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## LONG-TERM IMPACTS OF COLONIAL PLANTATIONS AND FORESTRY POLICIES ON LABOUR WELFARE STANDARDS IN SUB-HIMALAYAN BENGAL.

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### *Abstract*

With the British annexation of densely forested sub-Himalayan tracts in the 19th-century following consecutive conflicts with Burma, the Gorkhas and Bhutan, preliminary assessment was made of which forest lands were suited for commercial forestry. Other miscellaneous tracts considered unsuited for commercial forestry were reclassified as 'jungle', i.e. as wastelands incapable of yielding land revenue from being farmed out in agricultural leases to individual farmers. In Bengal and Assam, these wastelands were subsequently cleared for laying out commercial plantations.

The sub-Himalayan foothills in Bengal were deforested to yield way for economically valuable plantations of tea. This cycle of deforestation and replantation of forests was accelerated by adoption of the 'Taungya' system of shifting forest villages, feeding into the disputes over forest rights that are seen today (Ghosal & Ghosh, 2019). From thence onwards, extensive deforestation accompanied the expansion of tea acreages, driving the subsequent growth of population and markets (Prokop, 2018).

Consequently, the conditions of labour in plantation and forest work have been interdependent, since their workers are drawn from a common labour pool that is subject to the maximum rural poverty and deprivation. These are reflected today in the persistence of identical inequalities in the delivery of social services like healthcare and education to the isolated communities of these workers and their families.

Although the forests that are maintained by these workers as forest reserves have played a crucial role in regional conservation efforts, the sustained indifference adopted by the government towards the needs of these poor communities reflects the perpetuation of colonial attitudes, disdain and neglecting the needs of the rural poor. The research study will evaluate the critical labour welfare markers seen in the plantation history of Darjeeling, tracing out the emergence of health, housing and educational inequalities, as well as the urgency of broadening welfare access.

**Keywords:** Colonial forestry, tea plantations, labour welfare, Darjeeling, environmental history, plantation labour

## 1. Introduction

The colonial transformation of the Himalayan foothills during the nineteenth century marked a decisive moment in the environmental and socio-economic history of eastern India. Following British expansion into the territories bordering Nepal and Bhutan, colonial administrators began exploring the economic potential of the region's forest resources and climatic conditions (O'Malley 1907).

The development of plantation agriculture, particularly tea cultivation, became central to colonial economic strategy in the region. The Darjeeling hills and the adjoining Duars were gradually integrated into global commodity networks through the establishment of plantation estates and supporting infrastructure. These developments were closely tied to colonial forestry policies that reorganized land use patterns and restricted local access to forests (Guha 1983).

Colonial officials frequently categorized forested lands as "wastelands," a term that masked the presence of local ecological knowledge and subsistence practices. By declaring such lands unproductive, the colonial state legitimized their appropriation for commercial plantations (Arnold 1996). The process of land reclassification thus played a critical role in enabling plantation expansion.

The rise of the tea plantation economy generated an enormous demand for labour. Plantation enterprises recruited workers from marginalized communities across eastern and central India, creating a labour force that remained economically dependent on plantation management (Behal and Mohapatra 1992). At the same time, forestry operations required labour for clearing forests, planting trees, and maintaining forest reserves.

This article argues that plantation labour and forest labour were historically interconnected systems shaped by colonial policies of land control and labour exploitation. By examining these relationships, the study explores how colonial economic structures produced long-term inequalities in labour welfare, particularly in areas such as healthcare, housing, and education.

## 2. Historiography

The historiography of plantation economies in South Asia has expanded considerably over the past several decades. Early works focused primarily on economic aspects of plantation development and the role of European planters in colonial governance.

Amalendu Guha's influential study *Planter Raj to Swaraj* examined the political and economic dominance of plantation interests in colonial Assam and highlighted the relationship between plantation capitalism and colonial governance (Guha 1977). Later scholars such as Rana P. Behal and Prabhu Mohapatra further explored labour recruitment systems and the mechanisms of labour control within plantation economies (Behal & Mohapatra 1992).

Environmental historians have also analysed the ecological consequences of colonial forestry policies. Ramachandra Guha demonstrated how the introduction of scientific forestry disrupted traditional patterns of forest use and marginalized forest-dependent communities (Guha 1983). Similarly, David Arnold's work on colonial environmental history highlights the role of the colonial state in restructuring landscapes to serve imperial economic interests (Arnold 1996).

Recent studies have also examined the environmental impact of tea plantations. Pawel Prokop's research on land-use change in the Eastern Himalayan foothills demonstrates how plantation expansion contributed to deforestation and demographic transformation in the region (Prokop 2018).

Despite these contributions, relatively few studies have examined the interconnected nature of plantation labour and forestry labour systems in sub-Himalayan Bengal. By linking these two domains, this study aims to contribute to a broader understanding of how colonial environmental policies shaped labour welfare conditions in plantation regions.

### ***3. Colonial Forestry Policies and the Reclassification of Land***

Colonial forest policy in India emerged during the mid-nineteenth century as the British administration sought to regulate and commercialize forest resources. The introduction of scientific forestry was accompanied by extensive surveys that classified forests according to their economic value (Guha 1983).

A significant aspect of this process was the designation of certain lands as “wastelands.” These lands were considered economically unproductive because they were not permanently cultivated or generating revenue. However, this classification ignored the fact that many local communities relied on forests for shifting cultivation, grazing, and subsistence activities (Ghosh 2019).

Once categorized as wasteland, such lands could be transferred to plantation enterprises under favourable lease arrangements. This policy facilitated the rapid expansion of tea plantations in the Himalayan foothills, particularly in Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts (De 1980).

The reclassification of land therefore represented not merely an administrative measure but a fundamental transformation in property relations and land use patterns.

### ***4. Expansion of Tea Plantations in Darjeeling***

Tea cultivation was introduced in Darjeeling during the 1850s and rapidly expanded over the following decades. British planters recognized that the region’s altitude, climate, and soil conditions were favourable for producing high-quality tea (O’Malley 1907).

The growth of tea plantations involved large-scale deforestation. Forest lands were cleared to create plantation estates, fundamentally altering the ecological landscape of the Himalayan foothills. By the late nineteenth century, Darjeeling had emerged as one of the most important tea-producing regions in the British Empire (Prokop 2018).

The expansion of plantations also led to the development of infrastructure such as roads and railways. These networks facilitated the export of tea to international markets and integrated the region more closely into the global economy.

However, this economic transformation also generated new forms of social inequality. Plantation estates became highly controlled spaces where labourers were dependent on employers for wages, housing, and basic services.

### ***5. Labour Recruitment and Plantation Workforce***

The expansion of tea plantations created a constant demand for labour. Local populations were often reluctant to work under plantation conditions, leading planters to recruit labourers from distant regions.

Recruitment agents, often known as *arkatis*, were responsible for bringing workers from economically marginalized communities in central and eastern India (Behal & Mohapatra 1992). Many of these workers were tribal populations who faced poverty and landlessness in their home regions.

Once recruited, labourers were transported to plantation areas where they lived in labour lines within estate boundaries. Their mobility was limited by contractual arrangements and economic dependence on plantation management.

These labour systems created a workforce that was socially and geographically isolated from surrounding communities.

## ***6. Forestry Labour and the Taungya System***

Colonial forestry administration also required a stable labour force. One method used to secure labour was the Taungya system, under which forest villagers were allowed to cultivate crops temporarily while assisting in the planting of forest plantations (Ghosh 2019).

Although the system provided short-term agricultural opportunities, it prevented workers from acquiring permanent land rights. Once forest plantations matured, villagers were relocated to new areas where they repeated the same process.

The Taungya system therefore served as a mechanism of labour control that ensured a steady supply of workers for forestry operations while maintaining state ownership of forest land.

## ***7. Labour Welfare and Social Inequality***

Despite their central role in sustaining plantation production, labourers received limited welfare support. Housing conditions in plantation labour lines were often overcrowded and lacked proper sanitation facilities (Kusari 1981).

Medical facilities were also inadequate. Plantation workers frequently suffered from diseases such as malaria, cholera, and malnutrition. The absence of adequate healthcare contributed to high mortality rates within plantation communities.

Educational opportunities for plantation workers' children were similarly limited. Schools were few, and literacy levels remained low. These conditions reinforced cycles of poverty and social marginalization.

## ***8. Post-Colonial Continuities***

Although India gained independence in 1947, many structural features of the plantation economy remained unchanged. Plantation workers continued to face challenges related to housing, healthcare, and education.

Scholars have noted that plantation labour communities remain among the most economically vulnerable groups in contemporary India. The persistence of these conditions reflects the enduring legacy of colonial labour structures.

Understanding these historical processes is therefore essential for addressing contemporary debates on labour welfare and social justice in plantation regions.

## ***9. Conclusion***

The expansion of colonial plantation agriculture and forestry policies fundamentally reshaped the environmental and social landscape of sub-Himalayan Bengal. Through the classification of land as wasteland and the introduction of labour systems such as the Taungya system, the colonial state reorganized both landscapes and labour relations.

These policies created plantation economies dependent on marginalized labour populations while offering limited welfare provisions. The inequalities that emerged during the colonial period continue to shape labour welfare conditions in plantation communities today.

By examining the historical roots of these inequalities, this study highlights the need for a deeper understanding of how colonial environmental and economic policies continue to influence contemporary labour conditions

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