

Trinity College

## Trinity College Digital Repository

---

The Trinity Papers (2011 - present)

Trinity Publications (Newspapers, Yearbooks,  
Catalogs, etc.)

---

2013

### The Tea Gardens of Assam and Bengal: Company Rule and Exploitation of the Indian Population During the Nineteenth- Century

Gabrielle LaFavre  
*Trinity College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/trinitypapers>



Part of the [Asian History Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

LaFavre, Gabrielle, "The Tea Gardens of Assam and Bengal: Company Rule and Exploitation of the Indian Population During the Nineteenth-Century". *The Trinity Papers (2011 - present)* (2013).

Trinity College Digital Repository, Hartford, CT. <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/trinitypapers/21>

# The Tea Gardens of Assam and Bengal: Company Rule and Exploitation of the Indian Population During the Nineteenth-Century

---

Gabrielle LaFavre

*Contemporary agents of the East India Company claim that the organization stimulated development in the Indian sub-continent, but the formation of the Assam Company only benefited a certain proportion of the Indian population—the urban elite. Establishing tea plantations in the countryside conversely impoverished the rural populations—this paper will explore the extent to which Company Rule, in particular the tea gardens and plantations of nineteenth-century Assam and Bengal, impoverished and exploited the rural inhabitants of India, as well as pan-Indian laborers. These plantations followed the mold first set by the East India Company, and by contrasting their separate, but intertwined, histories, it is possible to posit wider questions about colonial rule, such as the large-scale subjugation of the Indian nation as a whole.*

*After securing a commercial monopoly and relaxing taxes for Europeans in order to stimulate their economic progress, private British managers and producers enjoyed unchallenged power and free access to resources and labor—all under the approving eye of the Crown. These private businessmen created a rigid plantation-structure that dislodged the traditional Indian positions of authority and simultaneously extracted as much labor as possible from their workforce—without substantial costs of production. Tea plantations achieved a high profit margin by means of coercive labor recruitment, low employee wages, an ethnic division of the work force, and inhumane living and working conditions—both on the plantations and in the surrounding villages. It is due to this pattern of economic exploitation that Company Rule on Indian tea plantations prevented local development and sustained an environment of colonial control in Assam and Bengal well into the twentieth century.*

*The East India Company developed as the primary trade company to advance British interests, and this umbrella business extracted Indian labor and resources. A more specific examination of the Assam Company, a descendent of the East India Company itself, reveals that the tea plantations of the nineteenth century were microcosms of larger political and economic issues that allowed the British traders and rulers to oppress the Indian people under Company Rule—the reverberations of which are still felt on the sub-continent to this day, evident in the widespread poverty and illiteracy of much of the population.*

European powers oppressed India, keeping it as a colony until the nation finally gained independence in 1947. To this day, large portions of the Indian population remain poor and illiterate, and although the economy is growing on the whole, India has not been able to recognize its full potential since. One of the methods with which Great Britain prevented Indian development was through the East India Company; although colonialism brought transportation networks, new infrastructure, and education to privileged sections of the Indian population that resided in cities, entities such as the East India Company ultimately did more to impoverish—not benefit—rural India. The East India Company, and its later tea subsidiaries and conglomerates, extracted Indian resources and abused indigenous inhabitants. One of the most oppressive tea subsidiaries, the Assam Company, formed out of a merger with the Bengal Tea Association in 1840. Studying Company Rule through the history of the East India Company and the Assam Company serves as a vessel with which to address the larger historiographic issue of the drain enacted by the metropole: whereby European nations benefited economically, socially, and politically—all at the expense of their colonies. In particular, Assam and Bengal, two of the largest tea producing regions in India, demonstrate the ways in which Company Rule not only created a colonial economy of exploitation, but also perpetuated social and economic underdevelopment in India.

By the 1880s, tea, once a symbol of upper class luxury, became the “cheapest and most widely used drink amongst the common people” in Europe.<sup>1</sup> Tea first increased in popularity during the 1830s, and the demand for this product, especially in Great Britain, soared; the British public accounted for roughly 88% of all tea use, and their patterns of consumption boosted market expansion.<sup>2</sup> Previously, Chinese tea dominated the world economy, but by 1888 Indian tea established itself as the chief product of European consumers.<sup>3</sup> However, with this increase in demand came the formation of smaller entrepreneurial bodies such as the Assam Company, which essentially followed the exploitative practices that the East India Company had already established. The East India Company initiated a string of government-supported private entities that possessed sovereignty in Indian provinces from the eighteenth-century on. With the growth of the East India Company and the tea industry, other companies began to form; the similarities between these entities gives rise to the question: to what extent do the private tea gardens, under the direction of companies like the Assam Company, embody the ways in which Britain exploited India as a whole?

The tea plantations of Assam and Bengal illustrates how the government worked with the East India Company to destabilize and exploit the indigenous rural people, and on many levels, tea plantations can be viewed as microcosms of the East India Company itself, especially in terms of larger political and economic issues. Although Sen Sudipta argues “colonial rule in

India has often been studied from the perspective of the British Raj of the nineteenth century,” he laments that “there are relatively few studies that treat the period of Company rule as the initial and perhaps crucial phase of colonial expansion”;<sup>4</sup> this claim underlines the fact that Crown Rule prefigured Company Rule, and the establishment of Company Rule paved the way for later oppression against the Indian people.

The Assam Company united with the Bengal Tea Association on January 16, 1840<sup>5</sup>, and this entity best illuminates the colonial abuses of tea plantations throughout Asia because Bengal and Assam became the world’s largest tea growing regions, due to the British system of exploitation there. More than any other conglomerate, the Assam Company displaced local rulers and established an economic monopoly by skewing taxes and land ownership opportunities in favor of British interest—similar to how the East India Company usurped traditional systems of power in other domains of trade. After Lord William Bentinck, aided by an Indian leader named Maniram Dewan, discovered indigenous tea in India in 1834, Company Rule utilized—and even intensified—existing exploitative practices.<sup>6</sup> The Assam Company maintained a substantial profit level despite competition from Chinese tea by keeping labor costs down, implementing coercive tactics of labor recruitment, deepening ethnic cleavages to prevent unified dissent and group consciousness, and ignoring Indian economic development in favor of private British gains. Ultimately, tea companies in India, especially the Assam Company, drew upon tactics of the East India Company, but took these avaricious measures a step further and created their own systems of damage and abuse which locked the Indian sub-continent into a cycle of indebtedness for decades. The tea company rule of the nineteenth century mirrors the East India Company and reveals the practices and methods underlying colonial exploitation on a larger scale; such a study helps to explain why India continued to remain subjugated for decades after colonial rule formally ended.

This paper details the oppressive practices and inequitable levying of taxes first instituted by the East India Company, as well as how this established an abusive model which tea companies later modified to achieve their own profits at the expense of local Indian inhabitants. Next, an exploration of the Assam Company, which epitomizes the larger characteristics of tea Company Rule in general, illuminates how plantations drew upon the East India Model in order to legitimize raising Indian taxes, sustaining oppressive conditions on the tea gardens, recruiting labor in order to divide their workforce, and subjugating neighboring towns and villages; in short, the Assam Company serves as a microcosm of colonial exploitation, displaying the practices of Company Rule, as well as how this system prevented Indian development. Finally, this paper alludes to a specific example of violent Indian reaction against the continued poverty, illiteracy, and oppression on tea estates, which,

unfortunately, highlights the connection between the metropole's colonial agenda and its adverse effects on India, even today.

## I. THE EAST INDIA COMPANY MODEL, A VESSEL FOR COLONIAL EXPLOITATION

William Pitt's India Act of 1784 gave the "Crown the power of guiding the politics of India with as little means of corrupt influence as possible," which, in effect, established a concrete link between the doings of the East India Company and the approval of the royal government. Because East India Company's products were seen as "necessary returns for public funds and trust put into the joint stock...Parliament was responsible for raising the finances to pay for the settlement of trade in the East Indies. The Company was authorized by letters...under the royal seal of England to make requisite laws, constitutions, and ordinances," and this ultimately awarded the Company sovereign authority in many Indian Provinces.<sup>7</sup> Pitt's Act did little, if anything, to ameliorate the fraud already rampant within the Company; in fact, "the India House became a synonym for corruption and faction,"<sup>8</sup> and the Act created an apathetic environment in which the East India Company pursued its aims by any means—moral or otherwise.<sup>9</sup>

Following Pitt's Act, "monopolies both lawful and questionable continued to exist...indigenous traders, brokers, and subordinates who had thrown in their lot with the Company Raj were busy adapting to a new regime".<sup>10</sup> This new regime, under the auspices of the East India Company, served as a precedent for later tea plantations such as the Assam Company, and they granted indemnity to businessmen who utilized manipulation and profiteering. The activities of the East India Company encouraged a system of 'black agents' who "dislodged a range of Indian middlemen (usually known as *dadni* merchants) who had acted as brokers".<sup>11</sup> This process relocated the profits of indigenous merchants and traders and placed them into the hands of British entrepreneurs instead. Consequently, these private British traders fostered a corrupt environment of insider trading, which allowed them to accumulate personal wealth—two characteristics which later reappeared on tea plantations. The East India Company displayed another corrupt practice which later distinguished the tea gardens of Bengal and Assam: British merchants seized power from local Mughal emperors by offering an annual tribute, or bribe, if the Mughals revoked the obligatory revenue payments on commodity goods; this eliminated European taxes and paved the way for later inequitable laws, such as the Waste Land Grant Rules of 1838, and led to Indian oppression.<sup>12</sup> The East India Company "set the tone for the expansion of British and European colonies and economic interests in Asia and the rest of the world,"<sup>13</sup> and one can argue that it laid the groundwork for a powerful intrusive state which tea companies later utilized as their model. The East India Company, approved by the government, created a climate of British dominance that tea plantations used as their basis for subsequent exploitation.

## II. THE ASSAM COMPANY, A MICROCOSM OF ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION UNDER COLONIAL RULE

The expansion of the East India Company occurred because the Company “assumed sole authority to impose customs duties”<sup>14</sup> and created customs houses that expanded revenue, while simultaneously supplanting traditional Indian trading authorities. The Company explored new realms of agriculture and commerce, and following the increase in worldwide tea consumption during the 1830s, a group of British merchants formed the Assam Company in London on February 12, 1839.<sup>15</sup> In order to create a profit in light of strong Chinese competition, the Assam Company’s main objective was to acquire an economic monopoly in the tea industry. The Company petitioned the government to relax tax payments, and by 1854 the Waste Land Rules—first enacted in 1838 to allow government-granted land to be free of revenue for twenty years—was in full swing and led to a rapid increase in British cultivation.<sup>16</sup> Later acts, such as the Fee Simple Rules of 1862, the Revised Fee Simple Rules of 1874, and the New Lease Rules of 1876, further enabled “British planters to own large tracts of the most fertile land of Assam at highly concessional rates”.<sup>17</sup> These legislations, which directly stemmed from the East India Company’s customs houses, displaced indigenous inhabitants and discriminated against aspiring Indian planters. Due to the nature of colonial capitalism, “only entrepreneurs with huge capital could take up tea-cultivation. Difficulties for the indigenous entrepreneurs were thus increased during a nearly three-decade period, initially by the government, and later by the government and the planters in conjunction,” further alienating local traders and aspiring Indian businessmen.<sup>18</sup>

These acts marginalized the Indian people—from traders, to laborers, to peasants. The Assam Company squatted on “as much land as possible to preempt any future rival,”<sup>19</sup> and only one half of land was actually cultivated for tea, while the other half remained “set aside for future expansion”.<sup>20</sup> What little land remained was out of reach of the local population, literally and figuratively, because only those with a large amount of capital could risk tea cultivation. In addition, while British evaded taxation, Indian landowners paid two rupees per acre to their British masters.<sup>21</sup> The peasants who were not coerced into working in the plantation sector remained “largely subsistence oriented” and “the bulk...impoverished as a result of rack-renting and usurious practices of money-lending, [they] did not possess enough capital to invest it in land reclamation in the district”.<sup>22</sup> Indians who did not work for the tea gardens became impoverished, due to discriminatory land taxes and duplicitous British loans.

Further, Company Rule maintained its economic hegemony through violent means as well. The Company took no chances with local competition, and “aspiring Assamese planters were discriminated against and discouraged from entering into competition with the British planters”.<sup>23</sup> Maniram Dewan, the Indian leader who had first alerted the British of the presence of

indigenous tea, resigned from his post with the Assam Tea Company in order to create his own plantation. However, his land was maliciously classified as ordinary rice-property and, therefore, subject to very high revenue, which ultimately discouraged his success and bankrupted his plantation.<sup>24</sup> When Dewan, a threat to British profits as well as a rival businessman, continued to excel, the Assam Company alleged that he was inciting rebellion; the Company's false allegations consequently enabled the government to execute him in 1858. Following his death, the Company confiscated his land for their own possession, illustrating the full extent of British corruption.<sup>25</sup> Dewan's execution also reveals the lengths to which British planters of Company Rule went in order to sustain complete control of the Assamese and Bengali tea trade.

As with the East India Company before it, the British monarchy endorsed the Assam Company and displayed support by transferring two-thirds of government-owned tea stations to the Company in February of 1840.<sup>26</sup> The Company flourished in this favorable environment, and used this opportunity to tie down laborers to plantations vis-à-vis subsistence farming, which not only prevented competition in the sphere of commercial agriculture, but also made the Indian people "dependent upon their employers for every necessity of life".<sup>27</sup> Tea estates distributed "a bulk of...surplus land...into small plots to be distributed among the laborers,"<sup>28</sup> but these plots forced Indians who bought land into a crushing cycle of debt and dependence. It chained peasants to uncultivated land "by further exploitation of his and his family's labour,"<sup>29</sup> which was necessary to pay off taxes and loans, and it gave rise to "a dampening effect on the propensity of the different categories of peasants to take the risks involved in commercial agriculture".<sup>30</sup> Coupled with this need to cultivate their own subsistence crops, Indian laborers found that the price of necessary goods in the market increased, while their wages remained injudiciously low.<sup>31</sup> Many of these peasants turned to plantation labor because when the British gained control of tax revenues in the 1770s, Indian taxation increased; labor became the only way they could pay their taxes. This caused peasants to "quit the land...indebtedness and expropriation from land of the small peasants created a favorable environment for the [British] planters," and the cycle became so severe that many Indians pawned their own freedom as a last resort.<sup>32</sup> Measures such as these, undertaken by the Assam Company and individual tea plantations, prevented local competition from profiting, and severely compromised the development of the Indian people and their economy.

### III. SPECIFIC EXPLOITATIVE MEASURES OF THE ASSAM COMPANY—LABOR, RECRUITMENT, AND PRIVATE TRADE

Perhaps the most gripping example of the exploitation of indigenous peoples under Company Rule occurred within the realm of labor recruitment. Because of market competition from Chinese tea, the Assam Company sought to keep all investments, especially labor costs, as low as possible in order to increase profit and remain competitive. There was little, if any, mechanization within the tea plantations, so labor was “the main element in the total cost of production of tea;”<sup>33</sup> therefore, the less that companies spent on labor, the higher their personal margin of profit would be. In the formative years of Company Rule, tea gardens created and sustained a hierarchal plantation structure in which labor was acquired through an indenture system, characterized by “mobilization of a large unskilled labour force through non-market mechanism, low wages, extra-legal methods of control and large scale production through labour-intensive, low-skill methods.”<sup>34</sup> This hierarchy, characterized by a small number of British managers and a large class of oppressed Indian workers, could not function without force. To combat the high rate of absconding laborers, the Company enforced “strict control through penal laws, floggings illegal confinements, and the *chowkidari* system,”<sup>35</sup> a system in which the British employed watchmen and guard dogs to prevent desertion and disobedience.<sup>36</sup> This example reinforces how British tea companies cut costs and exploited their workforce, which in turn led to an increase of disease, malnutrition, and mortality. During one extreme instance, the British even prohibited laborers from producing rice, the main subsistence crop for the Indian people, because it was “opposed to the interest of the Company”<sup>37</sup> and ‘interfered’ with tea profits.

In order to guarantee that the workforce was productive, entities such as the Assam Company constructed false narratives against local laborers and “raised a hue and cry about local labour due to the alleged unwillingness of Assamese agricultural laborers to work in tea gardens.”<sup>38</sup> British entrepreneurs ignored the favorable balance of indigenous inhabitants and land, as ignored the fact that the fertile soil allowed peasants to grow rice with little effort or capital—reasons which, if acknowledged, would have explained why local people were not interested in working on the plantations.<sup>39</sup> It is because of these factors that Assamese and Bengali inhabitants had little incentive to tea cultivators, a labor-intensive occupation. In addition, tea companies offered arbitrarily low wages and only a “substantial monetary inducement” would have caused Indian people to voluntarily labor in tea gardens.<sup>40</sup> No such monetary inducement existed, and government works such as railroad production offered higher wages—thus attracting local labor more easily.

Because the Bengali and Assamese inhabitants did not willingly seek employment with them, tea companies therefore dismissed indigenous people



as lazy. A civil servant in Bengal during this period wrote: “the village folk do not, as a rule, work harder than they are compelled to do...so long as their urgent wants are satisfied they do not care to exert themselves...they do no more than they must”.<sup>41</sup> Because of this discriminating narrative against local peoples, planters coerced laborers from other regions, and ultimately produced a system of neo-slavery that ensnared workers from vast distances throughout the entire sub-continent.

Recruiting labor from foreign districts solved many issues, especially because tea companies considered local labor to be “expensive and risky”<sup>42</sup>; for one, local laborers were more likely to protest poor conditions and garner the support of the neighboring villages. To prevent this type of unrest, companies sought labor from far distances. Unlike local labor, immigrant workers were easier for plantations to control because they could not “trek back home whenever they had reason to be dissatisfied with the Company”.<sup>43</sup> Immigrant laborers could be “exploited and ill-treated without much impact on the surrounding villages,” and therefore, tea companies preferred their labor.<sup>44</sup>

The Assam Company further claimed that immigrant laborers from regions such as Bhagalpore, Chittagong, and Dacca were “physically stronger than the weak Benglaies” and more capable of “understanding hard work in the jungle;” therefore, they were “better suited to the unhealthy climate of the districts of Assam”.<sup>45</sup> In actuality, many foreign workers, such as Bengali Muslims, could not survive the Assamese climate, and the foreign worker mortality rate reached 35 per cent on the plantations.<sup>46</sup> These foreign laborers, derogatorily referred to as “hill coolies, *dhangar* and *boonah* (jungle-dwelling),”<sup>47</sup> were easier to exploit than local people and companies could keep them illiterate, and therefore ignorant of their rights.<sup>48</sup> Tea companies coerced aboriginal laborers from tribes and lower castes, and because they constituted the lowest position, socially inferior to even the bottom caste,<sup>49</sup> tea managers exploited this vulnerability and reduced them to the “private property,” or slaves, of the Company.<sup>50</sup>

Because Company Rule sought to keep labor costs as low as possible, it was necessary to coerce foreign laborers in light of such low wages. Potential workers from alien districts had little incentive to travel far distances to the plantations because the “sufferings and high death rates were common knowledge...and further efforts to procure a fresh supply [of laborers] proved to be increasingly unsuccessful;”<sup>51</sup> consequently, importing labor necessitated an intensive recruiting network. *Sardari* recruitment developed to forcibly entice workers from distant regions, and bribery and trickery characterized it. *Sadars*, natives trusted by British companies to appeal to the indigenous people, worked as intermediaries and registered laborers in districts far from their home.<sup>52</sup> Similar to *sadars*, native *arkatis* served as middlemen because they knew how to induce their peers to become laborers. They used both “fair means and foul” to secure peasant labor for tea companies.<sup>53</sup> Ultimately, the

combined effort of the British planters and their labor recruiters created a deceitful system, which caused peasants throughout India to surrender their lands and resign themselves to *kamiouti*, or forced labor, because they believed they had no other option.<sup>54</sup>

Companies hired contractors based on commission, and as a result, these labor recruiters cared more for the amount of laborers they supplied than for the wellbeing of these workers.<sup>55</sup> Consequently, “mortality of coolies on the voyage up between 1861 and 1863 was caused by overcrowding, insufficient and improper food supplied on the voyage and total neglect of the coolies both as regards to medical treatment and cleanliness;” sadly, overcrowding became so excessive that people were crushed in transit, before they even arrived on a tea plantation.<sup>56</sup> Conditions on vessels transporting laborers, as well as accommodations of the plantations themselves, were unclean; they increased the probability of diseases such as cholera.<sup>57</sup> After the British government passed Act III in 1863, which officially licensed and ‘regulated’ the recruiting system, recruitment activity increased. The mortality rate in every shipment of alien laborers approached 50 percent as a result, and companies “shipped them [the recruits] as if they were cattle,” thus transforming the tea laborer “into a commodity and a virtual slave”.<sup>58</sup>

Another negative ramification of labor recruitment occurred because tea plantations introduced and reinforced ethnic divides. Companies purposefully imported a mélange of ethnic and religious groups so that workers’ struggles could not “crystallise into a unified and organized labour movement in the Assam Valley”.<sup>59</sup> Once on a plantation, workers could not unite because people “coming from a distant and scattered area were less powerful,” and therefore, less cohesive.<sup>60</sup> Colonial capitalism deepened “ethnic cleavages among the mass of the plantation labourers, brought about ethnic and class solidarity among the managerial and intermediary class,” while the laborers remained strictly divided by ethnicity, language, and religion.<sup>61</sup> This practice reflected the larger colonial trend of ‘divide and rule’ that bodies of British authority, such as the East India Company, commonly practiced during the nineteenth century.

Entities such as the Assam Company further prevented mass protest by isolating their divided workforce from the outside world. The Assam Company enacted measures of ‘discipline’ in various ways: “they [the laborers] were compelled to reside within the vicinity of the gardens; their mobility within and outside the plantations was severely restricted; they were isolated from the outside world; and they were made completely dependent on their employers”.<sup>62</sup> The struggles that developed on the plantations remained isolated, and no links could emerge in such a detached climate. Laborers, both native and foreign to the Assam Valley, were not allowed to leave the estates, and *chowkidars* prevented them from contacting villagers nearby. Enforced isolation inhibited “the development of class consciousness...by maintaining

a strict physical control”.<sup>63</sup> This gross exploitation reduced workers to the position of neo-slaves.<sup>64</sup>

Just as private inland trade developed during the early years of the East India Company, the Company Rule of tea conglomerates, such as the Assam Company, encouraged private gain at the expense of local development. Inland trading “of salt and other status goods was considered a scene of the most tyrannic and oppressive conduct that was known in any age or country,”<sup>65</sup> and this created a basis for exploitation in the realm of tea production later. Private tea managers reaped enormous profits and refused to invest in surrounding villages. During “the years of tea mania everybody was quietly busy making his own fortune”<sup>66</sup> and private merchants established extravagant lifestyles for themselves—often in stark juxtaposition to the poverty that characterized the plantations and the neighboring villages.

The real profit from these tea estates ended up in “the hands of the owners and managers in the form of profits or salary,” as they received a salary ten times the size of their common laborers.<sup>67</sup> In this way, tea plantations mirrored greater exploitative trends of the East India Company as a whole—especially because, as a result of these practices, North Bengal and the Assam Valley remained severely underdeveloped.<sup>68</sup> Urban centers did spring up near plantations, but they catered mostly to the needs of the tea gardens and “failed to grow into viable trade and commercial centers” for local people.<sup>69</sup> Although a member of the British civil service claimed that “the Charter Act of 1813 directed that out of the annual surplus revenues of British India ‘a sum of not less than one lakh of rupees’ should be set apart and applied to ‘the revival and improvement of literature and the encouragement of the learned natives of India,’”<sup>70</sup> the overwhelming majority of the profits from Assam gardens actually “enriched Britain and benefited British citizens”.<sup>71</sup> British planters did not invest in charitable organizations or state development, and preferred to hoard their profits. Tea companies, supported by the British government, utilized exploitative means, just as the East India Company furthered European interests at the expense of the non-Western indigenous population.

#### IV: MICROCOSM OF THE EAST INDIA COMPANY ECONOMIC MODEL—WHY IT MATTERS

The Company Rule of tea estates, such as the Assam Company in both Assam and Bengal, illustrates the East India Company’s corruption on a smaller, more specific level—yet it further reveals the oppression of colonial powers throughout the world. Due to “a high level of demand for Indian tea, weakness of competition from other foreign or Indian planters, a very low price of land for gardens, a low requirement of initial capital investment, cheap labour, elementary technical requirement and public patronage,” tea companies were able to thrive economically and to oppress the people of India.<sup>72</sup> After the discovery of indigenous tea in India in 1834,

the Assam Company created and controlled plantations in the regions of Bengal and Assam that microcosmically resembled the exploitative practices of the East India Company, and by extension, colonial rule as a whole. These tea gardens instituted an economic monopoly of land, duties, and trade; displaced traditional middlemen; and discriminated against aspiring indigenous planters. As a result of this monopoly, Company Rule locked Indian laborers into a cycle of indebtedness and introduced ethnic cleavages, by means of foreign recruitment, which prevented protest and the formation of class-consciousness. The lack of class-consciousness ultimately enabled the atrocious living and working conditions on tea plantations, and prevented the economic and social development of the Indian people. Company Rule became just one example of the colonial drain—the drain which subjugated non-European colonies for centuries.

Today, the colonial legacy of tea plantations and of the Assam Company lives on. In 1987, “out of about 620 tea gardens in the Brahmaputra Valley, only about 158 are owned by Assamese planters. However, most of these gardens are small in size...and many do not even have their own factories”.<sup>73</sup> Current British planters maintained the hegemony that their ancestors forcibly established during Company Rule until very recently, and to this day, they retain a large amount of plantation ownership. As time progresses, more Indian people have become plantation owners and managers. However, even with this trend towards Indian control of the tea sector, many Indian management executives retain the tools and techniques of the British colonial model and continue to oppress their rural workers. On May 30, 2003, incensed workers on a tea estate in Assam bunt set fire to their deputy manager because oppression still rages on, and all other forms of protest have not attracted attention or improved conditions.<sup>74</sup> Extreme examples of protest such as this murder highlight why it is important to study the colonial period of Company Rule during the nineteenth-century in Assam and Bengal; because tea plantations fostered an environment conducive to the violation of human rights, the industry has been able to exploit Indian workers for over two hundred years. Because “the legacy of the colonial days has been cherished and nourished consciously in the gardens even half a century after the end of the raj,”<sup>75</sup> it is imperative to study this period critically and analytically, so that society can find a way to end the exploitation that continues to subjugate India.

## ENDNOTES

1. Bhubanes Misra, "Quality, Investment, and International Competitiveness: Indian Tea Industry, 1880-1910," *Economic & Political Weekly* 22.6 (1987): 230-38, *JSTOR*, Web. 16 Mar. 2012, 230.
2. B. Misra, 233.
3. B. Misra, 232.
4. Sudipta Sen, *Empire of Free Trade: The East India Company and Making of the Colonial Marketplace*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1998, Print, 4.
5. Kalyan K. Sircar, "A Tale of Two Boards: Some Early Management Problems of Assam Company Limited, 1839-1864," *Economic & Political Weekly* 21.10/11 (1986): 453-59, *JSTOR*, Web. 16 Mar. 2012, 454.
6. *A Tale of Two Boards*, Sircar, pg. 453; and Tilottoma Misra, "A Colonial Hinterland," *Economic & Political Weekly* 15.32 (1980): 1357-364, *JSTOR*, Web. 16 Mar. 2012, 1358.
7. Sen, 80.
8. C. H. Phillips, *The East India Company, 1784-1834*, Manchester: Manchester UP, 1968, Print, 23.
9. Phillips, 14.
10. Sen, 87.
11. Sen, 87.
12. Narendra Krishna Sinha, *The Economic History of Bengal*, Vol. 2, Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1961, Print, 54.
13. Sen, 3.
14. Sen, 101.
15. Kalyan K. Sircar, "Labour and Management: First Twenty Years of Assam Company Limited (1839-59)," *Economic & Political Weekly* 21.22 (1986): 38-43, *JSTOR*, Web. 16 Mar. 2012, 38.
16. Gupta, 1861; B. Misra, 230.
17. T. Misra, 1358.
18. Suranjan Chatterjee and Rhatan D. Gupta, "Tea-Labour in Assam: Recruitment and Government Policy, 1840-188," *Economic & Political Weekly* 16.44/46 (1981): 1861-868, *JSTOR*, Web. 07 Mar. 2012, 1861.
19. *A Tale of Two Boards*, Sircar, 454.
20. Virginius Xaxa, "Colonial Capitalism and Underdevelopment in North Bengal," *Economic & Political Weekly* 20.39 (1985): 1659-665, *JSTOR*, Web. 16 Mar. 2012, 1661.
21. T. Misra, 1358.
22. Xaxa, 1661.

23. T. Misra, 1358.
24. T. Misra, 1358.
25. T. Misra, 1364.
26. *A Tale of Two Boards, Sircar, 455.*
27. Rana P. Behal, "Forms of Labour Protest in Assam Valley Tea Plantations, 1900-1930," *Economic & Political Weekly* 20.4 (1985): 19-26, *JSTOR*, Web. 16 Mar. 2012, 20.
28. Xaxa, 1662.
29. Xaxa, 1662.
30. Xaxa, 1662.
31. Chatterjee and Gupta, 1867.
32. Chatterjee and Gupta, 1862.
33. *Labour and Management, Sircar, 38.*
34. Behal, 19.
35. Behal, 19.
36. Behal, 20.
37. *Labour and Management, Sircar, 40.*
38. Chatterjee and Gupta, 1861.
39. Chatterjee and Gupta, 1861.
40. *Labour and Management, Sircar, 38.*
41. Andrew H. L. Fraser, *Among Indian Rajahs and Ryots; a Civil Servant's Recollections & Impressions of Thirty-seven Years of Work & Sport in the Central Provinces & Bengal*, London: Seeley, 1911, Print, 189.
42. Chatterjee and Gupta, pg. 1862
43. *Labour and Management, Sircar, pg. 39*
44. T. Misra, pg. 1359
45. *Labour and Management, Sircar, pg. 4; Behal, pg. 24*
46. *Labour and Management, Sircar, 41.*
47. *Labour and Management, Sircar, 38.*
48. Behal, 24.
49. Behal, 24.
50. Behal, 24.
51. *Labour and Management, Sircar, 41.*
52. *Labour and Management, Sircar, 42.*
53. Chatterjee and Gupta, 1863.
54. Chatterjee and Gupta, 1865.
55. Chatterjee and Gupta, 1862.

56. Chatterjee and Gupta, 1862-3.
57. See Chatterjee and Gupta, 1867.
58. Chatterjee and Gupta, 1867.
59. Behal, 19.
60. *Labour and Management, Sircar, 41.*
61. Xaxa, 1659.
62. Behal, 19-20.
63. Behal, 23.
64. Behal, 23.
65. Sen, 499.
66. *A Tale of Two Boards, Sircar, 457.*
67. Xaxa, 1663.
68. Xaxa, 1659.
69. Xaxa, 1662.
70. Philips, 245-6.
71. T. Misra, 1359.
72. B. Misra, 230.
73. T. Misra, 1359.
74. Udayon Misra, "Assam Tea: The Bitter Brew," *Economic & Political Weekly* 38.29 (2003): 3029-032, *JSTOR*. Web. 16 Mar. 2012, 3029.
75. U. Misra, 3029.

## WORKS CITED

- Behal, Rana P. "Forms of Labour Protest in Assam Valley Tea Plantations, 1900-1930." *Economic & Political Weekly* 20.4 (1985): 19-26. *JSTOR*. Web. 16 Mar. 2012.
- Chatterjee, Suranjan, and Rhatan D. Gupta. "Tea-Labour in Assam: Recruitment and Government Policy, 1840-1880." *Economic & Political Weekly* 16.44/46 (1981): 1861-868. *JSTOR*. Web. 07 Mar. 2012.
- Fraser, Andrew H. L. *Among Indian Rajahs and Ryots; a Civil Servant's Recollections & Impressions of Thirty-seven Years of Work & Sport in the Central Provinces & Bengal*. London: Seeley, 1911. Print.
- Misra, Bhubanes. "Quality, Investment, and International Competitiveness: Indian Tea Industry, 1880-1910." *Economic & Political Weekly* 22.6 (1987): 230-38. *JSTOR*. Web. 16 Mar. 2012.
- Misra, Tilottoma. "A Colonial Hinterland." *Economic & Political Weekly* 15.32 (1980): 1357-364. *JSTOR*. Web. 16 Mar. 2012.
- Misra, Udayon. "Assam Tea: The Bitter Brew." *Economic & Political Weekly* 38.29 (2003): 3029-032. *JSTOR*. Web. 16 Mar. 2012.
- Philips, C. H. *The East India Company, 1784-1834*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1968. Print.
- Reid, Robert Neil. *Years of Change in Bengal and Assam*. London: Benn, 1966. Print.
- Sen, Sudipta. *Empire of Free Trade: The East India Company and Making of the Colonial Marketplace*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1998. Print.
- Sinha, Narendra Krishna. *The Economic History of Bengal*. Vol. 2. Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1961. Print.
- Sircar, Kalyan K. "A Tale of Two Boards: Some Early Management Problems of Assam Company Limited, 1839-1864." *Economic & Political Weekly* 21.10/11 (1986): 453-59. *JSTOR*. Web. 16 Mar. 2012.
- Sircar, Kalyan K. "Labour and Management: First Twenty Years of Assam Company Limited (1839-59)." *Economic & Political Weekly* 21.22 (1986): 38-43. *JSTOR*. Web. 16 Mar. 2012.
- Xaxa, Virginius. "Colonial Capitalism and Underdevelopment in North Bengal." *Economic & Political Weekly* 20.39 (1985): 1659-665. *JSTOR*. Web. 16.