

## Beyond “Enclaves”: Postcolonial Labor Mobility to and from Assam Tea Plantations

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### Abstract

Labor mobility to and from tea plantations in India has been treated as an exception. Plantations continue to be imagined as unaltered enclaves with an immobile, bonded, or fixed labor force as their key feature. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in India, this article investigates forms of labor mobility to and from Assam tea plantations. While tea labor is not spatially immobile, I argue that spatial mobility does not necessarily lead to upward social mobility. Based on this observation, I reconsider the plantation in the twenty-first century in two ways: first, plantations are permeable and transforming spaces, due to ongoing labor mobility and evolving changes in the political economy of Assam tea production; second, certain forms of inequality and injustice attributed to plantation economies need to be located beyond the Plantationocene.

**Keywords:** enclave, India, labor migration, Plantationocene, tea plantation

### Introduction

Raju was one of the tea plantation laborers whom I met when I conducted ethnographic fieldwork on tea plantations in Assam between 2014 and 2017.<sup>1</sup> Raju was in his midforties when I met him in October 2015. He came to Noname Tea Estate together with his parents from the central Indian state of Odisha when he was three years old. Raju now had three children of his own. When I visited Raju’s family, he was frustrated about his work and life on the plantation. He complained about the hardship of labor, but most of all, he was upset about how caste hierarchies were blurred on the plantation:

They call us Adivasis here, but we are Gwala. We are higher caste (*jāri*) compared to Adivasis.<sup>2</sup> There are only seven other families on this plantation who belong to our caste; the others are lower caste. But people here, they do not believe in purity (*śud*) and impurity (*aśud*). It does not work here. In Orissa [the former name for Odisha], people believe in purity and live accordingly. Higher castes and lower castes do not live together like

here. I do not like how people live together here, without consideration for purity and impurity.

When I wanted to visit Raju one year later, he and his family had left for Odisha. His story is striking. Raju himself had migrated to Assam with his parents in the 1970s and migrated back to Odisha in the 2010s. His story does not fit the common narrative that tea plantation laborers were recruited from central India by British planters as indentured laborers during the colonial era and “got stuck” on the plantations for generations in forced immobility (see e.g., AK 2015; Banerji and Robin 2019; Columbia Law School 2014, 25–26; Lahiri 2000; Nagar and Feruglio 2016; Sharma and Khan 2018, 187).<sup>3</sup>

By presenting life stories, such as Raju’s, this article illustrates how ongoing postcolonial labor migration to and from Assam tea plantations challenges the image of unchanged and isolated tea plantation enclaves. I argue that Assam tea plantations are permeable and transforming spaces with mobile inhabitants. This radical reconceptualization of plantation spaces draws attention to how certain inequalities, such as economic precarity or caste stigmatization, that have been attributed to plantation economies exist, even more so, beyond the Plantationocene (Haraway et al. 2016).

Based on laborers’ oral histories, the first section of this article demonstrates that labor migration to plantations in Assam did not stop with Indian Independence, as suggested in the common narrative of Assam tea plantation laborers’ intergenerational immobility, but continued into the second half of the twentieth century. Further relativizing the image of immobility and enclosure, the second part analyzes why tea laborers decide to leave plantation work in postcolonial India and under what circumstances spatial mobility leads to upward social mobility. In the final section, I suggest conceptualizing tea plantations as transforming and permeable spaces instead of as enclaves.

Understanding plantations as transforming spaces highlights recent changes in the political economy of Assam tea production. The Plantations Labour Act, which was the main legal framework for plantation

labor in postcolonial India, was repealed in 2020, and large-scale plantations are being gradually replaced by small growers.<sup>4</sup> These legal and economic changes are transforming the political economy of Assam tea because they are introducing a freer and less legally regulated regime of tea production. While “old-style” plantations were characterized by a paternalistic, yet stable, dual wage structure (low cash wages and encompassing nonmonetary benefits), “new-style” plantations and small growers provide higher cash wages but fewer nonmonetary benefits and less security due to an increase of temporary labor contracts.

My reconceptualization of plantations as permeable spaces channels Tiffany Lethabo King’s connection of the metaphor of the shoal and the pore (2019, 115). When looking “at the pores of the plantation” (2019, 111), Lethabo King defamiliarizes traditional plantations and depicts them “as sets of relations and processes in the making rather than as fixed and already knowable plantation spaces” (2019, 116).<sup>5</sup> Defamiliarizing fixed ideas about plantations is also inspired by Mythri Jegathesan’s locating of a “*poēisis* of desire” among plantation workers – highlighting the need for solidarity with what workers themselves aspire to (Jegathesan 2019, 23).

Understanding plantations as permeable spaces draws attention to the fact that 1) laborers continue to migrate to Assam tea plantations in postcolonial India; 2) plantations constitute a refuge for workers’ dependents, who engage in other activities outside the plantations, since only about 33 percent of those living on tea plantations in Assam are permanent laborers (Mishra et al. 2012: 115); 3) some laborers quit their jobs and engage in other activities outside the plantation economy; and 4) economic and caste inequalities and discrimination exist beyond the Plantationocene. Therefore, laborers who do not belong to a higher caste do not necessarily experience upward social mobility even if they move.

### Narratives Beyond the Long-Bygone Migration

To establish commercial tea cultivation in Assam in the mid-nineteenth century, laborers were mainly recruited from the Chotanagpur Plateau, which includes (parts of) the present-day states of Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Jharkhand, and Bihar in central and eastern North India. The region is hot, dry, and famine-ridden and has the highest numbers of indigenous populations in India (Besky 2014, 54–55). According to Indian census data from 1911 and 1921, 50–60 percent of the recruited labor force were Adivasis, around 30 percent came from the so-called lower castes, and 10–15 percent were categorized as caste Hindus (Behal 2014, 255–256). Today, the state of Assam has approximately 803 tea plantations, which employ altogether 686,000 laborers.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, it is assumed that at least that

many or more live on tea plantations as dependents of the workers (Mishra et al. 2012, 81–82; Raj 2013, 471).<sup>7</sup> The common narrative about Assam’s tea plantation laborers is that they were recruited from central India by British planters during the colonial era and remained on the plantations for generations in forced immobility.

I had taken this narrative for granted until two permanent tea pluckers on Noname Tea Estate, Elisabeth and her husband, Manoj, invited me to visit them in their home in 2015. During our conversation, Elisabeth sent her daughter to the kitchen to make tea for us and disappeared into the next room for a moment. She came back holding a document showing that her father had migrated to Assam in 1966 when he was 32 years old. This was the first time that a tea plantation laborer told me about her postcolonial migration story. I thought that Elisabeth’s story must be exceptional.

I had taken the narrative of a long-bygone migration for granted because it was presented to me during many conversations about Assam’s tea plantation laborers by people from outside the plantations during my early stages of fieldwork. Additionally, this narrative is undergirded by recent scholarly and activist studies of Assam’s tea plantations.<sup>8</sup> One article states, “almost the majority of the workforce of the tea plantations ... were brought to Assam as indentured laborers by British planters more than 120 years ago ...” (AK 2015). Another study claims, “These Adivasis are the descendants of the workers who were brought by the British from the Chota Nagpur Plateau to work in the tea plantations of Assam three to four generations ago” (Sharma and Khan 2018, 187). Another report asserts: “The workers, who were initially migrants, lost contact with their communities of origin while remaining isolated within their new locations. Though active recruitment of new workers stopped in the 1950s, workers continued to live much as they did on arrival, entirely dependent on the plantation” (Columbia Law School 2014, 25–26).

However, during fieldwork I came across increasing evidence of laborers with recent migration trajectories to and from Assam’s plantations in postcolonial India, such as that of Binod. He migrated to Assam in the 1970s with his family when he was 12 years old. His family had owned a piece of land in Jharkhand and had engaged in subsistence farming before they migrated to Assam. He recalled that his family’s life in Jharkhand had been fine as long as their harvest was rich. But when it did not rain for several seasons in a row, their whole harvest was spoiled. Binod explained to me that his parents had great difficulty feeding the family during that time. “The situation was so bad that we were not able to eat more than twice a week,” he said. “We almost died of thirst and hunger.” His

family already knew people from their neighborhood who had gone to Assam to work on tea plantations. Plantations used to send *sardars* (overseers who act as recruiters) to their area with big cars to recruit new laborers. Binod told me that rumors had spread in his neighborhood that laborers would be eligible for housing facilities, food rations, and other facilities for free on plantations in Assam. Binod's family decided to pack their bare necessities and leave their relatives and piece of land behind to accompany a *sardar* to Assam.

Many laborers told me that they came to Assam themselves or with their parents when they were younger, like Binod. Often, they had owned a piece of land that they had farmed. When their farming did not support their livelihood anymore, due to difficult environmental challenges such as droughts or plagues of insects, they suffered severe hunger. Attracted by the promise of a secured livelihood on tea plantations, they decided to migrate to Assam.

These oral narratives of tea plantation laborers' more recent migration histories show that, after the end of the colonial era and the indentured labor system, similar economic precarities moved people from similar regions and social backgrounds to leave their homes and seek a secure existence on Assam's tea plantations, even though they were no longer legally bound to plantation labor through indentured labor contracts.

That tea plantations came to symbolize minimum economic security due to legally governed welfare measures for labor migrants who were suffering economic deprivation needs to be contextualized by looking beyond the plantation setting to the precarious nature of farming in India.<sup>9</sup> A recent study (Kantor 2020) of agricultural labor in Bihar revealed that rural people who grow their own food (and often refuse to call themselves "farmers") are usually unable to cover household expenses by farming alone. Instead, they rely on "off-farm employment in order to meet rising household expenses" (Kantor 2020, 99). This is also underlined by a growing number of rural indigenous Northeast Indian migrants who seek jobs in Indian metropolitan cities (see Kikon and Karlsson 2019). These studies emphasize that people in rural India are unable to live from farming alone, especially because the agrarian crisis in India has been exacerbated since the 1970s (see Reddy and Mishra 2012), which culminated in high suicide rates among farmers in India, especially since the 1990s (Kannuri and Jadhav 2021).

Yet what was striking to me, besides the fact that laborers continued to migrate to Assam's tea plantations after independence, was that laborers did not seem to have migrated in large numbers from central India to Assam's plantations after the late 1970s. One possible

explanation may be the gradual "disarticulation" (Bair and Werner 2011) of Assam tea production from the capitalist world market following the economic tea crisis in India.<sup>10</sup> The disarticulation found expression in the withdrawal of global vertically-integrated companies like Hindustan Unilever and Tata from tea production in the early 2000s. With the withdrawal of international companies, the ongoing replacement of large-scale plantations with small growers and the casualization of labor intensified since tea production no longer constitutes a profitable endeavor.<sup>11</sup> Thus, labor migration to Assam's tea plantations has probably decreased significantly since the 1970s, not because plantation labor is no longer appealing to people living in precarious circumstances off the plantation but because tea companies no longer regularly offer new permanent labor contracts.

### **Postcolonial Migration away from Assam Tea Plantations**

Rana Behal's historical study of the political economy of Assam tea demonstrates that labor migration away from tea plantations has occurred since colonial times when laborers migrated to the countryside in Assam to settle as tenant cultivators after their indentured contracts ended (Behal 2014, 254–255). This is evident in the common (and controversial) use of the term "ex-tea tribes" to designate former tea plantation laborers who migrated to the outskirts of the plantations in Assam.

During fieldwork, I came across three main types of spatial mobility away from Assam's tea plantations that tea laborers or their children embraced: 1) laborers migrated to the surrounding villages or to laborers' rural home places in central India to engage in farming; 2) laborers' children migrated temporarily to India's metropolitan cities to work as domestic laborers or factory workers; and 3) laborers' children went away to study and eventually engage in trade union or human rights activism.

With regard to labor migration to villages surrounding the plantations, Manoj's story is telling. Once he shared with me that he was planning to leave the plantation and that he had already bought a piece of land close to the plantation to engage in subsistence farming. Manoj also complained about plantation work. "It is as if they tied us up with a big rope," he said. "If we do not work, it is bad, and if we work, it is also bad ... as long as we work everything is all right, but the moment we stop working, we do not have anything, neither a house nor food rations." Manoj's purchase of land was his attempt to escape dependence on the plantation: "by buying land ... half of my sufferings are gone ..." When I asked him what the other half of his suffering was about, he answered, "Working for the plantation." Therefore, Manoj planned to leave

the plantation once and for all, together with his family. Like Manoj, many other laborers described life and work on tea plantations as *kaṣṭ* – the term for suffering in both Hindi and Sadri, often related to the hardship of plantation labor.<sup>12</sup> Hence, many laborers aspired to leave plantation work.

Migration to the outskirts of plantations was also evident in the stories of temporary laborers living off the plantation. Hanisha, for instance, was working as a temporary *sardarin* (female overseer) on Noname Tea Estate when I met her in 2015. She lived with her family on the outskirts of the plantation. After her father died, her mother could no longer afford to pay her school fees and quickly arranged her marriage to a farmer living off the plantation. In October 2015, I sat with Hanisha and some of her relatives, who were all temporary laborers, and learned that all their parents had been permanent laborers on Noname Tea Estate. When I asked them about their labor situations, they complained about being employed as temporary laborers only. Although they were getting the same wages as permanent laborers, because the regional wage agreement for tea plantation laborers in Assam is binding for permanent and temporary laborers alike, temporary laborers nevertheless received fewer nonmonetary benefits and were only employed for seven to ten months of the year. One retired woman lamented that laborers got permanent positions very easily in previous days, whereas it was exceedingly difficult to get a permanent contract now.

When I asked temporary laborers what a better life would look like for them, what they aspired to, the women replied that they wanted food rations for their families like permanent workers have, a house on the plantation like permanent workers, and so forth. When I met temporary laborers who lived off the plantation in surrounding villages, they would ask me if I could help them gain a permanent contract on a plantation. Most parents of temporary workers had been permanent workers on a tea plantation earlier and had bought land in the villages around the plantation (often using funds from their retirement scheme) to engage in subsistence farming, but eventually failed to make a living by farming. Sooner or later, they sent one or more family members back to work on a plantation. However, by then companies were giving temporary contracts only, so these family members became employed under worse labor conditions than their parents.<sup>13</sup>

Other laborers migrated to their home regions in central India to conduct farming. In 2016, I accompanied Vijay, an Adivasi tea laborer who was returning with his family, to Chhattisgarh by train for part of their journey. I had become acquainted with Vijay while I was staying on Noname Tea Estate. Vijay's father had come to Assam in 1975 in his early twenties and had worked on Noname Tea Estate until his retirement.

Using funds from his retirement scheme, he had bought a piece of land in Chhattisgarh, where he was born. Vijay and his family left the plantation to stay with his father and engage in farming in Chhattisgarh. He had to cancel his permanent position on the plantation in order to do this. I later learned that his father died in 2019, and Vijay was not able to make a living for his family by farming. He and his wife engaged in temporary wage labor alongside their farming activities to make ends meet. They regretted their decision to leave plantation labor, since their precarious life off the plantation eventually turned out to be more difficult for them than life on the plantation; but they could not gain a permanent position on the plantation again. In the neoliberalized political economy of Assam tea production, where permanent labor contracts are hardly available anymore, this kind of spatial mobility often turned into downward social mobility.

The second common form of mobility, which mainly younger people engaged in, was temporary migration to one of India's metropolitan cities. Young women most often worked as domestic helpers and young men primarily as factory workers. On the plantations where I conducted research, almost every family had some family member who had embraced this kind of mobility at some point in life. NGOs framed young people's migration to metropolitan cities as "human trafficking" because agents recruited young people from the plantations, often without informing their parents. Sometimes people were not paid well, or not at all if they ended up in the wrong location, and some even disappeared completely. Human rights activists on Noname Tea Estate started a theater performance campaign against "human trafficking" to communicate its dangers to young people. Yet, people who did migrate to a city for domestic or factory work had quite different attitudes toward this type of mobility, according to their own experiences. I met some people who viewed it as a good opportunity to see something new and earn some extra income for the family, since payments were much higher than the average wages on plantations. One laborer I spoke to revealed in her past as a domestic worker in Delhi:

In 2007, I once went to Delhi with an agent. The agent arranged everything for me. I went for one year. I earned 1200 rupees per month. Today people earn at least 3000 rupees. I really loved it. The agent was all right, and my boss as well. One time, they even took me to a five-star restaurant. One meal cost 600 rupees. It was so good. I am immediately ready to go out again, but I am old now and my husband is ill, so I can't go anymore, and nobody would be willing to take me.

Another laborer told me that he sent his daughter to Sikkim when she was fourteen years old. She

takes care of two children in a family where both parents work as teachers. He commented: “My daughter went to a very good family. My daughter really likes how they treat her as if she was their own child.” Thus, opinions differ on whether this type of mobility constitutes a dangerous human rights violation or a good opportunity to gain experience and extra income outside the plantation. This type of mobility is also present in plantations in other parts of the world. Jegathesan (2019, 151–175), for instance, illustrates the nuanced ambiguities and social implications of temporary labor migration to Colombo by children of Hill Country Tamils who work on tea plantations in Sri Lanka. However, temporary spatial mobility to cities hardly translates into sustainable socio-economic upward mobility. I met many laborers who went to a metropolitan city for a couple of years but eventually returned to Assam to inherit their parents’ position on the tea plantation. Thus, while people from tea plantations are not spatially immobile, spatial mobility does not necessarily lead to sustainable upward social mobility.

A third form of mobility that created upward social mobility for a small number of plantation laborers’ offspring was to engage in trade union or human rights activism. There were mainly three interest groups working on behalf of tea plantation laborers in Assam: a trade union called Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha; a student association called Assam Tea Tribes Student Association (ATTSA); and a newer social movement of Adivasi activists that includes different organizations working on behalf of tea laborers or Adivasis in Assam in general.

The Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS), which is Assamese for “Assam Tea Workers’ Union,” is affiliated with the Indian Congress Party and is the single-most important trade union for tea plantation laborers in postcolonial Assam. In the beginning, leadership positions in the ACMS were largely held by “caste Hindu middle-class men from outside the labor communities” (Sharma 2011, 235). Over time, however, the ACMS developed “an ‘insider’ union elite” (Sharma 2011, 235), meaning that laborers themselves could gain leadership positions in the trade union. Lower-level leadership positions on the plantation level were often occupied by laborers themselves, while higher leadership positions were usually taken by laborers’ better educated offspring. Those who managed to get into leadership positions in the ACMS were mainly caste Hindus, like Tantis, Karamkars, and Gwalas. The student association ATTSA had a similar leadership pattern.

On the other hand, the Adivasi movement, founded in the late 1990s, challenged caste Hindus’ dominance in existing interest groups. Adivasi activists were mainly children or grandchildren of tea

plantation laborers or former laborers (“ex-tea tribes”) who got the chance to receive a better education because, for example, their parents managed to get staff positions on plantations, or because they received a scholarship in a private school. Leadership positions in the Adivasi movement were given to Adivasis only, which empowered better educated Adivasis from the tea plantations to gain upward social mobility through a diversification of leadership positions beyond caste Hindus.

The Adivasi movement is of particular importance in Assam because ethnic groups (e.g., Munda, Oraon, Saora) who consider themselves Adivasis and are acknowledged as Scheduled Tribes (ST) in central Indian states such as Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Jharkhand, and Bihar are not acknowledged as Scheduled Tribes in Assam. Adivasis constitute the majority of Assam’s tea plantation laborers (Sharma and Kahn 2018, 196), and in Assam, they are categorized as Other Backward Classes (OBC). Groups that have historically been discriminated against are “scheduled” in the Indian Constitution as Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), or Other Backward Classes (OBC). These groups are eligible for affirmative action such as preference in public sector jobs, educational institutions, and in the electoral sphere (Deshpande 2013, 56). The OBC category, which was introduced in 1980 with the Mandal commission report and was implemented in the 1990s, takes economic dimensions into account in addition to historical discrimination based on ethnicity or caste, but it does not provide the same affirmative-action provisions as the Scheduled Tribe category (Deshpande 2013, 52–53). Therefore, Adivasi labor migrants from central India have felt particularly discriminated against because they are not acknowledged as Scheduled Tribes in Assam.

This third form of labor mobility demonstrates how ethnic and caste affiliation determines whether socio-economic mobility becomes a corollary of spatial mobility. While Adivasis in Assam used to be excluded from certain affirmative action provisions and from leadership positions in the trade union movement, some Adivasis were able to gain upward socio-economic mobility by participating in the Adivasi movement in Assam.

### **Plantations as Permeable and Transforming Spaces**

Although labor mobility has been mentioned in recent studies on tea plantations in India (e.g., Raj 2013, 2020; Besky 2014, 80–81, 2017, 619), it has been treated as an exception. The entrenched image of the tea plantation enclave is maintained. To give a few examples: Sharit Bhowmik contends “that plantations remain enclaves” (Bhowmik 2011, 250)

although plantation labor is part of the formal labor sector in India and has a high level of unionization. Mishra et al. (2012) argue that “invisible chains” would “bind” tea laborers in Assam to plantations (Mishra et al. 2012, 188). Souparna Lahiri characterizes tea plantation labor in India as “the epitome of modern-day bonded labour—the forced and unfree labour” (Lahiri 2000). Jayaseelan Raj emphasizes the continued marginalization of plantation laborers in “alienated enclaves” in a form of “neo-bondage” (Raj 2013). For Sarah Besky, the “defining feature” of Indian tea plantations to this day is “an immobile, precarious, fixed labor force” (Besky 2017, 628). Although some degree of freedom and mobility in plantation labor is acknowledged, the emphasis in the literature remains on bondage, immobility, and fixity.

This “enclave perspective,” I argue, has limited the view of plantations and plantation labor in India in two ways: First, the enclave perspective has obfuscated the fact that plantations are transforming spaces. The “old-style” plantation, which is said to have remained more or less unchanged, has, in fact, been phasing out. Less than 50 percent of the tea produced in India in 2020 was produced on tea plantations, while more than half of the tea has been produced by small growers who are steadily increasing and thereby changing the political economy of tea production in India (Tea Board India 2020). The remaining plantations are no longer regulated by the encompassing welfare measures prescribed in the Plantations Labour Act of 1951, which characterized the “old-style” plantation due to its prescribed dual wage structure with low cash wages and additional nonmonetary benefits (including housing facilities, subsidized food rations, and medical care) for permanent workers and their dependents. Plantations are now governed by two sections (92 and 93) in the Occupational Safety, Health, and Working Conditions Code, adopted in 2020.<sup>14</sup> These labor-law changes include repealing the Plantations Labour Act and may dissolve the dual wage structure on plantations (Singh 2020). These recent economic and legal developments illustrate that the “old-style” plantations are a thing of the past.

Second, the enclave perspective implies that certain forms of inequality and injustice are characteristic features of plantation economies. This is, for instance, evident in Jayaseelan Raj’s evaluation that “alienation ... is inherent to the plantation system” and that “new forms of alienation ... operate largely on the foundations laid by the oppressive plantation production processes which emerged under the colonial indenture system” (Raj 2013, 469–470). This assessment resonates with recent debates about the Plantationocene.

Donna Haraway et al. (2016) suggested the concept of the “Plantationocene” as an alternative, and more suitable term, to what has become known as the Anthropocene—a point of inflection from the Holocene to a new era (Haraway 2015, 159).<sup>15</sup> The central question posed by the evolving literature on the Plantationocene is how plantation economies have shaped the present, while different key features (i.e., extraction, extermination, homogenization, inequality, insularity) of plantations are foregrounded. The Plantationocene literature has been criticized for not using its potential to analyze racial politics in a meaningful way, but rather “obscuring the centrality of racial politics” (Davis et al. 2019, 1) by erasing Black and Indigenous voices from the Plantationocene discourse (Jegathesan 2021, 80) and due to its potential to create a “new, race-based world order” (Wolford 2021, 1624).

The above ethnographic evidence from Assam suggests that the Plantationocene’s point of inflection and marking of a new era obscures important continuities. In Assam, the intersection of structural casteism (including its oppressive dyadic structuring principles of purity and impurity) and economic precarity are carried in the bodies of Adivasis and Dalits when they move to and from plantations. The ethnographic evidence above demonstrates how casteism constitutes a major structuring principle beyond the Plantationocene, for instance, in rural India where Raju wants to move because caste hierarchies are still in place and Adivasis and Dalits are spatially separated from caste Hindus other than those living on plantations in Assam. Structural discriminations based on ethnicity and caste are also prevalent in trade unionism for tea workers when Adivasis and Dalits are excluded from leadership positions in trade unions as much as in state policies excluding historically discriminated Adivasis from affirmative action in Assam. Understanding the plantations as permeable spaces rather than enclaves draws attention to the continuities of forms of discrimination beyond the Plantationocene’s inflection point.

## Conclusion

This article draws attention to forms of mobility to and from tea plantations in Assam. Labor migration did not stop with Indian Independence but continued well into the second half of the twentieth century. Laborers in postcolonial India were not legally forced by British colonialists to migrate to plantations or to stay on plantations. Rather, they were forced by precarious livelihoods off the plantations to migrate to Assam and seek wage labor on plantations. At the same time, tea laborers and their children embrace various forms of mobility away from the tea plantations, including subsistence farming, temporary work in India’s metropolitan cities, and activist

engagements. Since farming is often not sufficient to make ends meet, former laborers who left plantation work to engage in farming are often forced to seek additional wage employment, and many end up on plantations again, under worse labor conditions than before and as temporary laborers. Therefore, spatial mobility sometimes turns into downward social mobility. Temporary labor migration to India's metropolitan cities is evaluated differently, but ultimately does not lead to sustainable upward social mobility for those who eventually become plantation laborers again after returning from the cities. The main opportunity to gain upward socio-economic mobility for tea laborers' offspring is through labor rights activism, which is, however, available for just a few.

Based on ethnographic evidence of ongoing mobility to and from Assam tea plantations, I suggest conceptualizing plantations as fluid, permeable, and transforming spaces rather than enclosed, unchanged enclaves. Like Tiffany Lethabo King and Mythri Jegathesan, who suggest new imagined geographies through the metaphor of the "pore" (Lethabo King 2019) and the "*poēsis* of desire" (Jegathesan 2019), which constitute "productive frictions" (Lethabo King 2019, 19), I attempt an epistemic move to create new foci in studies of plantation work. Moving beyond equating plantations with "enclaves" recalibrates taken-for-granted foci on plantations that obscure spatial mobility and continuities such as the dynamic intersections of class and caste discrimination beyond the Plantationocene.

This shift beyond the enclave frame echoes Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller's call to move beyond "methodological nationalism" (2002)—"the assumption that the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world" (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002, 302). Similarly, equalizing plantations with "enclaves" has naturalized an analytical view on plantation labor as immobile, bounded, and fixed. "Methodological enclavism" has obscured that plantations are transforming and permeable spaces that provide a refuge for workers and their dependents who frequently move to and from plantations without gaining substantial upward social mobility. Caste and class oppression determine tea laborers' experiences when they are heading for subsistence farming, temporary jobs in metropolitan cities, and trade unionism and activism. Even if tea plantations eventually cease to exist, it is doubtful that the world without "old-style" plantations is a better world for tea laborers in Assam and beyond—not because the present is shaped by plantation pasts, but because the injustice and inequality of economic exploitation and structural casteism were not invented in the Plantationocene and exist, even more so, beyond the plantation.

### Acknowledgements

The research project was funded by the Heinrich Boell Foundation. I would like to primarily thank all my interlocutors in India who shared their stories and experiences with me. For their guidance and feedback at various stages of research and writing, I express my deep thankfulness to Julia Eckert and her sit-in colloquium group, Pratiksha Baxi, Amit Prakash, Axel Harneit-Sievers, Sanjay (Xonzoi) Barbora, Dolly Kikon, Trishna Gogoi, Franscesca Feruogli, Jayshree Satpute, Stephen Ekka, Raphael Kujur, Binita Sagar, Virginius Xaxa, Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman, Ravi Ahuja, Olaf Zenker and the Political and Legal Anthropology Network, Sandra Baernreuther, Laura Affolter, Gabriel Zimmerer, Edda Rohrbach, the AWR editors, and the anonymous reviewers. I take the responsibility for all remaining insufficiencies.

### Notes

- 1 I conducted thirteen months of fieldwork in Assam, Delhi, and Kolkata. I visited seven different plantations in Assam in the districts of Cachar, Jorhat, Sonitpur, Dibrugarh, and the Bodoland Territorial Region. I spent about seven months on two plantations in Lower Assam. One plantation, which I call Noname Tea Estate, was a privately-owned plantation with around fifteen hundred laborers; the other was a government-owned plantation with around two thousand laborers. All names of persons and places in this article are pseudonyms, and I conducted all interviews in Hindi and translated them into English.
- 2 The term *jāt(i)* literally means "birth." It is used to describe lineages or endogamous groups in India located in hierarchical relation to each other and indicating spiritual (im)purity (Michaels 2012, 189–191). In colloquial language, the term *jāti* is often used interchangeably with the term caste. In the plantation context, both terms were used to denote ethnic communities of different scopes, including Adivasis. Adivasi is generally translated as "original inhabitant" of India (Parmar 2016, 4) even though the indigeneity of Adivasis is highly controversial (Parmar 2016, 6). The term Adivasi subsumes diverse ethnic groups. Tea plantation laborers in Assam are often equated with Adivasis and vice versa (cf. Kikon 2017). I cannot do justice here to the different layers of meaning of the term Adivasi. There are brilliant studies on the meaning of being Adivasi, such as Parmar 2016, Shah 2007, Steur 2014, and Xaxa 2014. For a sophisticated examination of the term "ethnicity," see Zenker 2011.
- 3 The indentured labor system provided tea planters with the legal right to exert penal provisions on their workers for any breach of contract, including the attempt to leave the plantation before the minimum contract duration (three to five years) had ended (Behal and Mohapatra 1992). The terms "laborer" and "worker" are used interchangeably in this article. For a discussion of differentiating the terms, see Butt 2020.

- 4 Small growers raise tea on smaller plots of land and sell green tea leaves to so-called Bought Leaf Factories where the tea is processed and further sold. Becoming small growers or small holders has been envisioned as a productive alternative for tea plantation laborers, who should be able to transform from waged workers into independent entrepreneurial farmers (see Besky 2016). However, according to my observations, small growers in Assam are largely privileged Assamese people who employ temporary tea laborers under much worse, less regulated labor conditions (see Biggs et al. 2018, 10), making small growers hardly an attractive alternative to plantation labor.
- 5 Lethabo King uses the metaphor of the shoal “simultaneously land and sea” to overcome the overemphasis on the water metaphor in Black diaspora studies, which symbolizes rootlessness, and the overemphasis of the land metaphor in Indigenous studies, which highlights rootedness and fixity (Lethabo King 2019, 4). Lethabo King’s context is distinct since her focus is on Black and Indigenous experience on plantations in the historical context, whereas I am thinking about contemporary plantations and questions of caste and mobility.
- 6 Estimates are taken from Government of Assam Tea Tribes Directorate for Welfare, List of Tea Gardens at Assam: <https://ttwd.assam.gov.in/frontimpotentdata/list-of-tea-garden-at-assam> (accessed on May 23, 2021) and Government of Assam Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Economic Survey of Assam 2017–18: <https://des.assam.gov.in/information-services/economic-survey-assam> (accessed May 23, 2021). Plantations minimally comprise five hectares according to the Plantations Labour Act (Section 1.4 a).
- 7 There are plantation laborers living on plantations, people living on the plantation property without labor contracts as dependents of permanent laborers, and (former) laborers living off the plantation.
- 8 There is a rich historical literature on Assam’s tea plantations (e.g., Behal and Mohapatra 1992; Behal 2014; Sharma 2011; Varma 2017). Historical studies focus on the indentured labor period, not on the more recent post-colonial labor history.
- 9 I follow Bourdieu’s understanding of precarity as a labor condition (Bourdieu 1998) rather than Butler’s reading of precarity as an ontological condition (Butler 2006). For an excellent discussion of the different meanings and politics of the term precarity, see Millar 2017.
- 10 The economic crisis in the Indian tea industry lasted from about 1998 to 2008 and was attributed to an over-supply of tea in the world market, among other factors (see Raman 2010, 149–158). During the crisis, 118 tea estates were temporarily closed in India between 2000 and 2005 (Raman 2010, 158).
- 11 Small growers replacing large-scale tea plantations is not particular to Assam but is a visible trend in India in general (see e.g., Sen 2017).
- 12 The term *kaṣṭ* is generally used in India to express a feeling of suffering or hardship. It is not particular to tea plantation labor.
- 13 The Tea Board of India estimates that out of 1.1 million tea plantation laborers in India, 700,000 have a permanent contract, while the remaining 400,000 work as temporary laborers (Tea Board India 2017, 91). The actual number of temporary laborers is likely to be much higher.
- 14 The Indian government merged 44 labor laws in India into four new labor codes regarding wages, industrial relations, social security and welfare, and safety and working conditions. Since the actual implementation of the new labor law is ongoing, it is not entirely clear how the situation on plantations will change. The legal regulations provided in these two short sections on plantations are less comprehensive and less legally binding as compared to the Plantations Labour Act. For example, section 92 of the new code stipulates that “the State Government may prescribe requiring every employer to make provisions in his plantation,” while prescriptions in the PLA were framed as legally binding: “It shall be the duty of every employer to provide and maintain necessary housing accommodation.”
- 15 Haraway suggested replacing the term Anthropocene with the term Plantationocene rather spontaneously in a conversation about the Anthropocene among anthropologists at the University of Aarhus in October 2014, which was published two years later in *Eiḥmos* (Haraway et al. 2016). She later described the Plantationocene as a “situated historical metabolism with the planet in conditions that nurture extraction and extermination” (Paulson 2019).

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DOI: 10.1111/awr.12235