issue of Labour Supply

British explorers found tea growing wild in Assam and thus it was to be tamed and subjected to the civilization of tea gardens to make it a commercial proposition.

⁸Letter from A. G. Paton, Subdivisional Officer, Sibsagar to the Deputy Commissioner, Sibsagar 29th October, 1924, No. 1348, Finance Department, Immigration Branch B, Assam Secretariat

⁹Letter from C.S. Gunning, Offg. Deputy Commissioner, Sibsagar to the Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, 5th March, 1925, No. 5046, Finance Department, Immigration Branch B, Assam Secretariat

¹⁰Letter from A. Phillipson, Deputy Commissioner, Lakhimpur, to the Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, 11th April, 1925, No. 24, Finance Department, Immigration Branch B, Assam Secretariat

¹¹Letter from the sub-divisional officer, Hailakandi to the Deputy Commissioner Cachar 20th December, 1924, No. 1025, Finance Department, Immigration Branch B, Assam Secretariat

(Ghosh in Bhadra, Prakash and Tharu (eds), 2003,14). Similarly the large labour force needed for the plantation was also to be tamed. Thus experimental plantations were inaugurated in Assam in the 1830s based on the systematic cultivation of tea. In fact the tea industry was the earliest commercialized industry established by private British capital during the 19th century. Assam became over the latter half of 19th century one of the largest producers of tea in the world. In order to make waste lands available for tea cultivation a set of rules were framed known as the Waste Land Rules of 1838. (Guha, 1977, 13-16). It continued to grow phenomenally during the second half of 20th century with the production of tea increasing in the three major tea producing districts of the Assam valley (Lakhipur, Sibsagar and Darrang) from 70 million lbs in 1900 to 243 million lbs in 1947, while area under tea cultivation expanded from 187,639 acres to 279,299 acres during the same period. (Behal, 1985 PE-19)

Predictably the scale of expansion required a huge labour force not only for planting the tea but more so for cleaning the jungles and making the land suitable for plantations. But compared to other provinces of India, Assam was sparsely populated, most of the inhabitants settling along the fertile tracts of the Brahmaputra where vast areas of cultivable waste land on ownership or tenancy terms were easily available (Das Gupta, 1986, PE-2).

Therefore right from the beginning mobilization of labour force was a major issue wherein the “primitiveness” of the local labour in Assam was seen as driving the very rationale of the working of the plantation to stand still. (Ghosh in Bhadra, Prakash and Tharu (eds.) 2003, 15) and colonial authorities were repeatedly asked by the tea planters to initiate policies that would facilitate supply of labour. It was urged upon the government to further enhance the land revenue rates so that poor cultivators could be flushed out from their villages to work for wages on the plantations. Thus land revenue rates were almost doubled in 1893 in Assam. (Guha, 1997, 10) but local labour continued to elude plantation.

An indigenous migrant group Kacharis was induced by the planters to work on the plantations but their engagement was marked by irregular condition of life and work. Issues of wages, timing of payment and supply of rice led to frequent work interruption, strikes and mass withdrawal on the plantations. (Guha, 1977, 15).

Outsourcing the Distanced Migrant Labour and its Limitations

The planters attempted to resolve these labour difficulties by sourcing a new group of long distanced migrant labour based on a new system of contract. (Varma, 2011, 47-50).

By the mid-60s the policy of recruitment of labour from other provinces was well underway and planters resorted to a policy of systematic and organized recruitment of tribals as well as communities, inhabiting areas spread over several provinces in eastern and central India, already impoverished due to alienation of their land and continual decay of an agrarian economy characterised by forced commercialization.

The tea planters following the model of overseas plantation recruited their coolies through contract houses and their agents known as arkattis and after 1870, increasingly through sardars or specially appointed tea garden labours who were sent back to their home to recruit more coolies (Ghosh, in 2003, 34). Living far away from their homes and hearths and contract-bound, these labourers were extremely vulnerable. (Guha, 1977, 18).

In the initial years the most popular source of labour supply were tribals of Chotanagpur. The agents were the most important link in the state who though mostly outsiders managed to impose themselves securely on the rural societies. The plantation labour source slowly came on to be dependent on poor peasants and landless peoples from other parts of the country like Bihar and Eastern UP (Gyan Prakash, 1994, 31).

But once in plantation they were to be confined as the success of the scheme depended on immobilizing the mobile. Private arresting was particularly unleashed to retain workforce, apart from powers to track the coolies. They were confined in concentration camp like situation and housed in segregated “coolie line” and remained under strict supervision round the clock. Being bound down under contract, the indentured workers had no freedom. In case of continued refusal to work or absence exceeding certain days he was liable to be imprisoned. The term “absconder” came into regular use and planters were empowered to confine ‘absconders’ and inflict punishment (Das Gupta, 1986, 3).

Thus uprooting vast number of labours and re-planting them what was achieved was a massive, controlled and assured labour supply. The system of recruitment worked somehow in the first two decades of 20th century, but it had its own constraints which increasingly became evident in the mid 1920s.

First, was the image of Assam as an ‘unknown territory’ from where no traveler ever returned. It was always a hope for Assam administration that with the development of communication and railways, the condition of employment in Assam would become more widely known, enabling tea gardens to compete successfully in the labour market but it did not happen¹².

Secondly, Chotanagpur had practically ceased to be a productive field alongside United Provinces, Odisha and other parts as recruiting districts were witnessing good crops for some years discouraging out migration. Moreover industrial development nearer the homes of labourers coupled with competition in the shape of rivals in the labour market ‘who were unfettered by any acts or restrictions’ was also impairing labour supply¹³.

¹²Extract from the Proceedings of the Governor in Council in the Finance Department , 3rd November, 1925, No. 7440, Report on Immigration labour in the province of Assam, Assam Secretariat

¹³Report on the Working of the Assam Labour Board 30th June, 1922, 45, Assam Secretariat

Also, sustaining labour supply from newly opened areas was not always easy, as once opened it often led to scramble for labour, competing tea gardens giving sardars a free run, compelling the authorities in the recruited areas to prohibit migration. For example, in mid-1920s feudatory state of Bastar in central province was targeted and in 1923, 1700 plantation labour came to tea gardens of Assam which rose to 3000 in 1924, following an active campaign. Garden sardars were sent freely to Bastar without certification or with illegal certificates, with the result that no less than 34 villages of the state were entirely deprived of population. This compelled the authorities in the feudatory state to disallow 'recruiting, engaging, inducing or assisting' any native of Bastar to immigrate to any tea garden¹⁴.

Southward HO

Given the unfavourable recruitment results from the areas old and new, including Chotanagpur, Eastern India and Central provinces, exploring and penetrating new sources of labour supply became a matter of survival for tea industry and a Southward HO thus became the inevitable choice. In 1921, Melligan, Chairman Assam Labour Board wrote to the Secretary to the Government of Madras that in recruitment of plantation labour Assam should not be singled out but should receive same concession as south Indian planter association, the recruitment for whom was "entirely uncontrolled and much more open to abuse"¹⁵. Thus Ganjam and Vizakapatam which were earlier opened for short period confining recruitment to certain caste, subsequent to persuasion from tea industry from Assam were opened to recruitment of "labour of all races" for a period of twenty one month initially in November, 1921 and later in 1923 the whole of Madras Presidency including the ceded districts was thrown open to recruitment. Arrangements were made by TDLA for extensive propaganda relating to immigration to the tea gardens. Two cinematograph outfits were purchased and suitable films procured¹⁶.

So desperate was the tea industry in Assam for coolies that the prospect of engaging those who were registered as 'criminal tribe' (which itself was a colonial stereotype to debunk certain communities) in the recruited districts was also welcome. One such group were Paides whose particular form of 'habitual' crime was said to be house breaking, frequently accompanied by violence. Yet Chairman Assam Labour Board strongly defended their recruitment to the tea gardens of Assam, in view of the fact that large number of members of the other "criminal tribes" whose 'record is worse than that of the Paides have for many years been recruited by the tea gardens of

¹⁴Letter from the Secretary, Indian Tea Association to the Secretary to the Government of Assam, 26th June, 1925, No. 152, Finance Department, Immigration Branch, Assam Secretariat

¹⁵Letter from J. A. Milligan, Chairman, Assam Labour Board, to the Secretary to the Government of Madras, Law Department 3rd August, 1921, No. 1920, Government of Madras

¹⁶Tea Districts Labour Association, Assam Secretariat, 1924, 4

Assam without any evil results¹⁷. Government of Madras was quick to endorse their recruitment as their “caste disabilities and traditions are largely responsible for their present characteristics and their removal from present environment and association would have a marked reformatory effect and that it is not likely that they would be a menace to life and property in their surroundings”¹⁸. Given the desperation of tea planters, though the recruitment was theoretically permitted through garden sardars, in practice it was done vigorously including middle men and non-sardars, supported by local administration, magistrates countersigning garden sardar certificates for people who were obviously not garden sardar class¹⁹. Besides deploying non sardars to the ceded districts, instances of obtaining fraudulent Sardar licence by appointing criminals as sardars under assumed names were also reported²⁰. Thus a multitude of factors unsuitable men combined with the conditions in plantation ultimately resulted into exodus.

IV. Framing the Discourse on Exodus: Coolies, Planters and Colonial Bureaucracy”

Withdrawal of the coolies and their long march engaged planters represented by ITA and TDLA on the one side and colonial bureaucracy in Assam on the other in a protracted negotiation and debate to ascertain the cause and fix blame for it which brought the complexities in the relation between the two. The “adventurism” involved in recruitment as evident in the previous section and the prevailing working conditions in the tea gardens were largely to blame for this as was also evident from the petitions and statements of the tea garden coolies themselves. The coolies in their accounts presented before the district authorities before proceeding on long march, mentioned a variety of grievances -the recruiting Sardars misled them to believe that they would have lighter work to do and will be paid higher wages, many of them disliked climate and condition of life and labour in Assam, the other complaints were about excessive and unaccustomed labour, inferior quality of rice and poverty. They also complained that there had been a number of deaths amongst them since they came out to Assam.

This was reaffirmed by enquiry conducted by the Labour Commissioner of Madras in the ceded districts of Bellary, Ananthpur and Cuddaph from where majority of labourers to Assam tea gardens had been recruited. The Labour Commissioner,

¹⁷Letter from J. A. Milligan, Chairman, Assam Labour Board, to G.E. Soames, Second Secretary to the Government of Assam, 17th June, 1924, No.2804, Magistracy Department, General Branch, Assam Secretariat

¹⁸Letter from Bahadur V. T. Krishnama, Secretary to the Government of Madras to the Second Secretary to the Government of Assam 15th October, 1924, No. 2884 Government of Madras, Law (General) Department

¹⁹Letter from G.E. Soames, Second Secretary, to the Government of Assam to The RA Deputy Commissioner, Goalpara 25 September, 1924, No.5507-14, Finance Department, Immigration Branch, Government of Assam

²⁰Letter from G. W. Selle, District Magistrate, Visagapatam to The Chairman, Assam Labour Board, 24 October, 1924, No.3681- 24R43, Magistracy Department, General Branch, Government of Assam

Government of Madras recorded statement of coolies wherein they narrated a long list of grievances- Wages, fever, leeches, medicines, heat, excessive nature of the task set, methods used to compel them to fulfill these tasks²¹.

Reasons for exodus given by the coolies themselves were summed up by the Labour Commissioner as follows:-

Reasons given by repatriates for leaving Assam

Fever	23	Medicines	3
Leeches	19	Ill-treatment	3
Insufficiency of wages	16	Climate	2
Excessive task	6	Language difficulty	1
Dysentery	6	Domestic reasons	1
Rain	4	Bad water	1

The Commissioner concluded that a multitude of factors were responsible for their exodus. In some cases the wages might be too low and improper methods might have been used to compel the coolies to work, the difference in language, the climate, especially the rain, malaria, leeches, recruitment of unsuitable people - all may have had some effect²² and summed up, “the new Madrased coolies from the Ceded districts were ‘strange people in a strange land speaking a strange tongue’²³. But perplexed both by the spread as well as the speed of its transmission exodus was seen by planters as triggered by outsiders; blaming it on influence brought in by ‘non-cooperationist’, thereby criticizing any move to repatriate the coolies and asking the government officials to send them back to the tea gardens, if required forcibly. The colonial authorities on the other hand defended repatriation citing adverse public opinion that the wandering group of coolies may create in Madras Presidency.

However the tea industry was “convinced” that the exodus, was not due to chronic grievances but was a conspiracy engineered by outside influence emanating perhaps originally from Madras, where Assam recruitment had all along been seriously opposed by political agitators and undoubtedly fostered by similar agencies in Assam.

Planters also argued that the exodus was causing “breach of peace” and “disturbance to public tranquility”, an interpretation which the colonial bureaucracy was not ready to accept and authorities made it clear that sending them back to the tea gardens was illegal. In the process what followed was a debate over “public tranquility”, “rule of

²¹Letter from G.F. Paddison, Commissioner of Labour, to the Secretary to Government, Law (General) Department, 22 November, 1924, No. 61, Finance Department, Immigration Branch, Assam Secretariat

²²Letter from G. F. Paddison, Commissioner of Labour, to The Secretary to Government, Law (General) Department, 22 November, 1924, No.61, Government of Madras

²³Noting of J. A. Dawson, Offg. Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, 22 September, 1924, No. 575, Finance Department, Immigration Branch, Assam Secretariat

law” and what is “legal or illegal” and who was entitled to define it, officials resisting any attempt by the tea industry to appropriate “state power”. The contest was not about definitions and claims and counter-claims alone but an indication that planters, when inconvenienced, wanted the entire apparatus of state power and law to their side, which the colonial bureaucracy was not willing to accept, asserting that they were not to be solely guided by planters’ interest.

Planters asserted that in a region like Assam where labour was short and prices of tea were high, managers would do all in their power to induce labourers to settle and earn good wages and hence Madras coolies had no real grievances from their employees.

What however flummoxed planters the most was the plan of campaign employed in every case, even by the small, isolated groups of ‘absconders’; the similarity of the grievances alleged; the actual words used in rejecting all the persuasions; arguments; tactics; watch, words and manifesto adopted by coolies, which warranted the conclusion that in every case inspiration came from a common source²⁴.

The fact that the coolies spread over many tea gardens, isolated from each other, were linked by common grievance was denied and ‘simultaneity’ and ‘similarity’ became a convenient peg to hang the outside influence theory on. The planter overlooked the fact that if there had been any desire to embarrass the Government or the tea industry the matter could certainly have come up in some form in the Legislative Council, which was in session shortly after the exodus occurred but it was not even mentioned once during its proceedings.

The confidential police reports also never mentioned any outside influence and the subsequent enquiry failed to elicit any proof that the exodus was organized by non-cooperationists²⁵.

But, afraid that exodus might spread to other classes of labour, the tea industry was anxious for an assurance of no repatriation from the Government in such an event. They suggested that instead of repatriation coolies should be sent back to the gardens and a complete change of policy and use of effective means were needed to stop it and deal drastically with those responsible. The Government contended that while as matter of general policy no encouragement or help was to be given to ‘absconding’ coolies who could substantiate no grievance and every possible effort was to be made to induce them to return to their employment, but if they refuse to do so neither the Government nor the employers have any powers ‘under the law’ to compel them to

²⁴Letter from The Chairman, Indian Tea Association to The Second Secretary to the Government of Assam 1 October, 1924, No- 590, Assam Secretariat, Finance Department, Immigration Branch, Assam Secretariat

²⁵Letter from G. E. Soames, Second Secretary to the Government of Assam, to-The Chairman, Indian Tea Association 18 October, 1924, No. 604, Finance Department, Immigration Branch, Assam Secretariat

return²⁶.

Officials also argued that the case of Madras recruitment was different because labour was recruited from districts not opened for recruitment and in no circumstances the coolies should be allowed to wander helplessly around the districts. In a veiled threat the industry was told that if they refuse to pay for the repatriation, Government must pay and then ask the council to vote the necessary funds which will invite debate in council, a situation that the tea industry would not like. Moreover, march of these coolies through the length of the tea districts would have resulted in serious sufferings and many casualties and would have done far more harm to the tea industries than their prompt repatriation as the spectacle of gangs of men, women and children wandering in a destitute state all over the country could not have failed to have a public opinion in India, asserted the Government officials²⁷.

The tea garden industry nevertheless backing on the outside influence theory reiterated that on the occasion of each exodus there had been leaders among the coolies who led them to leave and organize exodus and suggested proceeding under section 107 Cr.Pc. against them.

Official on the contrary, explaining the legal position contended that there could be no such proceeding unless there was an apprehension of breach of peace and Government cannot take any illegal action²⁸. It was further elaborated that although section 107 did mention “disturbance of public tranquility” as well as “breach of the peace” no one could be said to disturb the public tranquility because he induces his fellow man to leave work and return home²⁹. However this did not satisfy Tea Industry, which pointed out that government will be fully justified in taking action in a case where the ‘ring leaders’ were inducing coolies to leave tea gardens and walk home at the risk of dying on the roadside and disturbing other labour forces on the way in as much as such action must be considered to be likely to cause disturbance of public tranquility and the section is worded in such a way to give it a much wider application.

There were also differences about the procedure to be followed during repatriation. The tea industry wanted a set of instructions to be framed for guidance of district officers and repatriation to be resorted only if there was “real necessity”. They lamented that in absence of any specific policy each case depended on the personality and

²⁶Letter from G. E. Soames, Second Secretary to the Government of Assam, to the Secretary to the Indian Tea Association, 4th December, 1924, no.611, Assam Secretariat

²⁷Letter from Second Secretary to Government of Assam, No.591 to The Secretaries, Tea District Labour Association, 19th December, 1924, Finance Department, Immigration Branch, Assam Secretariat

²⁸Proceedings of a meeting held at Government House, 22 September 1924, no.578, from Immigration Branch, Assam Secretariat

²⁹Letter from Second Secretary to Government of Assam, to The Secretaries, Tea District Labour Association, 19 September, 1924, No-562, Finance Department, Immigration Branch June, 1925, Assam Secretariat

idiosyncrasies of the local officers. But the Government officials were of the view that labour exodus must be treated with reference to its causes and application of general instructions to individual cases would only lead to confusion³⁰. They also made it clear that it was the Government who was responsible for deciding whether a coolie shall or shall not be repatriated and they will decide what is meant by the term ‘real necessity’ and even if the tea industry undertook financial liability to repatriate, it did not invest them with the power to control the ‘discretion of magistrate’ who were responsible solely to the Government³¹.

The question of ‘legality of repatriation’ was also subject of contention between planters and colonial officials. Alluding to the Assam Labour and Immigration Act 1901, tea industry asserted that only legal ground on which repatriation at the expense of employers could be possible was if recruitment contained elements of fraud and misrepresentation or those recruited were permanently incapacitated from earning their livelihood and in the instant cases neither of the two was attracted. Defending their action officials responded that the issue of misrepresentation and fraud can be settled bestonly after a detailed enquiry in the recruiting districts. Moreover, it could be interpreted that the labour who could not stand the climate or weather were called permanently incapacitated from earning their livelihood in labour districts.

Another suggestion from the planters was that instead of repatriating the coolies they should have been allowed to march accompanied by doctors and a commissariat and forced to halt at different stages to recover their strength. Officials termed it impractical as it was difficult to halt them for long enough to enable them to recoup their strength on account of possibility of epidemic³². It was added that the state of coolies was such as to render immediate repatriation necessary and a continued march accompanied by deaths and sickness might create ‘public scandal’ and lead Government of Madras to impose restriction in recruiting and it would therefore be appropriate to repatriate the coolies at once³³.

What emerged from the long drawn negotiation and debate was that the tea industry wanted to return the administration and law as a apology for planters interest, but the officials concerned about protecting their turf, would not allow legal powers, which were in their ‘domain’ in hands of men who did not have any claim on issues like

³⁰Letter from G. E. Soames, Second secretary to the Government of Assam, to The Chairman, Indian Tea Association, 18th October, 1924, No. 604, Finance Department, Immigration Branch, Assam Secretariat

³¹Letter from H. C. Barnes, Commissioner, Assam Valley Division to The Deputy Commissioners of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Nowgong, Darrang, Kamrup and Goalpara 14 December, 1924, No- 622, Finance Department, Immigration Branch, June, 1925, Assam Secretariat

³²Letter from the Secretary, Indian Tea Association to The Second Secretary to the Government of Assam 1 October, 1924, No. 590, Finance Department, Immigration Branch, Assam Secretariat

³³Letter from G. E. Soames, Second Secretary to the Government of Assam, to The Chairman, Indian Tea Association 18 October, 1924, No.604, Finance Department, Immigration Branch June, Assam Secretariat

‘public tranquility’ or ‘law’ but a direct interest only in sending the coolies back whose ‘stampeding’ was a nuisance to them.

In the inequitable colonial context of tea plantation, equity of the law must always be in some part sham and it could become an instrument in the hands of powerful planters. But even here the rules and rhetoric imposed limitations upon the unbridled exercise of power both for colonial authorities and planters and which could not be twisted at will.

V. Conclusion

i) Labour Response and Success of Exodus

The limitations imposed upon the unrestrained exercise of power by the existence of law was seized by the plantation labour to work the system to their advantage and to achieve their objective, by taking recourse to wide ranging modes of avoidance protest that stopped well short of collective outright defiance and survived mostly on self-help- taking the ‘legal’ course of deputation and petition before local authorities about their grievances and then proceeding on long march to legitimize exodus, splitting into small groups to avoid detection, arranging transport on their own with their limited resources, continuing their march despite extreme adversaries, ‘false’ compliance and thwarting any negotiation to send them back to the gardens and ultimately making the exodus a success. By their act of “denial of labour through exit” they could demonstrate that Planters’ Raj was something less than it claimed to be and its agenda could be altered by everyday struggle of plantation labour.

Exodus was invariably followed by deputation and petition before the district authority - to obtain justice from them, starting from Tipuk through Ethel wood, Lakwa, Melleng to Khomtai. The petition, ‘respectfully’ submitted by plantation labour of Barbaritea estate collectively complained about the working condition and the quality of rice and actually produced the specimen of rice to substantiate their claim. In the same petition they also invoked their ‘right to subsist’ by pointing out that they were men, women and children so poor as to scarcely feed themselves for long and they should be repatriated for “which act of kindness the petitioners as a duty bound ever pray”³⁴. Once the exodus had the legitimacy of deputation and petition, the next step was to proceed on long march. Thus, assurance given by the district authorities that immediate enquiries would be made was turned down by coolies, who refused to return in any circumstances. In many instances, the coolies after hanging about near the D.C office marched further refusing to go back to the tea garden. By starting on a long march after duly informing the administration, which in way legitimized their action and showing sufficient resolution, they were able to successfully pressurize the government to repatriate them.

³⁴The ‘humble’ petition 22 November, 1924, No. 81, Finance Department, Immigration Branch, Assam Secretariat

Evidence also indicates that the coolies acted through a web of informal network to communicate. For example a day before one thousand Lakwa coolies ‘absconded’, some ‘Madrassi’ coolies from Muttrapur garden ‘without taking leave visited them’³⁵. It seems that market place played an important role in transmission of verbal message, as evident in the exodus of coolies from Amguri plantation which was summed up as follows “a most unexpected exodus no sign of unrest and apparently quite happy on Sunday visited the bazar making their usual purchase of fish. Chowkidar reported all correct at 9 P.M. During the night they evidently filed out individually, met in jungle”³⁶.

It appears that in furtherance of their strategy of avoidance, combined with lack of trust in the colonial authorities, coolies tactfully refused any shelter provided by them. Lakwa coolies refused to occupy the sheds erected for them by the Deputy Commissioner and many of them stayed on the road side exposed to the rain³⁷. In case of Khomtai after petitioning Deputy Commissioner they scattered about different places and their names and address could not be ascertained, thus foiling any attempt by the administration to deal with them collectively³⁸.

Work avoidance or go slow was another mode adopted by the coolies. After the exodus the remaining Lakwa and Meleng Coolies did as little work as possible and some did not do enough work to earn a ‘decent living wage’. They also ceased to work regularly and their demeanor changed entirely³⁹.

A between the line reading of the following official report, despite its colonial connotation and categorization provides an interesting account as to how any attempt to negotiate with the coolies to send them back to the garden and break their combination was thwarted by them -

“After the Meleng and Lakwa coolies arrived at Jorhat, attempts were made to persuade them to send them back, but the ring leaders remained obstinate, argumentative and unreasonable and whole of ‘Madras’ labour crowded around listening, but the rank and file were “laughing and joking”. The first piece of propaganda staged was sudden emergence of diseased or injured in front whowere loudly proclaimed as evidence of

³⁵Letter from the Chairman Indian Tea Association, to the second Secretary, Government of Assam, 1 October, 1924, No. 590, Immigration Branch, Assam Secretariat

³⁶Memo by the Assistant Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, March 1925, No.106, Finance Department, Immigration Branch, Assam Secretariat

³⁷Letter from The Chairman, Indian Tea Association, to The Second Secretary to the Government of Assam, 1st October, 1924, No.590, Finance Department, Immigration Branch, Assam Secretariat

³⁸Letter from V.T. Krishnamma Achariyar Avaragal, Acting Secretary to the Government of Madras, Law (General Department) to the Second Secretary of Government of Assam, 16th September, 1924, No.66, Finance Department, Immigration Branch, Assam Secretariat

³⁹Letter from G. E. Soames, Second Secretary to the Government of Assam, to The Secretary to the Government of Madras, Law Department 25 September, 1924, No.579, Finance Department, Immigration Branch, Assam Secretariat, June, 1925

hardship of garden life. The ring-leaders stated that they heard good rain had fallen in their country and there was prosperity so they wanted to return. To counter this latest Madras Government weather and crops reports were produced by the authorities, who also proposed a deputation selected by coolies to be sent. The authorities thought that the ring-leaders were apparently impressed but the balance was trembled when suddenly the organization in the back ground made itself felt and turned the scale. "Without warning the front row of the spectators were cleft by a well marshaled phalanx of women throwing instantly themselves on the ground and grasping the manager and the authorities by the feet from all sides, while a chorus of hysterical weeping and wailing made further parley impossible". When the authorities sought to depart row of all women linking arms laid down on the road in front of the motor car.

Next morning same tactics was repeated by the labour marching in a procession towards Jorhat. Again the argument put forward seemed to impress the coolies when the tactics of previous day was repeated and the intervention of the women brought the negotiation to an end⁴⁰.

The expressions like 'ring leaders', 'stampeding', 'absconding' and 'contagion' were variously used both by the planters and colonial officials for the coolies and their movement to delegitimize the exodus. Also by blaming their collective withdrawal on "outside influence", attempt was made by the planters to deny recognition to the coolies as a subject of history even for a project that was their own. But though bound by contract and immobilized in routine of work and discipline by the planters, immobilization was successfully contested as success of exodus showed. In the process they also demonstrated remarkable courage, solidarity and determination, emboldened by the fact the situation was one which no provision of law has been designed to cover.

ii) Invoking Mahatma

An interesting aspect of exodus was the way Mahatma Gandhi was invoked by the coolies to make their collective withdrawal a success. Though it was the Government of Assam, which in most cases paid for repatriation, in the accounts about the journey back home, many of them stated before the Labour Commission of Madras that they were helped by Gandhi Maharaj in their journey, claiming that Gandhi gave them tickets or Gandhi took pity on loss of human life they suffered during long march and arranged tickets. Yet another version was that some people came and asked them to go away and on the way they told the coolies that they belonged to Gandhi Maharaj or Gandhi Maharaj gave railway fare, which was handed over to them by a constable, as a present of Gandhi Maharaj. Another coolie told that they walked for many days suffering loss of life and then Sarkar Gandhi Maharaj sent them home.

⁴⁰Letter from The Chairman, Indian Tea Association, to The Second Secretary to the Government of Assam, 1 October 1924, No-590 Finance Department, Immigration Branch June, 1925, Assam Secretariat

The study of non-cooperation movement in Gorakhpur (Eastern U.P.) 1920-22 has shown that there was no single authorized version of Mahatma Gandhi to which people subscribed and indeed many of the ideas about Gandhi's "orders" and "powers" were often at variance with those of the leadership of national movement. (Amin in Guha (ed.), 1984) Similarly, during the non-cooperation movement in Surma Valley in May, 1921 the tea plantation labour recruited from United Provinces demanding a wage increase had left in thousands amidst declaration that such was Gandhi's order (Sarkar, 1983,217). But while radicalization of Mahatma Gandhi's message during a momentous even like non-cooperation and interpretation of his 'orders' differently by different sections of people to align with what they regarded as just, fair and possible was not uncommon, 1924-25 was relatively a non – momentous phase in Indian history of relative 'peace'. Non-cooperation movement had been called off in 1922 and the pros and cons of council entry was engaging the attention of national leadership. Use of Gandhi's name in such a context was exceptional as his authority was invoked when there was no possibility of linking it or drawing sustenance from a larger, widespread, national movement, to legitimize collective withdrawal from the tea gardens. Also use of Mahatma Gandhi authority shows his emergence as an alternative source of power to the colonial state, a savior more powerful than the latter and even if invoked as an afterthought, it was based on the firm believe that it would protect them from any future repressive action of colonial government.

Thus even though a constable who gave the ticket, did it on behalf of government, it was attributed to Gandhi. That the ground of colonial rule was shifting and Raj was giving way to Gandhi Maharaj could not be comprehended by the planters or the officials. The dilemma was summed up by the Chairman of Indian Tea Association - "It is really amusing that government at present paid for their repatriation but Mahatma Ji came in for the credit"⁴¹.

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⁴¹Demi official from A.D. Gordon, Chairman, Indian Tea Association, to the Law (General) Department, Government of Madras, 9 December, 1924, No. 4174 A-3

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The views expressed here are personal and not those of the government or the organisation where the author works.

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