

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **WORLD WITHIN A WORLD: TEA GARDENS AND THE LITERATURE OF THE CONTACT ZONE**

“Contact zone”... is often synonymous with “colonial frontier.” (Pratt, *Imperial Eyes* 6)

“contact zone” is an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect. (Pratt 7)

A “contact” perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among colonizers and colonized, or travellers and “travelees,” not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power. (7)

Colonial landscapes were ordered, sanitised, made amenable to regulation, and structured to enhance the flow of economic activities. Thus, these landscapes did not simply reflect colonial aspirations but were also both consciously and unconsciously used as social technologies, as strategies of power to incorporate, categorise, discipline, control and reform the inhabitants of the city, town or plantation. (Joanne Sharp, *Geographies of Postcolonialism* 56)

The aim of this chapter is the study of selected colonial texts that deal with the tea industry of Assam. This includes planters and other people who wrote on the life on the plantation. It deals with what Mary Louise Pratt called transculturation of a people in the ‘contact zone’ and in the context of colonial Assam, the migrant tea garden workers. This chapter highlights the representation of the transcultured ‘other’ in the texts. It gives a clearer picture of the clashes and conflicts within the colonial world. For instance, regarding the native’s life on the plantation, people like Cotton and Dowding have a perception which is in contrast to Baidon and Barker’s views on the same. The ways Dowding and Kinney get suppressed only show how cultural demand and the role of the reading community contribute towards the structuring of colonial narratives.

The discovery of tea in Assam and the research in this field was a phenomenon which took place at the same time with the colonial takeover of the region. The beginning of colonial rule also saw the setting up of a new industry which brought western people into the country. Although people visited Assam in search of tea prior to the Yandaboo treaty, which brought the region under British rule, the people associated with the tea garden

could be called the third category of westerners officially coming into Assam after the colonial administrators and the missionaries. The tea plantations were private properties owned by British groups or individuals and were run by an administration of their own which was not at all dictated by the colonial government. The planters enjoyed some power and they could take part in fixing local problems.

The planter was apparently the administrator on the tea gardens which could be seen as an epitome of the colonized region. Therefore, how the planters and other people from the tea industry viewed and projected the indigenous people or the migrant workers from Central India in their writings is remarkable. Their experiences both on and off the garden premises, their depiction of the people serving under them or living in the vicinity of the tea garden and their own stories about life in the garden etc., make for an assortment of people in this rarified space which can be seen as a microcosm of the colonized territory. This chapter focuses on the complexities of writing in what Pratt calls

“contact zones,” social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today. (*Imperial* 4)

In the tea gardens, apart from the Europeans involved in the tea industry, we find the presence of British and American missionaries, the migrant labourers from other parts of India, local workers and a mixture of indigenous people domiciled in the area. Most of these people earn their living through some connection with the tea garden. This makes for asymmetrical relations and power equations as all significant decisions are taken by the tea planters in that little community. Without the tea garden workers being actually enslaved, the structures of domination and subordination prevail in the tea garden. This falls in line with Bhabha’s reading of colonial subject positions inclusive of coloniser and colonised as being determined by a “repertoire of positions of power and resistance, domination and dependence” (*Location* 67).

Pratt explains further that by “contact zone,” “I...refer to the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (*Imperial* 6). Some of these

conditions obtaining in the contact zone are operative within the tea garden as well. The world within the tea garden, cut off from the rest of the world, becomes a site of colonization where people from disparate places and cultures meet within the isolation of the tea plantation and enter into relations determined by a power structure. Further, Pratt suggests that

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The people within the tea garden are forced to enter into relations which, however tensional or influenced by power equations, depend on copresence, accepted parameters of interaction and to some extent, some degree of mutual understanding.

Within the colonial site there is a transmission of colonial cultural and religious values which are passed down to the common people, indigenous or otherwise, through coercion or hegemony. Again, Pratt explains what happens in the ‘contact zone,’ the tea garden in this case:

The term “transculturation”...sums up my efforts in this direction. Ethnographers have used this term to describe how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture.<sup>4</sup> While subjugated peoples cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for. Transculturation is a phenomenon of the contact zone. (6)

The culture and religion of the dominant European community in the tea gardens is acquired or absorbed to some extent by the employees and residents within that plantation. Some elements miscarry in transmission while some others are reinvented to be accommodated within their own or shared cultures. Such exposure to a dominant alien culture amidst a background of more than one indigenous or regional cultures leads to the ‘transculturation’ of the contact zone.

In the colonial texts on Assam this transculturation of the tea garden labourers gives a new angle to the authors' consideration of the 'native' and therefore it is interesting to note the way these 'others' are projected or represented in the narratives. The selected texts for the study are: Samuel Baidon's *The Tea Industry in India, A Review of Finance and Labour, and a Guide for Capitalists and Assistants* (1882), George M. Barker's *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam* (1884), Charles Dowding's *Tea-Garden Coolies in Assam* (1894), T. Kinney's *Old Times in Assam* (1896) and Henry Cotton's *Indian and Home Memories* (1911).

The hypotheses for this chapter are:

- i. That the compulsions of living within the "contact zone" ensure that the lines of cultural demarcation are somewhat seamless;
- ii. That those compulsions notwithstanding, the indigenous people and the migrant workers—the 'coolies'—are more or less seen as extensions, albeit diluted, of the savage other;
- iii. That the master/employer-employee power structure still obtains within the tea garden;
- iv. That there is a process of transculturation amongst the various Indians (migrant and resident alike) in the tea garden as the culture and religion of the dominant European community filters down to be absorbed into their own culture through hegemony;
- v. That the success of the tea industry in Assam is seen as an endorsement of British colonialism;
- vi. That the tea plantation represents a miniature site of colonization within the larger colonized state (Assam/India).

### **Samuel Baidon on the Tea Industry**

In the colonial narratives, included in this chapter, these tea gardens are presented as the gift of British enterprise during the colonial era. Baidon, in *The Tea Industry in India*, affirms that

Lakhs upon lakhs of rupees have been put into the tea industry, the merchandise of the principal Indian ports has been greatly increased thereby, hundreds of miles of deadly, unprofitable waste have been opened out, districts...have been

made habitable and valuable, hundreds of thousands of natives have been given remunerative employment, English lives and English money have been sacrificed...to the great benefit of the country and people... (*Tea* 147)

What he suggests is that the tea industry which was a boon of colonialism, changed the topography as well as the economy, not to say the social structure of Assam. Apart from large estates being set up and made habitable, “hundreds of thousands of natives have been given remunerative employment... steamer companies, railway companies, and tramway companies have been inaugurated, to the great benefit of the country and people, posts even have been made for members of the Civil Service—and now, after forty years of work, English money, English enterprise and determination having 'in every branch of the great industry done everything that possibly could be done,' (147) it remained for visitors and writers like him to make the world acknowledge that great contribution to Assam.

Prior to that, however, Baildon narrates how the tea plant had been raised to its present level of quality:

Hidden in the jungles where the rain fell in torrents, and where the dense undergrowth prevented the sun from drying up the ground, the tea-plant originally lived in an atmosphere which was always damp. But it was discovered in its wild luxuriance, protected by almost impenetrable jungle; and British energy and enterprise brought it out of seclusion. It was taken away and planted in open spaces, deprived of the shelter of its giant neighbours, and exposed to the direct action of the sun; and having a supply of moisture only when it rained, it forgot how to vegetate as it previously had. So it was found that what had been healthy and vigorous as jungle, was apt to be delicate and fragile as a cultivated plant. (15-16)

The point to note here is that while the tea plant was growing unknown in the jungle, it was ‘British energy and enterprise’ which had cultivated and nurtured it as a delicate plant to achieve excellent results in the brew.

Baildon wants his book to be a guide and a useful brochure to European capitalists and the young people who were aspiring to become tea planters. Baildon offers an analysis of the status of the whole industry; he discusses the hindrances standing in the way of the

development of the Indian tea industry, the different shortcomings in the whole system of running a plantation and the troubles faced by the tea planters in the tea districts of Assam. The planter had to struggle against a deadly climate and unfavourable surroundings and many of them died there too. Baildon thus gives an appalling picture of the Assam tea gardens where the Europeans had to lead an awful life.

Baildon believes that the planter has been always compassionate and sympathetic towards the worker. He also believes that there were instances where the planters and workers enjoyed a good relationship based on mutual liking and trust. He describes an ideal planter who has had a good rapport with his labourers and was a benefactor to them. Baildon's account appears intent on projecting the magnanimity of the planter towards his workforce amidst a personal life of physical discomfort and absolute responsibility.

Planters have to manage their labourers with an eye to the future, and not to act arbitrarily during the course of an agreement, because, once in a while, at all events, the usual relations of planter and cooly are reversed, and that is when the former asks the latter to renew—because the latter never, or hardly ever, goes to the former to ask that he may be allowed to do so. (159)

The relationship between planter and worker is presented in terms of an affective community with a mutual recognition of their own limitations. Somehow the perspective that comes across in his work is always that of the superior White man being bountiful to the indigenous workers who should have no grounds for complaint.

Discussing the contribution of the planters and other employees coming out of England to serve in the tea plantation, and their sense of job satisfaction, Baildon observes that

But whilst many of the social phases of English life may seem very desirable—as indeed they are—and whilst also, they may make the planter think his jungle life to be sadly wanting in social and intellectual advancement, he will be almost sure to think that in the matter of occupation he has decidedly the advantage of men in England who are not their own masters, and even of many who are. (99)

He further explains:

But I think the new arrival will be most struck with the personal freedom that exists between managers and assistants. Particularly will this appear so to anyone who has left English mercantile life. Whilst it is advisable, and is, I should add, customary, for discipline to be maintained, it is done with an entire absence of that marked distinction which at home at once shows to the most casual observer which is the superior of two men in an office. This open demeanour is very pleasant; and although official squabbles do sometimes occur, the individual bearing of managers toward assistants, and vice versa, is one of thoroughly good-fellowship and freedom from restraint. (63-64)

What he tries to point out is that the odds may be heavily loaded against this profession but there are certain advantages in terms of freedom and lack of rigid official procedure and decorum, common in England.

The benefits and the expertise gained by a tea planter are wholly physical although he has to be perceptive in his management of both land and labour. As Baildon tries to figure out,

He can speak fluently one or two Indian languages, he thoroughly understands the culture and manufacture of tea, has a slight knowledge of agricultural chemistry, can ride well...is open-handed and open-hearted, and has money put by; but his life for several years has led him far from scientific or generally intellectual channels, and he has had no time for studying matters not connected with tea....No; his life is necessarily practical rather than theoretical. (99)

While these skills are enough to acquit himself honourably in the colony/ tea plantation, they sometimes appear inadequate in English society. The planter remains a boss in his estate, and his being White opens up certain doors for him which is sadly missing in England. Being White back home is not enough. Baildon realises that “People who have never been out of England talk about the prestige of the white man; but...the peculiarities of life in the tea districts enable planters to speak upon this subject with much deeper feeling,” (98). It is the colonial who learns of the prestige attached to Whiteness.



The Planter's position as 'Bura Sahib,' the boss of the world of the plantation insulates him to the extent that as soon as he comes out of it and is treated like a common man, he is somewhat disoriented:

One's voice sounds almost strange in asking for a railway ticket...For years past all locomotion would have been under the planter's own governance—horse, elephant, boat, or buggy—and progress or stoppage in his own hands, and his safety dependent upon himself. But now... he feels himself being carried away irresistibly, and there is almost a slight feeling of uneasiness at his inability to control his own movements.... Of late years all the animation about him would have been the outcome of the planter's own orders. (91)

Baildon points to the insular world of the tea planter where he is the one who decides. Even as the planter is prepared to work hard, he finds that “‘roughing it’ generally applies more to the mental than to the physical or material side of life” (81). It is the responsibility of looking after everything: the land, the employees and the animals that rests heavy on his shoulders.

Moreover, the Planter's burden is not lessened by the fact that he cannot rely on the intelligence of his subordinates. As Baildon observes,

This intellectually low condition of the cooly (I leave other people to write about the gentleman's morals) should cause consideration to be given to the fact, that while he undoubtedly possesses a head, the nature of its contents is still an unsettled question as regards brain. The homely Assamese express themselves innocently when promising to remember anything, by saying it shall remain in their stomach! But then, of course, the Assamese cannot strictly be called a learned people; and it is therefore quite possible that they do not know where their brains are (if they have any). Be this as it may (I am sure I cannot decide the matter), coolies should not be expected to grasp the gist of an order directly it is spoken. (74)

Since both groups suffer from a lack of intelligence or a refusal to think, the colonial master is forced to be patient. Baildon shows a sense of humour as he refers to the Assamese people keeping things in the stomach (and not in the brain). Keeping things in the stomach, in the Assamese language, means keeping things secret. Baildon

deliberately misreads that to suggest, tongue in check, that there is little north of the stomach in the Assamese! There were even less expectations from the 'coolie's brain. This hints at a certain presumption that language difficulties are the result of an inability to grasp or articulate matters.

Baildon and others present two types of 'natives,' the indigenous population and the migrant tea garden workers from Central India who had since settled down on the plantations. While he is critical of these labourers, he feels that poor drought ridden farmers in better health from other parts of India could have been given the chance to work in Assam. Baildon is all for the migration of able-bodied labourers from one part of India to another. He feels that the colonial government could have taken the initiative in this matter to help out the tea planters: "Government has been grievously and criminally unjust in not helping such agriculturists to the tea districts, where there existed a remunerative market for labour" (182). That was his answer to the labour problems in the tea gardens.

Baildon observes that "Planters naturally side with planters... each section believes in its own infallibility, and in the error of the others" (3). While this sometimes leads to a narrowness of vision, at others, it is necessary for them to look out for each other. He writes:

There are not too many of one's own countrymen in the Indian tea districts; and it seems to be a mutually understood thing for those who are there to stick together as much as possible. Nothing pleases natives so much as to see Sahibs at variance; and it is consequently the social duty of every man to guard against gratifying the native populace in this regard. (64)

He suggests that it is expedient for the White people to build up a sense of community and present a united front. In passing he mentions that "the single fact of being white has for years been a sufficient introduction to the home of any planter" (98). It comes as a painful awareness when on returning to England they notice the discrepancies amongst the Whites to the extent that some are destitute.

Baildon stresses the importance of money in the colony:

A man never knows how soon he will be obliged to go home; but the future, as regards that event, will not trouble him at all if he have sufficient money banked

to meet expenses. No one will blame a young fellow for saving money; it is the purpose for which nearly every European goes to India, and it is the last thing that many succeed in accomplishing. (65)

While he warns that a man may need money if he has to suddenly leave for home due to sickness, he also explains that it would be foolish to think of making a quick fortune in the tea industry.

He will do well to start with the conviction that there will be no such thing for him as suddenly making a fortune. Tea estates do not contain diamond mines. In an earlier part of this chapter, I have shown that a capitalist, by planting fifty acres annually for six years, ought to be able to go home at the end of nine, the owner of a remunerative 300-acre garden. (69)

What Baidon means is that tea gardens require a lot of nurture and effort as well as time, to produce good quality tea. He almost implies that a planter has to be committed to his job to the extent of loving it.

Similarly, he has to learn to live with the heat, if he is to continue working in the garden: “It may almost be said that planters live in a state of chronic perspiration for eight months in the year, which becomes very wearisome towards the end, the more so as the rainy season is the unhealthy one also” (77). The planter cannot afford to ignore health concerns nor can he avoid getting wet in the rains or in perspiration, both of which need to be addressed as soon as possible.

The nature of the climate is exhausting, there is no one to speak to, the mosquitoes prevent your reading in peace, the night-air is unwholesome, and venturing out of doors is risky, so there is nothing to do but to turn under the mosquito curtain. (80)

There is little scope for entertainment or any kind of recreation as the heat defeats all such attempts. The Planter is constantly reminded of the risks from the fauna in tropics if he ventures out of doors at night.

If the summer months are long and uncomfortable, winter is pleasant:

The redeeming feature of life in Assam and Cachar is the cold weather, which is thoroughly enjoyable. The days generally are bright and fairly warm, but the

nights and mornings are chilly, fires are going in the bungalows, warm clothes are brought out of seclusion, mosquitoes go to Calcutta, work begins later and ends earlier, blankets are wanted on the beds, and dinner is served sooner to give a good long evening. (87)

Baildon takes care to point out the reprieve provided by the winter months in Assam as the weather permits them to engage in a variety of activities.

Further, the good weather permits these Englishmen to recreate gardens with some of the English vegetables.

Work is much more varied than in the rains, gardens are pruned, and, of course, manufacturing ceases; horses are rested, as walking is delightful; English vegetables are planted and brought to perfection; and planters sit down to breakfast and dinner, after walking all the morning or afternoon, with a great appetite for solid food, and not exactly an aversion to the regular quantum of Bass's tincture. Men pull themselves together in health and spirits, and the cosy evenings seem more like home than in the trying months of the rainy season. (87)

This presents a rather pleasant picture of life in Assam in contrast to the heat and humidity of the summer months.

Baildon also mentions the convenience of communicating with the people in their local language if one can master it.

Acquiring the language is an important matter. I believe I may say that assistants will find themselves thinking that when a native speaks English well, he must be a sharp fellow, and where, if at all, only badly, the reverse. Natives look on Europeans in a very similar light, believing that perfect speech represents long residence, and long residence a knowledge of their ways (literally, artifices); consequently, endeavouring to get the better of such a Sahib is useless. (67)

It may be noted that the planters share with the missionaries, this inclination to use the local language. They realize the efficacy of the local language not only to make their commands understood but also to reach out to the maximum number of people including the labourers. This, despite the imposition of Bengali as the medium of instruction in Assam, from 1837 onwards.

## **Charles Dowding and the Issue of Migration**

Charles Dowding's *Tea-Garden Coolies in Assam* is a very important document so far as the representation of the tea garden workers in colonial writings is concerned. It is a critique of the systems in the tea gardens in colonial Assam. This book is chiefly a reply to the letter by J. Buckingham, who communicated through the editor of the *Indian Churchman* regarding the condition of the tea garden workers in Assam. It refers to a public debate that took place on the very newspaper where many people contradicted Dowding in his view on the condition of tea garden workers in Assam. There were three letters that drew Dowding's attention and he decided to reply to those authors. However, his reply to Buckingham's letter was not published in full and Dowding calls it suppression as the editor found it 'illegible.' Considering the profundity of the matter he decided to publish it in the form of a book with an introduction. He also included some other letters, the responses from different readers along with his replies to those in the section called Appendix.

Dowding begins with a statement that he gave in one of his communications which actually created the debate:

The expansion of the tea-garden industry demands, yearly, more coolies than the natural flow of emigration from even the most congested districts, inhabited by people whom Assam will suit, can afford. (*Tea-Garden i*)

Dowding's concern was the unhealthy environment that the tea garden workers were living in. His article was not any personal attack but an indictment of the whole system where he tries to give a systematic analysis of the subject of labour in the tea gardens of Assam with the help of data collected from government surveys and reports.

In his writings, Dowding depicts a completely different picture of the migrant 'natives' which separates his narratives from those written by other colonial writers. In the introduction, Dowding discusses the binaries between the 'native' worker and the Europeans. He calls the government indifferent and negligent towards the workers' condition. He compares it with the stir that could be caused in the society by the sudden death of a European with the slow death of the natives in an unhealthy environment. Dowding was against the emigration of the labourers to Assam as according to him, there was a lack of proper environment for them. He highlights the discrimination against the

workers. It is intriguing that when it was about the new arrivals from Europe falling sick, people spoke of the extremities of the climate which, according to many, was fatal to them; but when it came to the migrant workers, instead of the climate, they criticized the people for being sickly and feeble. Dowding notes:

If a European sickens soon after coming to Assam, people say how hard it is that he cannot stand the climate, and he goes home. But when coolies succumb to the climate, the pity is felt, not for them, but for their employer. (40)

In fact, it was a common complaint against the labour recruiters that they deceived the planters by appointing sickly people as workers. Some planters even complained that the migrants carried diseases from their native places which caused increase in their death rate. Baildon too complains about this in his narrative which has been discussed above. As mentioned by David Arnold in *Colonizing the Body*, it was necessary “to emphasize the importance of the body as a site of colonizing power and of contestation between the colonized and the colonizers,” and “also in order to stress the corporality of colonialism in India” (*Colonizing* 8). He observes:

Colonialism used or attempted to use the body as a site for the construction of its own authority, legitimacy, and control. In part, therefore, the history of colonial medicine, and of the epidemic diseases with which it was so closely entwined, serves to illustrate the more general nature of colonial power and knowledge and to illuminate its hegemonic as well as its coercive processes. (9)

Arnold’s contentions can be used to explain the corporal control exercised by the tea planters and the management over the indigenous or migrant labourers. Almost every writer suggests that the labourers try to avoid work on the pretext of sickness, without paying due attention to their ailments. If the sick worker did not recover even after the administration of medicine, it was assumed that he was cheating or feigning things.

Dowding believed that the workers did not get human treatment in the plantations and that both the agents and the planters discussed the workers with such indifference as if they were discussing the weather and not humans. He says that it was not their weak health but the unhygienic environment that caused the increase in the death rate of the worker. Dowding thought that the wages given to the workers were not sufficient and that there should be hike in their wages. Dowding criticizes the ‘coolie’ recruiting act

which permitted many agents do illegal things while bringing people from different parts of the country. He throws light on the monopoly of the Calcutta agents and questions if commercial morality moves on a higher plane. Dowding avowedly talks about the ‘coolie-catchers’ and informs that there were European people too engaged in that ‘dirty business.’ He calls it vile trade of European Coolie contractors. His main concern was to raise voice against the corruption in the labour recruitment as well as the system which was discriminating the labourers. Therefore, Dowding proposed for close-years of labour recruitment.

In his response to Dowding’s article, J. Buckingham asserted that nothing was wrong with the system. He not only denied any fraudulent recruitment but also emphasized that the workers were well paid and fed; that their surroundings were sanitized and that they were in better condition than they were formerly in their home districts. He also declares that the migrant workers carried disease from their home districts and that there was a gradual decrease in their death rate. There were other responses too which condemned Dowding for his views on this subject. He was accused of being bias against the Europeans as they thought that what Dowding said about the condition of the garden workers was illusory. All the respondents claimed that the garden labourer was in a much better condition than they had been in their native districts. One of them wrote:

The tea garden coolie in Assam is much better housed, much better paid and much better fed than he ever was, or ever could have hoped to be – although even a friend would be slow to credit him with much imagination – in his own country.  
(*Tea-Garden* 45)

Dowding called it the trickery of the contractor or agent who sent pictures of well fed and nicely dressed groups which did not actually match the real picture of the labourers in the gardens. He writes:

I have wished I could get a photograph taken of such a group, and contrast it with the photograph a contractor will send up in advance of a batch he is forwarding to a garden, all nicely decked, and dressed and oiled, and fed up, as described by “Medicuss.” (65)

He writes a reply to Buckingham giving a detailed analysis of the unhealthy condition of the poor labourers. He discusses the death rate of the workers in different gardens in the province and finds out that the environment in which they worked was not favourable.

Many colonial writers have praised the government as well as the tea garden administration for the medical facility provided to the labourers. Dowding points out that it was one medical man against every nine thousand labourers in Lakhimpur, against every twelve thousand in Sibsagar and against every ten thousand in Darrang. This proportion only shows the hollowness behind the so called medical facility provided to the workers in the tea gardens. Dowding also informs that there was doubt about the qualifications of those medical men. In other colonial writings too this question of reliability is raised against the doctors treating the workers. The Europeans did not trust the garden doctor and to use Susan Ward's term, he was merely reduced to be the 'cooly doctor' (*Glimpse* 129).

Planters like Buckingham believed that many diseases like Cholera and Beriberi were imported to Assam by those tea garden workers but Dowding produces clear evidences that the labourers suffered from those diseases only after their arrival in Assam. He writes,

They do not die of diseases they bring with them: the diseases are generated by the local conditions of the gardens: these may include overwork and insufficient food, owing to wages being docked for tasks incompleting by debilitated labourers. (*Tea-Garden* 39)

Dowding emphasizes that the labourers were overloaded with work. Labour recruitment per acre was 1.07 which was too less; the labourers had to work on Sundays too and although they were paid extra money for that it was compulsory to work.

Dowding's observation calls for attention to the many incidents of collective protests against the administration. Records of strikes and at times assaults and violence that took place in many districts of Assam were found during the period between 1880- 1920. There were reports about protests against small wage, boycotts of work, physical assault of administrators including the managers and about refusal of obeying to the authority. Most of these mishaps were caused by alleged discriminations, sexual exploitations or outrage, provoking communal anxieties, wage related grievances etc. It is significant to



note that Dowding compares the condition of the tea garden labourers in colonial Assam with that of the slaves in American South. According to him, it was almost slavery with a bit difference only. He calls the whole system a ‘thinly disguised slavery’ (39) and it was the British hypocrisy for which such a system prevailed. To Dowding, it was a dirty system to catch the labourers, an utterly illegal act which he again compares with the catching of runaway slaves in the American South before the civil war.

What is interesting here is that Dowding was not the only one who saw a similarity between the tea garden workers and the black slaves in ante-bellum America. There are quite a few colonial travellers who held same views regarding the status of the ‘coolies’ in Assam tea gardens and the missionary writer Swanson was one of them. Another missionary writer Mildred Marston’s description of the labourers on board is very pertinent to note in this context:

There are about five hundred of these Coolies together in filth and wretchedness. The cholera is raging fearfully among them, and victim after victim is pushed off into the Ganges as soon as life is extinct. (*Korno Siga* 36)

Those corpses became food of either the crocodiles or the jackals. Even George Barker called it ‘shameful’ when he saw the way the labourers were brought on the ship.

Dowding wanted a solution and a just system to prevail in the tea gardens. He replied to his responders but to his sheer astonishment, only one third of his letter addressed to Buckingham was published as according to the editor, the rest was ‘illegible.’ The editor wrote a note to sum up the debate by saying that Dowding’s knowledge and understanding of the ‘native’ life were not sufficient. He concluded:

Mr. Dowding is shocked, as any Englishman would be shocked at the general helplessness, the passive submission to unrealized ills of the people whom he has seen; he perhaps does not know enough of the native life in country districts to understand that in their own homes these evils are far worse. (*Tea-Garden* 62)

This clears that the editor was supporting the group that was against Dowding. The way he wended up the whole matter only reveals the suppression of the voices that got raised against the colonial system.

Dowding's writing is very peculiar in the sense that it refutes the cliché about both the westerners and the 'natives.' There are a few colonial texts where the authors tend to show some sympathy towards the 'natives' but Dowding's position is completely different as he, despite being one of the Europeans, raises a voice against an unfair system and those who exercised it. The text therefore unfolds a new facet of the colonial discourse by revealing the disagreements within the westerners which give a different shape to the representation of the 'self' and the 'other.' Dowding did not accept the idea that just because he too was employed in a tea district he should not have raised voice against the system and its administration. He says, "The feeling prevails that living as a chaplain in a Tea district, a sort of loyalty towards employers of labour, should have kept my mouth shut. I don't think so" (67). Moreover, this is not a narrative but the letters and notes written by people to the editor of a newspaper where their personal views had got expressed.

Dowding's book thus projects two kinds of both the 'self' and the 'other': on one hand are the writer's explorations, whereas the stereotyped images projected by his responders are on the other. Although Dowding says that his attack was not against the planters but against the system and its defects, he ostensibly projects a negative image of the planters too. The discriminations against the 'natives' show the brutal planter whose sole aim was to get his work done and at times, even at the cost of the lives of his employees. He presents a kind of master-slave relationship in the tea gardens and depicts a hypocritical 'self' of the British people against poor and helpless natives. He represents the migrant 'native' as the exploited 'other' who had been victims of colonial treachery and fraudulence.

However, Dowding's responders along with the editor of the *Indian Churchman* draw a completely different picture. Some said that the labourers were happy about their condition and it was unanimously believed and accepted by the planters that the 'coolies' were in a far better condition than they had been formerly in their home districts. It was indeed an assertion on the part of the planters that the migrants got upgraded as they were brought into a place with better living conditions. What a garden manager writes about the labourers is pertinent to note:

Anyone who has had much experience of working coolies, knows that their principal object in life is to do as little work as possible for a maximum amount of pay. (56)

This at once clears the position of the planter as that of the occident who always attributes laziness and deceitfulness to the orient. Like many other planters he found nothing wrong in the system and denied any kind of fraudulence involved in it. He even states that the overload of the labourers was merely an illusionary theory put forwarded by the government officials. Once again, Arnold's contention of 'the body as a site of colonizing power,' albeit the indigenous body, can be mentioned, to underline the point (*Colonizing* 8).

All the responders along with the editor of the newspaper believed that the 'natives' had been in a worse condition in their home districts. This does not really prove that the labourers were provided with better livelihood but tells the readers that the condition in Assam gardens were better but might not necessarily be good enough to live a healthy life. When the editor says that the migrants had far worse evils in their home districts it actually does not deny the existence of evil in the present country and the healthy environment that the planters brag about was only relatively better even if it was so.

The whole debate on the system of 'coolie' recruitment and the reactions from different people authenticate the importance of cultural exigency and social acceptance of the representation of a place and people in the colonial context. In Dowding, a defiant 'self' emerges which the colonialist society was not ready to accept. He was not only termed an agitator but his voice too was suppressed as it rose against the colonialist system of exploitation and discrimination.

### **T. Kinney's Experiences**

T. Kinney's *Old Times in Assam* can be regarded a revelation as it exposes many things about the tea industry as well as the people. The book is a collection of writings published earlier in the Englishmen and the Indian Planters' Gazette. In the Preface, Kinney declares that his book is concerned about a time when Assam did not have 'improved communications' and about the pioneers of the tea industry in Assam. The book is in fact a collection of the diaries and write-ups of a Mr. Pekoe Tips who is introduced by the author as an assistant manager in a tea estate of colonial Assam.

Kinney tells that Mr. Tips died before he could give a comprehensible form to his writings and that Kinney possessed those written papers which he has now published in the form of this narrative. Kinney's book appeared at a time when the tea was a stable industry and therefore he thought that the condition of the same industry in its initial days with the suffering of many people would be interesting to the present day planters. Kinney begins with Tips' personal notes as he selects from the latter's diaries.

*Old Times in Assam* can be roughly divided into three parts: the first part deals with the diaries of Mr. Pekoe Tips; the second part tells some stories on planters' life narrated by the author; and in the third part, the author describes some of his experiences in the province. An interesting aspect of this book is its frame narrative. It begins with Kinney's introduction of the place and its inhabitants, both indigenous and migrated ones. The basic objective of this account seems to be similar with that of Barker in *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam* as the author of *Old Times in Assam* presents an unhappy picture of the region in the early days of the tea industry. However, he also highlights the transformation of the region through colonisation.

Kinney introduces Assam as the habitat of wild and savage tribes but more importantly, as an 'exuberantly fertile' (*Old Times* 1) land. He also informs his readers that it is a place of disease and that it was a mistake to come out to a tea garden and only the "misguided youths" (3) considered coming to Assam in search of their future. Kinney thought that Pekoe Tips was one of those young men who were weak enough to leave their homes for an alternative career. Publishing Tips' personal notes posthumously, Kinney writes:

It is the views and opinions of one of these misguided young men from the country, who, instead of going home –or staying at home –to tea, was weak enough to come out to it, which is now given to the world. (3)

Kinney believed that Tips had been through a tough time in Assam and to prove his speculation correct, he adds the extracts from Tips' diary.

Tips came to Assam as a result of a business deal that took place between his aunt and the owner of a tea garden in Assam. His aunt had purchased some shares and sent Tips to be the assistant manager in that tea garden. But what Tips experienced when he arrived at his destination was awful. Tips had imagined an ideal life of the planter in Assam but

what he received in reality was really pathetic. The topsy-turvy environment that welcomed him was enough to disappoint Tips but that was added by the manager's shocking way of living. However, a friend of Tips, Stanley writes to him about the premises of the garden where he lived which was but the reverse of Tips'. It is from Stanley that Tips came to know about the status of his garden which was going to crush and that his aunt had been deceived by an imposter.

One can notice the similarity in the views of Kinney and Baildon as the latter too has drawn a similar picture of the whole situation of the tea industry in Assam along with the miserable life of the planters. Baildon too informs about the probable frauds for which he advised his fellow countrymen to consult an old experienced planter. Like Baildon, Kinney too showed the pathetic condition a planter could have in Assam through Tips' life. Any prospect seeking person coming to this place could fall a victim of mischievous traders which might lead him to live a deplorable life devoid of every kind of luxury and the minimum level of comfort. Tips expresses his angst: "I am surprised now, when I come to think, how many of the bad habits of civilization – cleanliness – I have learnt to get rid of" (25). Moreover, the moist weather during the rainy season was another added trouble about which Tips too complains in his personal notes.

Like Barker, Kinney too held the view that Assam was a place that could not offer a good future prospect to the youths of England and that it was great risk to go ahead. He tries to show it through Tips' life which can aptly be called Kinney's use of the rhetoric of 'anti-conquest.' He extracts from Tips' personal notes where the latter narrates his first-hand experience as a fresher in this region. Kinney produces selected portions only for the reason that he could not publish the whole lot as it would be too voluminous then. In this process of rejection and selection Kinney chose those write-ups which were suitable to serve his purpose and as his was to project Assam as a dreadful country for the westerners he chose those papers where Tips describes the pathetic condition of the tea planter. Kinney's rhetoric of 'anti-conquest' lies in his use of a frame narrative which stands for enhancing his own viewpoint regarding the tea industry of Assam.

The narrative of *Old Times in Assam* can also be seen as a revelation of many aspects about both 'self' and 'other.' As is already mentioned, Kinney viewed the region as the home of many wild and savage tribes; his calling the migrated labourers 'curious and expensive animals' (2) is striking. In Tips' notes too, a similar picture of the 'native

other' is depicted. Tips' first impression after landing from the ship of the place along with the natives who came to receive him is remarkable:

Not a habitation in sight on land; on the river, nothing but that wretched little iron boat as the skipper called it, with its crew of a half a dozen more or less naked black fellows. (11)

Tips' depiction reminds one of Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* where the framed narrator, Charlie Marlow, describes his impressions of the black natives as shadow or ants. Later on, when Tips becomes a bit accustomed to the place, he again writes about the workers, their unhygienic ways which led them towards early death. It was a matter of concern that the workers died in large numbers and Tips gives a horrible picture of how the death of the worker was treated; the dead body was simply thrown into the water.

However, Tips also writes about the manager along with the life of the workers. The first impression of the manager of the tea garden was not a satisfactory one; in fact, it was almost same as it was with the 'natives.' The sight of a dirty manager 'as dark as the coolies' puffing his hookah with a darker woman beside him made Tips feel sick. He showed some customary greetings to the dark woman although with extreme difficulty as he expresses, "I bowed to the – the – creature on the bed" (17). In fact, Tips' narrative can be called a revelation as it pictures not only the 'other' but also the 'self.'

Tips explores certain aspects of the Europeans which he has described in his notes. He had observed class consciousness and class prejudice among the European people too as the wife of the skipper asked Tips not to get mixed up with the engineers and flat-captains. Tips realizes, "I always thought that caste only divided the natives into classes. I begin to see that there is a good deal of "caste" prejudice amongst Europeans also" (6). Tips informs about the life of the young planters in Assam and their occasional gatherings which he calls 'spree.' Again, his interaction with a planter also reveals that the workers and sardars were ill-treated on the plantations. Through Tips' account, Kinney shows the proud, unfeeling and hollow nature of the European 'self' which is quite contrary to its usual image.

This revelation leads to other ramifications in the discussion of travel writing and its authenticity. When this bachelor gathering that Tips attended appeared in the periodical

it created a tumult in the European reading public. After that Kinney received such negative criticism from his European readers for writing about a ‘wet night’ amongst the Europeans that he stopped writing from Mr. Tips’ diary and instead focused on such stories of the planters’ lives which he thought would be acceptable to his readers. Kinney, however, expresses his anguish as he was accused of maligning the whole community of planters by this description of a ‘wet night’ amongst some young people in a planter’s house. He writes:

Into what abyss did I fall! I, whose pride it is to count amongst planters some of my best, truest and noblest friends, I was said to have maligned the whole race, and even drawn down on them the suspicion and mistrust of our paternal Government, by a sketch of a “wet night” amongst some youngsters in a planter’s bungalow thirty years ago! (49)

Kinney is offended as he is accused of sketching a wrong picture of the western society. He could not understand why a group of young people could not have such a party just because they were westerners. He further writes expressing his annoyance:

this is indeed black ingratitude: I withdraw: I apologise. No one even got “tight” in Assam; spirituous liquor was utterly unknown there thirty years ago, and has only been recently introduced, medicinally. (49-50)

Kinney also announced that he would write stories from his own memories which he hoped the planters would acknowledge as true. He then narrates a few stories with the more popular image of both the planter and the worker, where the former is virtuous while the latter is very often mischievous.

Kinney’s experience, thus, unveils another aspect of the colonial discourse—the exigency of the reading public and the role of the same in the construction of both the ‘self’ and ‘other’ in colonial writings. It was obvious that the reading public of the colonial writings were those sitting at the mother country who could not accept the representation of their collective ‘self’ in a certain way. As JanMohamed observes:

If such literature can demonstrate that the barbarism of the native is irrevocable, or at least very deeply ingrained, then the European’s attempt to civilize him can continue indefinitely, the exploitation of his resources can proceed without

hindrance, and the European can persist in enjoying an existence of moral superiority. (“Economy” 62)

It was therefore very important to present a virtuous and superior image of the European, even in the narratives. Both Dowding and Kinney were accused for maligning this image. Their writings, followed by the reactions as well as unsatisfactory reception of the reading community can be pertinent examples to show how the colonial prejudice contributed towards the shaping of the colonial narratives. The expectation as well as the attitude of the audience towards certain things were influencing to a great extent in the way of representations. The same can be said of the delineation of the indigenous people whom the same reading community may have expected to be portrayed as if not the savage other, at least ‘debased’ and the authors found themselves complying.

This invariably brings in the question of reliability in the narratives as the imagination as well as preconceived notions about a particular region, its inhabitants along with its explorers/colonizers had got a great deal of involvement. In his narrative, Kinney does not disappoint his readers in his portrayal of the ‘other’ but he offends them by exploring negative traits in the ‘self’ which actually posits the westerners on the same plane with the natives. In the latter part of the narrative, therefore, Kinney seems to be compensating for what he did in the projection of the ‘self.’ He seems to be trying to fashion the ‘self’ in an altogether different way. Kinney discusses whether it was justifiable to call the planters with their pet names such as ‘brutal planter’ and ‘the wild European tribes on the North-East frontier’ (*Old Times* 177). Although initially he himself tried to give a negative image of the planter through Tips’ personal notes and experiences, in the third section of *Old Times in Assam*, Kinney is seen to be defending the same.

Unlike some other colonial writers who defends the planters for their wrongdoings by putting the blame on the desolate place and the depressing surroundings, Kinney puts his logic that education and refinement are not lost in a person no matter how distant one lives from civilized society. He writes:

It is now recognised that education and refinement are not utterly lost and forgotten as a result of engaging in the management of a tea garden; that men



who are gentle, kind and forbearing, do not become savages in habits and manners when they “go into tea.” (177)

He believes that being in a place away from civilization does not turn a man into a ‘brutal planter.’ Kinney also tries to earn some sympathy towards the planters by highlighting the toils that the latter goes through on a plantation.

In *Old Times in Assam*, Kinney thus shows two types of lives that awaited the planter in the early sixties when life was not easy in Assam. On one hand, he shows Stanley who was the ideal image of a flourishing planter and Peko Tips on the other, who was just the reverse of the former. He depicts Assam as a dreadful country devoid of every comfort any European man could aspire for. But then, as he revisits the country Kinney sees a different Assam with the advent of colonial rule which he describes in the third section of his book. He is surprised to see the developments; Kinney wants to go back to that Assam “where long boots and brandy are the only evidences of civilization” (104). Kinney observes:

I did not want to come to a place where there was a Kachari, a Post Office, and a submarine cable across the river for the steamer’s anchor to foul of; where there are bungalows with glass windows and flaming red curtains; good roads, with absolutely pony phaeton driving on them; and where the people are actually coming out of church. (104)

Through this Kinney undoubtedly gives an idea how the whole scenario had been changed over the years which was definitely brought about by colonialism.

Kinney’s *Old Times in Assam* is, thus, an interesting document that offers contradictory views on different subjects related to the tea industry. Kinney, very cleverly, uses the frame narrative to present these observations. He depicts Assam from a time when the tea industry was nascent. He shows that the planters had been through much suffering and toil which contributed a lot towards the development of a remote place. Kinney shows two pictures of the region within a gap of thirty years and realizes that colonialism, convince immensely.

### **Henry Cotton’s Memories of Assam**

Henry Cotton’s *Indian and Home Memories* is a very remarkable document so far as the colonial issue is concerned. In the book, the author bluntly discloses some very important

information about the government he served. It should actually be discussed in the chapter on the texts by the colonial administrators but considering the importance given to the tea garden life in colonial Assam, the text has been included in this chapter instead. As an autobiography, the book encompasses an extensive period of the author's life, but at the same time, a part of it also gives significant details on Assam and its then social condition, expressly from 1896 to 1902.

Cotton arrived in India in the 1860s and the memory of the Mutiny of 1857 was still fresh in the people's mind and according to him, the influence of the movement was felt everywhere. Cotton saw the evil of colonialism which he openly expresses in his book and illustrates the brutal treatment of the natives by the British officers. He also exposes the hypocrisy of the British officials and the government's appreciation of evil practices. Cotton admits, "It was, I fact, a demoralizing environment into which we were thrown, and I am not ashamed to say that I succumbed to it" (*Indian* 66). He despised many government laws and acts which were made to encourage brutality in the colonial officers. For instance, Cotton mentions the Indian Whipping Act of 1864 which conferred the administrators the authority to whip along with many other legal punishments.

Cotton too was bestowed with such power which he exercised freely but according to him, that was exceedingly horrible. The number of judicial flogging was appalling which was sometimes more than seventy five thousand a year and was rarely below twenty thousand in any year. Cotton says that he had seen people dying out of such flogging and although he says that he loathes such judicial punishment Cotton himself was addicted to that. He says, "It is impossible to conceive of a more brutalizing procedure, and it is with shame and sorrow I record that I was addicted to it" (80). His Successor, Bampfylde Fuller too mentions having similar experiences in his book *Some Personal Experiences*. However, such confession on the part of a colonial author definitely complicates the whole colonial issue as it contradicts the said image of the colonizers as the rescuers from brutal indigenous control. This refers to what Leela Gandhi calls the 'politics of friendship,' where "individuals find it increasingly difficult entirely to condone the international commitments and networks forged by their governments" (*Affective* 10). She goes on to explain how the citizen might find himself in an increasingly ambivalent position where he may empathize with both parties.

In many of the colonial texts on Assam, the authors have endeavoured to establish that the British government has rescued the native people from the barbaric legal practices of their former rulers but the brutality of the British judicial punishments speak up an altogether different story. As Henry Cotton informs, it was not only the legal punishments but the administrators had enjoyed the authority of flogging the common natives outside their official service too. He also informs the secret influences of people, the discriminations and politics for promotion within the British officials of which he himself had been victim several times. In fact, he was supposed to come to Assam at the time of its separation from Bengal in 1873 which could not take place because of the interruption of some influential people. However, Cotton received the charge of Assam administration in 1896 and he expresses his feelings: “It was a new country to me, and I passed with zest from district to district, mingling with all classes, and warmly welcomed by all” (*Indian* 226). He discusses the problems and the difficulties faced by the people of Assam. An important point to note is that Cotton exposed the step-motherly treatment of the province by the government which has been a complaint throughout the ages even after the independence of India from British rule and which has been still relevant in the present political scenario of Assam. Cotton calls Assam the ‘Cinderella of India’ (242) and Lord Curzon the Fairy Prince during his time, who actually dispelled the hopes of the country. In fact, Cotton believed that there were many instances where the government took wrong steps regarding Assam. In fact, Cotton believed that there were many instances where the government took wrong steps regarding Assam.

Cotton had a close connection with the tea planting community and in his book he writes about the life on the plantation and the systems of the industry at large. There were some tension and trouble going on on the plantations during his time. Although Cotton had a cordial relationship with the planters’ community and as he himself admits his favouritism for the planters, he discloses the nature of discriminations and exploitations of the tea garden labourers by the planters too. Cotton describes the workers:

The labourers in Assam are an ignorant and voiceless community and they had no organ to press their demands. On the other hand, the whole society and all newspapers of the British Press were united in their support of the tea industry. (259)

This at once problematizes the whole issue as there are authors such as Samuel Baidon and T. Kinney who have said just the opposite of what Cotton claimed.

According to Baidon, both the government and the press favoured the labourers and were very bias against the planters. What Kinney says in this regard is very remarkable:

The planter whose chief enjoyment is torturing his coolies, and who spends all his leisure in thinking out new places to hit them on, where they cannot by any freak of nature wear those fragile articles, their spleens, exists now only in some of the lower vernacular papers. (*Old Times* 177)

It is both interesting and significant that Kinney wrote this in 1896 and Henry Cotton became the Commissioner of Assam in the same year. According to Kinney, the 'brutal planter' is an imaginary thing found only in some low vernacular papers whereas the Chief Commissioner of the province himself writes about the existence of the same in his autobiography.

Important to note is that Cotton's successor, Bampfylde Fuller, too said similar things regarding the tea garden workers in his book *Some Personal Experiences*. Like Baidon and many others, Fuller too believed that the 'coolies' were in a better condition than in their home districts but he does not deny the exploitation done to them. Fuller did not even like the idea that the managers were given the authority to arrest the runaway workers and to give them over to the police. He was also against the planter's right to arrest a 'coolie' without a warrant.

According to Cotton, it was the policy of all the British officials to encourage the planters. Cotton illustrates this with examples from his personal experience. He writes about the proposal for the monthly wage hike of the labourours. According to the old law of 1865, the monthly wage for a male labourer was Rs 5, for a female Rs 4 and in the last year of the contract Rs 6 and Rs 5, respectively. There was a proposal to make it Rs 6 and Rs 5 throughout the period of the contract and according to Cotton, that was a mild and moderate proposal. But the wages were not altered and instead Lord Curzon announced the postponement of this graduated rate owing to the depression in the market of tea. Cotton raised his voice against that but was supported only by a few Indian members. He calls it 'a decisive victory for the capitalist party in council' (*Indian* 261).

He says that the Times newspaper was an advocate of the British capital and it published a series of statements based on its special correspondent on the condition of the labourers in Assam. The statement however tried to show that the labourers were in a very comfortable condition which according to Cotton, was but a lie. He questions, "Is life in the tea garden, then, an earthly paradise? That is not only not the fact, but the very reverse is the fact" (264). Both Cotton and Fuller gave a completely opposite picture of the scene which has been described satisfactory by many colonial authors.

Cotton's description of the plantation life in his memoirs is somewhat similar to the picture drawn by Charles Dowding. Cotton depicts a hellish condition in the gardens where the workers were exploited, treated inhumanely and left unattended when sick and even expelled when ill. He gives such instances from his own experiences when the workers were cheated of their wages and were short of food. He even says that the planters took care of the labourers the way they kept their horses and cattle when in good conditions. Cotton reveals cases of flogging of 'coolie' men and women and of imprisoning and beating of them within the garden premise. T. Kinney too draws attention to this matter in his book; in the frame narrative, Mr. Pekoe Tips writes about a planter, Johnson by name, who tells Tips about flogging the native in order to make things go easy in the tea making business. Tips says,

He (Johnson) says it is awfully easy. You have only just got to tell the *Mohurrir* to *joldi chalau*; see that the *tea teklas maro the path* all right; give the tea house *sirder* a licking if the tea gets burnt on the *dhols*; and you are sure to get on well. (*Old Times* 7)

That flogging was exercised as punishment is apparent and according to Cotton, some people even died out of such brutal treatment.

Cotton confirms that the brutal cases were reported from not the black sheep but from the most reputed gardens and also from those under the control of most respectable London boards of management. Some people were also of the opinion that the virtuous nature of the British people would never allow them to be brutal human beings and therefore, the image of the brutal planter was false. To such remarks, Cotton replies that the Britons were not out of virtue but they were also not exempt from the failings of a common humanity. In fact, Cotton had to do some survey as he was asked to submit a report on

the ongoing collision between the planters and the labourers. Cotton found that it was a fact that the planters were brutal at times and so were the magistrates in Assam. But Cotton had to face similar fate as Charles Dowding and T. Kinney for his report. He writes,

All the available floodgates of abuse in the Anglo-Indian Press were opened. I was assailed with extra-ordinary virulence. I was charged with malignity, inveracity, and dishonesty, my motives were impugned in the most shameful manner, and one journal loudly clamoured for my dismissal from the public service. (*Indian* 275)

Such incidents of aggressive feedback from the European community only lead to further implications regarding the content of a colonial travel narrative which again complicates the issue more.

The cultural exigency and its influence can play a great role in the formation of those narratives. It brings into the discussion the role of the reading community in giving shape to the colonial narratives. Since the reading public was mostly the Europeans sitting in the mother country its importance cannot be denied. The superior European sentiment could not accept the depiction of their fellow countrymen with negative traits and therefore it was the cultural exigency to a great extent that the British colonial people be given a superior image against an inferior native. This aspect raises the question of veracity in the typed representation of the natives in the colonial narratives. Nevertheless, like Dowding and Kinney, Henry Cotton too had to go through a tough time because of his audacity for which he had to pay. He was not supported by any of his colleagues and superior officials. Even the Viceroy called him incorrect in his views. And then he got intimation from the government to leave his job in Assam. This in fact put an end to Henry Cotton's career in India.

### **George M. Barker Observation**

George M. Barker's *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam* is based on the author's own experience along with his friend's understanding of Assam. In the Preface, Barker states his purpose behind writing the book as an endeavour to convey knowledge of the eastern part of the British Empire which was little known to the western world. The book was meant for those who intended to come to the region and Barker intended to draw a true

picture of the country. Throughout the narrative, Barker sees only the inferior status of the country along with its inhabitants. To him, the travelled land is one of mystery where every manner and design is an oddity. Starting from their disposition, all the cultural affairs, behaviours and the ways of living are surprising to Barker. He views the Assamese as a lazy but mischievous people who “pass through life enjoying a mere existence.” (*Tea* 64) A passivity or non-entity is conferred on the native who is made active by the domination of a superior culture. This is indeed a typed image of the orient that the colonizers used to portray in their accounts.

Barker assumes a sarcastic tone which remains intact all the way through his narrative. He wonders at the laziness of the native which creates a great amount of surprise to the ‘active-minded European’ (24). He uses ‘surprise’ as the rhetoric of ‘anti conquest’ in his narrative. He presents himself as a traveller coming from a superior culture and society who is taken by surprise in this unknown country. His strategy lies in comparing everything in the travelled region with its English counterpart; indeed, his is an endeavour to familiarize the unfamiliar by discriminating the latter from the former. The traveller is struck by the outlandish and the weird, whether it is food, or manners amongst the Assamese. Not only is the stillness in the surroundings monotonous for Barker but the simplistic and self-sufficient life of the ‘native’ too is criticized for being so. Right from the scenic view, the climate, the weather, the food, the customs of the people and their simplicity along with the lack of commercial knowledge are things of wonder to Barker.

He also criticizes the bad communication which makes life in the country full of troubles. Barker mocks the backwardness of the native people, their ‘pre-historic’ agricultural instruments, opium consumption, and their houses which he describes as ‘gigantic pigeon roost’ (94). The ‘native’s self-sufficient and contented life was rather a surprise to Barker. He wonders at the ‘native’s indifference towards making money. The whole narrative can be called a criticism of the place along with its peoples. His remarks even contradict those of his contemporaries in the description of the picturesque view of the country. While most of the colonial travellers found the scenic beauty of Assam attractive, Barker calls it even worse than the diseased place Eden in Charles Dickens’ novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*. What he says about the natural surroundings is remarkable, “The intense flatness of the country is heart-breaking, and makes it intolerable as you

ride or drive about the place” (70). This is indeed a sharp contrast to the remarks by other colonial travellers who thought that the scenic view of Assam was very rare.

Barker’s narrative is very apparently two dimensional. One can see that both the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ are placed at two opposite poles—the European and the Eastern. Everything good he associates with the former and contrastingly the latter’s manners and affairs were oddities and mysterious. Barker, in his effort to degrade the native does not even spare the flora and fauna of the region. According to him, the fruits were deficient and did not have as good flavours as the European fruits. His description refers to what Arnold observes in the colonial exploration of botany:

Despite the considerable skill, labor and cost involved in producing botanical illustrations in India, their existence seemed merely to confirm the prevalent impression that colonial botany was inferior to its metropolitan counterpart. (*Tropics* 184)

Barker describes the ‘native’ botany merely to show its inferiority against the superiority of its western counterpart.

He expresses similar views about the birds and animals. He categorizes the birds as Eastern while drawing a parallel between them and the human natives in terms of their mischief. Barker compares the beautiful birds with their English counterparts whereas the unappreciable ones in his consideration were ugly and similar to the inhabitants. He criticizes different animals and brands them as cunning and distrustful. However, he shows some positive regard for the elephants who according to him are not only indispensable in the lives of the inhabitants in Assam but both loyal and obedient. He appreciates the way this large animal submits to its master, the mahout, but then he again calls it vindictive and that its evil nature can be compared with Shakespeare’s Shylock. All these hint at Barker’s colonialist ‘self.’ Whether it is the animals or the humans, if anyone ever does not submit to his will Barker calls it cunning and distrustful.

It is pertinent to note here that the Barker, who almost at every page of his narrative has something derogatory to say about the natives, appreciates the same for continuing the servility that the Europeans exacted in the days of the Company. Barker notes:

This is the last remaining district where any sort of respect is shown for the Europeans; in all other parts of India the black man is as good as the white, a fact



that is speedily brought home to a new comer. It is here, in Assam, that nearly all the old rights of servility that were exacted by Europeans in the days of the East India Company, are still in existence, and flourish to the general better feeling of the whole community. (*A Tea Planter's Life* 87)

He is pleased to see the submissiveness and respect in the natives of Assam towards the white sahibs which according to Barker, was decreasing in other places of India. This kind of servility gives him a sense of wellbeing within the colonialist frame, as if he could recapture, if not reinvent, those days.

Barker portrays the animals as anti-European but at the same time, he also sees a yearning in them to be like the Europeans. It is far more than ridiculous when Barker says that the white ants of Assam had a desire for the 'English box' (191). Not only that, he also says that the insects longed for the English and that even the birds appreciated the Europeans. Barker's extreme consciousness of his own superior status makes him believe that all the other inferior beings have a longing for his upgraded position. Having declared Assam a degraded country in every manner and matter Barker tries to establish that everything in that country does or should follow the Europeans. Barker thus not only presents his colonialist 'self' but also his subjective position as an observer and narrator.

*A Tea Planter's Life in Assam* is the narrative of a traveller who is besieged with ill feeling while visiting a strange country as a consequence of his mind being filled with preconceived views about the travelled region. He does not seem to be objective enough to say a few words of appreciation about the natural scenery of Assam which interested most colonialists. He therefore draws an awful picture of the country. In the Preface, he says that he wanted to sketch a true picture of the region as he did not want to rely on those who had little or no knowledge on this part of the Eastern Empire. But in his narrative, Barker seems to be only justifying what he had already heard about the place as a 'beastly unhealthy hole' (iii). His narrative shows that Barker already had that impression on mind which affected all of his observations. His highlighting of the surprisingly degraded elements of the place only confirms that very notion. In fact, Barker endeavours to establish that Assam is not only an 'out of the way corner of the universe' (84) but a 'vile country' (217) full of pernicious diseases.

In his narrative, he intends to discourage the burgeoning interest of the English people to come to Assam as a land of promise and to engage themselves in the tea industry. To his countrymen who were willing to come to Assam, he says:

If everything fails, as a very last resource, leave England. This is my most earnest advice to anyone turning his thoughts towards Assam, especially as a land of promise. (2)

Barker advises his fellow countrymen to stay in England and to keep the thought of coming to Assam only as the last option. He informs that no matter how large salary the Europeans get it is never sufficient considering the fact that Assam is a very backward place sans any facility which would make the life of the planter a bit expensive.

Barker describes the life of a tea planter in Assam which is also the main theme of his book as far as the title is concerned. Barker intends to focus on the toils of a planter in the Assam tea gardens. Referring to the dreadful climate of the place Barker tries to give an idea of the hard work in the tea gardens of Assam. He says,

The work is very hard, the sun a terrible enemy; there are many comforts wanting, scarcely any society, and in his daily habits a man has to exercise an enormous amount of self denial and discretion if he wishes to retain good health. (3)

Barker describes the kind of life a planter gets to live in Assam in detail. He gives elaborate accounts of the thatch roofed houses of the planter which were not only devoid of any comfort but were not at all safe from rain and the attack of various insects like mosquitoes. He presents the lonely planter living through a 'horrible nightmare' (247). Work in the offices as well as in the factory was hard which was made harder by the climate of Assam. Barker also tries to look at the commercial side and writes about the troubles and pains of a tea planter. By telling the fact that tea production was not an easy task which involves many hurdles, Barker highlights the mental anxieties and risks that a tea planter takes while being engaged in the trade. He gives instances where investors were deceived and brings to the fore the failures of old tea gardens. However, Barker observes that the future of the industry was assured but at the cost of utmost economy on the part of the planter.

An added trouble to the hardship of the planter was the shortage of labour and Barker has discussed this aspect in his narrative. As the population of the region was very small, the native could not fulfil the labour requirement in the plantations. What Barker says about the indigenous people's attitude towards work is noteworthy:

the Assamese, who are sparsely scattered over the country, are lazy and will not work, unless the rice crops fails, when they are compelled to turn to and earn sufficient for their wants until the next season's crop. (125-26)

An important point to note is that in most of the colonial narratives the 'natives' are projected as lazy people with a natural unwillingness to work. This is indeed a very common trait that the European colonialists attribute the oriental people with and Barker is no exception to this. However, there are other facets of the same story which tell different things.

While describing the climate of the region the writer himself says that it was very difficult to work in that heat and that the climate makes a person thirsty and weak. But when it comes to the 'natives,' he simply calls it their laziness. The simple way of living, and the non-commercial minded people with their self-sufficiency are given a critical view and are interpreted as an outcome of laziness. He calls the fisherman lazy as the latter is satisfied with one or two poor catching; he wonders at the 'native's indifference towards earning more money. Like many colonial narrators, Barker seems incapable of understanding the simplicity of the indigenous people and their lives.

Barker's strategic position as a colonialist is apparent in his attitude towards the natives, particularly the tea garden labourers. He describes the tea garden workers as mischievous and vindictive. He is very much critical about their laziness and cunning nature but, important to note, the cunning way adopted by the Europeans in bringing those 'coolies' from different places of India is not given any thought. Interestingly, Barker says that the workers did not come to the region at their own will and that the same trouble of assimilation was faced by them too and thus there was hardly any difference between the Europeans and those migrated workers in terms of being outsiders. In his narrative, Barker tells in detail how these people were induced to come to the tea land and how the recruiters bring groups of people by luring them with false words and also, how the government agents did kidnappings from the thickly populated districts of the country.

This makes it clear that the garden workers were neither skilled nor used to that kind of work. This story is two dimensional: Barker the traveller, on one hand, pities the labourers whom the planters managed to engage by inducement of every kind possible which is but another name for treachery; on the other hand, his colonialist position does not see any wrongdoing on the part of the planters since a huge margin of collective profit was at work behind that. This is an important point which offers a larger area for criticism.

Barker's narrative, thus, can be read as a text revealing colonial prejudice in its extreme. That he describes everything he comes across in the region from an assumed subject position is apparent throughout the narrative. There lies the rhetoric of 'anti-conquest' of the narrator. Barker's strategy seems to be that of the superior colonialist whose sole intention is to reflect on the inferior 'other' by highlighting what is condemnable in the latter. His position also involves imaginative speculation on the part of the narrator which is also another important aspect of this study. Barker's narrative thus is merely a symmetrical construction of both the 'self' and the 'other' in the colonialist discourse. The writer intends to discourage those of his countrymen who were thinking of coming to Assam and invest in the tea industry.

All these narratives and writings present different images of the colonial situation in Assam. The writers focus on the life on the plantations with projections of the planter as the colonialist 'self' against the labourer 'other.' In the selected texts for discussion, one can see that the garden is the 'contact zone' which is marked by the presence of apparently two cultures—the colonizer's and that of the colonized. But as seen in the course of the discussion, the indigenous population and the migrants uphold somewhat different cultures. There is also the minority trading class along with the professionals from other parts of India who do not uphold the same cultural values as the indigenous people. The tea garden becomes the physical social space of 'contact zone' where one can see the establishment of a relation of dominance and servitude.

In the colonial texts, the travellers depict both the cultures of the colonizer and the colonized, and transculturation as the colonized people start acquiring fragments/traits from the dominant colonial culture. The epithet 'coolie' itself is a referent of that since these people migrated from differing places and were transposed into Assam with a new cultural identity as the 'coolie.' The very migration of those people was in itself a

phenomenon of colonialism in Assam and therefore the people as a community were the products of the same. Since those garden workers were not indigenous to Assam but had originally migrated from different parts of India to work in the plantations, people from different cultural and social structures came to interact with one another in the 'contact zone,' the tea gardens in this context, and created their identity as one community. Thus, a transcultural identity was created and the people were called with a significant nomenclature, 'coolies.' They were brought from places like Bengal, Orissa and Chotanagpur and therefore it was obvious that those people had cultural differences amongst themselves. Despite that fact, they were called simply 'coolies' and branded as one community.

If the tea gardens could be called a microcosm of the whole colonial situation, the term 'coolie' gives a clear idea of the process of othering. The term 'coolie' is believed to derive from the Tamil word 'kuli' meaning wages. It was used to refer to the low wage workers at the Indian Ocean labour market. But with the imperial recruitment the term got associated with the central Indian workers and this same epithet was again used when the imperial condition brought these workers from different parts of central India. This gave birth to a new community which was known as the 'coolie' irrespective of any cultural or linguistic differences amongst different communities. People coming from different places, with disparate cultures met in the tea garden premises of Assam and in the presence of the dominant class, the colonizers, the former got transcultured into a new class which was made known as the 'coolie.' It is interesting that this epithet was used to refer to the garden workers long after Independence.

Many of the colonial writers complain about the workers' laziness and cunning nature but, important to note again, the cunning way adopted by the Europeans in the migration of those 'coolies' from different places of India is never given any critical observation. In fictional works also we see this aspect of colonial mercantile policy. It is apparent that the transculturation of the indigenous people in the 'contact zone' has much to do with the colonialist propaganda and that the whole process of imagining the 'other' and then to structure a debased image of it is indeed a way of legitimizing the colonialist scheme. In the colonial narratives too this attitude is evident and the tea garden workers were reduced to a much degraded position with a transcultural identity known as 'coolie.' The

selected texts under discussion show how colonialism fueled the construction of a transcultural community with structured identity.

The texts discussed in this chapter unfold various aspects of colonialism and the significance of the study lies in the confusion that it creates. It not only offers opposing views regarding the 'natives' and the systems on the plantations in colonial Assam but at the same time, tells of ambivalences within the colonial people. That there were conflicts and clashes amongst the Europeans and that there was politics going on inside have been made clear in the statements given by some of the authors. Apparently, there were colonial people who, despite being colonialists, condemned the exploitation of the 'native.' People like Henry Cotton and Downing are vocal about the cruelty and bias of the government against the indigenous people whereas authors like Barker and Dowding were supporting colonialism all the time. There were people like Kinney who posited themselves in between as they seem to be rather confused. However, the empathy of the colonisers can be read as what Leela Gandhi calls 'affinity with victims of their own expansionist cultures' (1) although they cannot be termed 'anticolonial nationalisms' (3). This aspect of the 'politics of friendship' is discussed in the next chapter.

However, those perceptive texts were very less in number and such authors had to face abuses from their own people. Most of the time, such observations were not given importance or were suppressed by the whole community. This unfurls the significant role played by the society and reading community in the representation of both the 'self' and the 'other' in colonial narratives. Cultural exigency did play an imperative role which conferred subjectivity to the travellers' observations of the natives. It shows that the description of the 'other' was a construction based on some preconceived notions retained by a community which considers itself a superior race.

The relationship between planter and worker is presented in terms of an affective community with a mutual recognition of their own limitations. Somehow the perspective that comes across is always that of the superior White man being bountiful to the indigenous workers who should have no grounds for complaint. The tea planter, despite heavily loaded odds against his work, enjoys certain advantages in terms of freedom and lack of rigid official procedure and decorum, common in England. Most of the narratives discuss the hindrances standing in the way of the development of the Indian tea industry,

the different shortcomings in the whole system of running a plantation, and the troubles faced by the tea planters in the tea districts of Assam.

While these skills are enough to acquit himself honourably in the colony/ tea plantation, they sometimes appear inadequate in English society. The planter remains a boss in his estate, and his being White affords him certain rights and conveniences, missing in England. Being White back home in England is not enough. The peculiarities of life in the tea districts enable planters to speak upon this subject with much deeper feeling as pointed out by one planter. It is the colonial who learns of the prestige attached to Whiteness.

It may be noted that the planters share with the missionaries, this inclination to use the local language. They believe that language difficulties are the result of an inability to grasp or articulate matters. They realize the importance of the local language not only to make themselves understood but also to reach out to the maximum number of people including the labourers. They hold on to this position despite the colonial authorities promoting Bengali instead of Assamese in the region.

The chapter highlights the representation of the transculturation of the 'other' in the texts. It addresses the complexities within the colonial world. As the tea gardens could be looked at as the epitome of the colonial condition they were also the physical 'contact zone' or the space where the two groups meet. Some of the conditions of the 'contact zone' are shown to be operative within the tea garden as well. The world within the tea garden, cut off from the rest of the world, becomes a site of colonization where people from different places and cultures—from other parts of the country as well as Europe—meet within the isolation of the tea plantation and enter into relations determined by a power structure.

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