

## REVIEW ESSAY

# Labour in Your Cup: Global Histories of Labour, Commodities, and Capitalism

ARUN KUMAR

*Centre for Concurrences in Colonial and Postcolonial Studies*  
*Linnaeus University, 351 95 Växjö, Sweden*

E-mail: arundelhi019@gmail.com

---

BREMAN, JAN. *Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market. Profits From an Unfree Work Regime in Colonial Java*. Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2015. [Social Histories of Work in Asia, vol. 1.] 404 pp. Ill. € 99.00. (E-book: € 98.99.) Available at: <http://www.oapen.org/search?identifier=597440>.

VARMA, NITIN. *Coolies of Capitalism. Assam Tea and the Making of Coolie Labour*. De Gruyter, Berlin 2017. [Work in Global and Historical Perspective. Vol. 2.] 242 pp. Ill. € 109.95; \$154.00; £82.99.

Tea and coffee, undoubtedly the world's most popular beverages, have cruel histories. Jan Breman's *Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market* and Nitin Varma's *Coolies of Capitalism* are powerful texts, reminding readers of the savage past these global commodities inherit. The aim of these two books – despite discussing two different commodities cultivated in two different empires, temporalities, and geographies with two different labour regimes – is simple: to make clear that the labour employed to produce these commodities was coerced and bonded. Pointing out the interconnected world of cash-crop production, consumption, and trade, Breman's book explores the regime of unfree labour of coffee production in the Priangan region of colonial Java (under the Dutch rule) during the eighteenth and mid-nineteenth century. Varma's book focuses on the coolie labour regime developed by Assam tea plantations in colonial India (under the British rule) between the 1830s and 1920s. Coffee and tea, produced at the expense of natural and human resources of colonies, ended up in the European and

American market for sale, resulting in huge profits to planters, traders, and colonial powers.<sup>1</sup> Low- or no-cost labour in colonies transformed these commodities from luxury to staple items. At the end of the production process in this chain of the colonial capitalist venture was the “native” worker. The two books detail the history of their exploitation, poverty, and resistance by exploring the agrarian commodity labour regime in South East Asia and South Asia. This combined review offers an interesting perspective on how tea and coffee became global commodities and what Asia’s role was in this regard, what types of labour regimes developed to produce tea and coffee, and how a capitalist mode of agrarian production took shape.<sup>2</sup>

#### UNFREE LABOUR AND COFFEE PRODUCTION IN COLONIAL JAVA

Jan Breman’s *Mobilizing Labour* builds upon decades of hard labour.<sup>3</sup> Breman, an expert on agrarian and informal labour, began his research on colonial Java in the early 1960s, but the political turmoil between his country (the Netherlands) and Indonesia in 1961 forced him to shift his scholarly gaze to India.<sup>4</sup> The result was a highly sophisticated study of the agrarian bondage labour system (known as *haliprathá*) in southern Gujrat.<sup>5</sup> His anthropological insight, combined with a historical approach, allowed him to explore the internal dynamics of the *haliprathá* system, which was

1. On the global trajectory of cash-crop commodity production see, Marcel van der Linden, “Globalization’s Agricultural Roots” in Willem van Schendel (ed.), *Embedding Agricultural Commodities: Using Historical Evidence, 1840s–1940s* (London, 2017), pp. 146–89.

2. Agrarian commodity history has received significant scholarly attention in recent years. See, for example, Ulbe Bosma, *The Sugar Plantation in India and Indonesia: Industrial Production, 1770–2010* (New York, 2013); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York, 2014); Willem van Schendel, *Embedding Agricultural Commodities*; Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff, *Colonising Plants in Bihar (1760–1950): Tobacco Betwixt Indigo and Sugar* (Gurgaon, 2014); Prakash Kumar, *Indigo Plantations and Science in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 2012). The 1980s was another moment when agrarian commodity history received similar scholarly attention. Allen Wells discusses these works in his 1988 review “The Terrible Green Monster: Recent Literature on Sugar, Coffee, and Coerced Labor in the Caribbean”, *Latin American Research Review* 23:2 (1988), pp. 189–205.

3. The present work is a translation of Breman’s Dutch edition titled, *Koloniaal profijt van onvrije arbeid. Het Preanger stelsel van gedwongen koffieteel op Java, 1720–1870* (Amsterdam, 2010). His other works on colonial Java include: Jan Breman, *Control of Land and Labour in Colonial Java: A Case Study of Agrarian Crisis and Reform in the Region of Cirebon during the First Decades of the 20th Century* (Dordrecht, 1983). Breman, *Taming the Coolie Beast: Plantation Society and the Colonial Order in Southeast Asia* (Delhi, 1989); Breman and Gunawan Wiradi, *Good Times and Bad Times in Rural Java: Case Study of Socio-Economic Dynamics in Two Villages towards the End of the Twentieth Century* (Leiden, 2002).

4. “Jan Breman: A Footloose Scholar”, *New Left Review*, II:94 (2015), pp. 45–75, 49.

5. Breman, *Patronage and Exploitation: Changing Agrarian Relations in South Gujarat, India* (New Delhi, 1979).

based on a patron-client relationship between the upper-caste landlords and the socially and economically inferior labourers. In the 1970s, Breman returned to his research on colonial Java, and studied the nature of pauperization and differentiation among the Javanese peasantry under Dutch colonial rule.<sup>6</sup> For the present book, Breman uses considerable amounts of materials, such as official records, reports, contemporary books, paintings, and statistics, to unravel the coffee production system in the Priangan highlands (West Java) between 1700 and 1870. By 1726, the VOC (the Dutch East India Company) supplied three quarters of the total coffee in the global market. Coffee produced in the Priangan was brought to Amsterdam from the Javanese shores and, from there, it was sold in the global market.

Breman's narrative is structured at three levels. First, how was the Priangan system of forced labour built, how did it survive, and how was it merged into the cultivation system (1830–1870) in colonial Java? Second, what was the effect of forced cultivation on local society and economy? Finally, how did peasants respond to the regime of unfree labour?

Breman argues that the VOC's economic gains were first secured by establishing a political dominance in the region. The VOC aligned with local elites, who, on behalf of the VOC, ran coffee cultivation and extracted labour from the peasantry as a tribute. In return, the VOC paid local chiefs a certain amount of money per pikul (equal to 125 pounds) of coffee and recognized their rights to extract forced labour, taxes, and grains from the peasantry (p. 73). The result of this collaboration was that the VOC was able to maintain an "indigenous" bureaucracy of coffee production at the local level without paying regular salaries. Breman uses Jairus Banaji's phrase, "the tributary mode of colonial production", to characterize the nature of production process (pp. 58, 199–200).<sup>7</sup>

Breman goes deeper to understand the relationship nexus between the VOC, local elites, and the peasantry. He finds that local gentry were able to dominate under the authority of the Sultan of Cirebon by taking control of land and the labour of "footloose peasantry". In the seventeenth century, a specific regime of sedentarized agriculture was built (pp. 34–39). Pastoralists were settled to colonize wastelands and to setup irrigated rice fields (*sawahs*). In return for providing protection, the gentry claimed a part of the peasants' paddy crop from the *sawahs*. When the VOC gained control of the region in the 1670s, it recognized and legitimized local chiefs' rights through decrees. Breman argues that peasants "were forced into servitude by the gentry" as peasants did not ask for patrons (p. 37). But he offers no

6. Breman, *Control of Land and Labour*.

7. Jairus Banaji, *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation* (Leiden, 2010).

primary evidence to show that sedentary agriculture was, from the outset, an involuntary movement of the footloose peasantry and marked its servitude. Rather, he relies on H.J. Nieboer's thesis – servitude is required when labour is scarce compared to land – without probing it historically (p. 37). We must be wary of applying “universal” theoretical formulations in specific local contexts. Is servitude always guaranteed in these pre-given conditions? Is servitude a result of the situation of abundant land and scarce labour? Nieboer's thesis, especially its corollary thesis that unfree labour ceases to be necessary in resource (land) closed societies, has been subject to severe criticism.<sup>8</sup> Breman also does not talk about the social origins of local chiefs, the most important “collaborator class” of the VOC. Did the colonial rule alter the social composition of local chiefs based on its own notion of loyalty and efficiency? Posing such questions allows us to historicize the subordination of footloose peasantry and the relationship nexus between the VOC, local elites, and the peasantry.

According to Breman, unfree labour regime was comprised of three elements: forced cultivation of coffee, performance of *corvée* (unpaid) labour for the colonial state and local nobility, and compulsory delivery of processed coffee beans to colonial warehouses. Peasant households or the *cacah* (a composite household comprising landowner, sharecroppers, and farm servants) planted coffee seeds, tended plants, picked and processed cherries, dried beans, and delivered coffee beans. Hardly anyone was exempt from forced labour by 1810, except for the old, the disabled, and chiefs and their servants. Each family had to maintain 1,000 coffee trees and plant 200 new trees every year to compensate for the dying trees. In 1810–1811, 25,340 households maintained, on average, 1,653 plants each (p. 113). However, the growing demand for coffee meant not only the colonization of mountain wastelands, but also increased pressure on labour. The VOC shifted to *somahan* (the family unit of husband, wife, and children) in 1839 from *cacah* (pp. 84–85, 235) for a better control over labour. Workers travelled to these distant plantations in the mountains, stayed there, and worked in gangs under a strict work regime. Once the coffee beans were ready, the delivery to warehouses took months due to bad roads, the wilderness, and poor means of transport (pack animals). The coffee had to arrive on the coast before the monsoon to avoid getting wet (p. 70).

Breman brilliantly shows that the degree of labour extraction kept changing over the years, but the essence of the system – unfree labour – remained untouched. Governor H.W. Daendels (1808–1811) intensified the extraction of labour by collecting new knowledge about the hinterland, its

8. For a critique of Nieboer's thesis see, Orlando Patterson, “The Structural Origins of Slavery: A Critique of the Nieboer-Domar Hypothesis from a Comparative Perspective”, *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 292:1 (1 June 1977), pp. 12–34.

population, and natural resources through maps, surveys, and inspections (p. 108). The days of forced labour under his rule increased from two months to six (p. 118). He also increased the share of local chiefs from twenty per cent to fifty per cent in peasants' paddy crops (p. 110). However, the reach of the Dutch colonial state was never absolute in the region, and labour extraction was often mediated by local power relations and hierarchies. Local gentry always hid a portion of the total population from the Dutch government's scrutiny. For example, from 168,521 households in 1886 in Priangan, about 20,030 households were exempt from forced coffee cultivation and produced paddy for local chiefs (p. 286). This uneven extraction of labour became a bone of contention between local chiefs and the colonial government, which wanted a more homogenous extraction of labour since the 1840s.

When the VOC's rule ended in the 1800s and the French-ruled Dutch state took control of the region, a debate occurred among colonial officials about whether peasants should be recognized as owners of land and should pay a land tax instead of performing forced labour to produce cash crops (pp. 101–102). Officials concluded that the Priangan system best suited the economic interest of the Dutch state. Similarly, in 1811, when the British took control of Java from the Dutch (until 1815), they continued the regime of unfree labour in Priangan while abolishing it elsewhere in colonial Java and replacing it with a land rent system (pp. 124–125). In the 1820s, when the coffee price fell in the world market, Brazil took the lead in coffee production with its slave labour, and Java's productivity fell due to the British neglect and the Java war, the Dutch colonial state resorted to unfree labour on a larger scale. The cultivation system was launched and the whole Java was mobilized for forced labour. The goal was to produce cash crops at the lowest rate possible for the global market: sugarcane in the northern coastal plain of Java and the east of Java, and coffee and indigo (for a brief moment) in Priangan.

Breman's analysis of how the forced regime of labour survived a century and half is fascinating. He suggests that it was based both on everyday physical violence and imperial morality. His exploration of colonial tropes, rhetoric, and myths to justify the regime of unfree labour shows his scholarly brilliance. For example, when the peasantry protested their exploitation, colonial officials often blamed regents and chiefs for amassing wealth and not paying due wages to peasants (pp. 65–66). Similarly, colonial officials constantly justified the regime of unfree labour by calling the Priangan peasantry backward, uncivilized, subsistence loving, and uneconomic. Officials were convinced that if peasants were left on their own to cultivate and pay land rents, they would not do so because of their lazy and uneconomic behaviour (p. 144). Forced labour, according to them, was a necessity to civilize, modernize, and educate the backward Priangan peasantry. However, we do not get a sense of how these myths and

rhetorical tropes were constructed. Did such notions derive their understanding from the beliefs of native gentry or were they borrowed from the emerging imperial civilizational discourse? Was the uneconomic behaviour of the Priangan peasantry a reflection of their poverty, lack of capital, resources, or was it part of their resistance to a settled life?

At the centre of Breman's work is the refutation of the revisionist view that asserts that indigenous peasantry prospered under the cultivation system and did not protest its implementation.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, Breman shows that the cultivation system forced Javanese into involuntary labour, took over their common lands and natural resources, produced monoculture, destroyed local economy by banning foreign merchants and traders, impoverished peasant families, created a class of landless labour, and sharpened local socio-economic hierarchies.<sup>10</sup> One of Breman's strongest argument is that the peasantry was not passive. Peasants constantly challenged the unfree labour regime. They destroyed coffee plants, hid cattle to avoid forced requisitioning, threw coffee beans while transporting, and, in extreme cases, fled to inaccessible mountains (pp. 66, 74, 174). Breman further refutes Cees Fasseur's explanation of the demise of the cultivation system due to external forces – the powerful lobby of liberal politician and businessmen in the metropole for a laissez-faire policy (pp. 358–360). Instead, he shows that the system was abolished because of its perpetual drive to increase coffee production at the lowest cost possible in the face of continued resistance from the peasantry (p. 306). While I agree that peasant workers had undone the calculations and strategies of colonial officials through their continuous resistance, and forced authorities to alter the terms of forced coffee production, could they have abolished a heavily entrenched violent system by themselves alone? Did the growing critique of the system along with the pressure to open up colonial Java to private agro-business not add to the demise of the system?<sup>11</sup> Did it not create conditions where the resistance of the peasantry against forced labour received more attention? Breman's total denial of the private agro-business advocates from the metropole and the emerging internal critique of forced labour among colonial officials is problematic because it restricts his research into the binary of external versus internal causation

9. Robert Van Niel, *Java under the Cultivation System: Collected Writings* (Leiden, 1992); R.E. Elson, *Village Java under the Cultivation System, 1830–1870* (Sydney, 1994).

10. According to Breman, one third of 108,816 households in Priangan did not own any paddy fields (p. 317).

11. J. Crawford, a British colonial official, debated with J.C. Baud, a Dutch Governor General of the Indies and the Minister of Colonies, about the superiority of employing free labour. His point was that British-controlled Ceylon, employing free labour (Malabarais and Tamils from colonial India), was far more successful in producing coffee than the large Java island producing coffee under forced labour. John Bastin, "Crawford and Baud on Free and Forced Labour in Java", *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 29:1 (173) (1956), pp. 195–99.

and reproduces an analytical framework similar to the one that he sets out to critique. Further, he undermines much of the interesting empirical material that he presents on these two aspects – the private agro-business lobby and the colonial critique of the cultivation system – in the second half of the book.

Breman's choice to not engage with wider debates on free and unfree labour regimes of agrarian commodity production further limits his empirically rich study.<sup>12</sup> He neither refers to, nor engages with major historical works on coffee production labour regimes outside of colonial Java, such as the "free" migrant contract labour system developed in Ceylon, the slave labour system in Brazil, or the post-slavery indentured labour regimes in the Caribbean islands.<sup>13</sup> When Dutch colonial officials defended the forced labour system, they spoke in a global context. Justifying the forced labour system against the onslaught of "free labour", the aforementioned Dutch colonial official J.C. Baud wrote to the previously mentioned J. Crawford, "your cause is that of civilisation and of European prestige; we are interested in its success".<sup>14</sup>

#### BONDED EMPLOYEE AND THE PRODUCTION OF TEA IN COLONIAL ASSAM

Nitin Varma's meticulously researched book focuses on tea, another export-oriented commodity produced by the English in colonial India.<sup>15</sup> The book is precise, well argued, and thoughtful. Varma sets out to study the recruitment, settlement, work patterns, and resistance of coolie workers employed at Assam tea plantations between the 1830s and the 1920s. His book adds to a recently growing scholarly literature on tea.<sup>16</sup>

12. Tom Brass and Marcel van der Linden (ed.), *Free and Unfree Labour: The Debate Continues* (Bern and New York, 1997).

13. Sidney Chalhoub, "The Precariousness of Freedom in a Slave Society (Brazil in the Nineteenth Century)", *International Review of Social History* [hereafter *IRSH*], 56:3 (2011), pp. 405–439; Verena Stolcke and Michael M. Hall, "The Introduction of Free Labour on São Paulo Coffee Plantations", *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 10:2–3 (1983), pp. 170–200; Roland Wenzlhuemer, "Indian Labour Immigration and British Labour Policy in Nineteenth-Century Ceylon", *Modern Asian Studies*, 41:3 (2007), pp. 575–602.

14. Bastin, "Crawford and Baud on Free and Forced Labour in Java", p. 198.

15. The book is a revised version of Varma's PhD dissertation submitted at the Humboldt University in 2011. It also forms the second volume of the series titled *Work in Global and Historical Perspective* edited by Andreas Eckert, Sidney Chalhoub, Mahua Sarkar, Dmitri van den Bersselaar, and Christian G. De Vito.

16. Jayeeta Sharma, *Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India* (Durham, NC, 2011); Rana P. Behal, *One Hundred Years of Servitude: Political Economy of Tea Plantations in Colonial Assam* (New Delhi, 2014); Samita Sen et al., *Passage to Bondage: Labour in the Assam Tea Plantations* (Kolkata, 2016); Erika Diane Rappaport, *A Thirst for Empire: How Tea Shaped the Modern World*, (Princeton, NJ, 2017); Jane McCabe, *Race, Tea and Colonial Resettlement: Imperial Families, Interrupted* (London, 2017).

Varma forwards two thesis in the introduction. First, the coolie labour regime in Assam was shaped by the specific conditions of Assam tea plantations as well as by interactions with other global labour regimes such as the ship labour, slavery, and the indentured labour (p. 7).<sup>17</sup> Second, coolie labour relations were historically produced through the process of migration, employment contracts, work regime, and plantation life, and coolies were an active subject who not only participated in these relationships, but also reworked them (p. 8). While these concerns are brilliantly elucidated in six different chapters, global connections do not feature prominently. There seems to be an attention imbalance between the specificity and the global interactions, which he stresses in the introduction. The specificity of Assam tea plantations gets a more empirical and analytical focus.

Varma proposes that, from the beginning, tea plantations were plagued by the dual problem of labour shortage and labour uncertainty, which pushed European plantation owners to go for a labour policy that tied workers to the plantation for a fixed period. Rising demand for tea in the global market and in Great Britain, along with an unfavourable tea trade with China, forced Great Britain to look for alternative solutions.<sup>18</sup> The East India Company's discovery of upland Assam as the ideal land and climate for tea cultivation required capital, infrastructure, and human resources. A London-based joint-stock company by the name of Assam Company pooled necessary capital for tea plantations in Assam. Varma does not tell us about the social and occupational background of plantation owners. Did these "men" have prior experience in the agrarian economy? During the phase that Varma calls "proto-plantation", Chinese tea workers' skills became indispensable, and they were brought at great expense from China both to set up plantations and to train Indian workers, including the management (p. 21). Local labour was employed to clear, drain, level, and fence the hilly forest land. However, for cultivation purposes, the local labour was unreliable because it constantly deserted during the peak of the agricultural season (p. 25). The initial solution was the employment of wage-seeking Kacharis (an ethnic group found in Assam). Advance payments and wage withholding became the means to immobilize Kacharis. However, due to the peculiar nature of plantations – their distance from the mainland labour and commodity markets – regular wages and rice provisions became critical parts of the wage structure. Delay or stoppage in the delivery of these two items became an arena of conflict between labour and the management during the 1840s and 50s, resulting in desertions, strikes,

17. Prabhu Mohapatra raises similar issues in his essay, "Assam and the West Indies, 1860–1920: Immobilizing Plantation Labour", in Douglas Hay and Paul Craven (ed.), *Masters, Servants and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire, 1562–1955* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004) pp. 455–480.

18. A tea committee was formed in February 1834 to explore the possibilities of growing tea in Assam. Varma, *Coolies of Capitalism*, pp. 16–18.



and protests by Kacharis (pp. 31–32).<sup>19</sup> Labour shortage was further accelerated by the establishment of new plantations in the southern districts of Cachar and Sylhet (Surma Valley) and elsewhere. In the 1850s, a total of sixty-eight tea factories operated and produced 12,05,689 pounds of tea (p. 34). Attempts were made, albeit without much success, to produce a wage-seeking proletarian class locally by levying a high land tax and restricting the opium cultivation. The only solution was to import labour from the areas with excess workers in the eastern and upper central regions of India.

Varma shows that plantation managers resorted to private recruiting through a figure called an *arkati* (recruiter), who roamed the villages of the above regions to entice landless peasants to go to Assam. Labour was brought to Assam via Calcutta by foot, rail, and steamers, where they were bound under contracts. The journey was torturous, unhealthy, and devoid of proper food. The mortality rates during the transition were as high as twenty to fifty per cent (p. 47). The Bengal Native Labour Act of 1863 was instituted to regulate the migration of Assam workers in terms of sanitary provisions, registration of recruiters, and standard travel arrangements. However, what worried plantation owners more was the desertion and unsettlement of imported workers whose recruitment and journey to Assam cost them a lot. In the coming decades, employers constantly experimented with cheaper ways of recruiting labour. For example, they established the *sardari* system – sending old employees (*sardars*) to their home regions to recruit relatives and fellow-villagers.<sup>20</sup>

Planters' anxiety to immobilize migrant labour at the site of plantation was secured through various colonial acts.<sup>21</sup> Varma argues that these acts were crucial, not only in terms of settling the plantation labour, but also in building and legitimizing the authority and powers of planters. The Assam Act of 1863 bounded workers for five years and made desertion a criminal act, and a revised Act in 1865 gave planters the special power to privately arrest deserting coolies (p. 49). The legalization of private arrest was

19. Delay in the delivery of cash-kind salary continues to be a problem in Assam tea plantations. On 13 December 2017, workers of the Bogidhola Tea Estate in Assam demanded their delayed annual bonus, which is tied to the timings of Durga Puja Festival, by surrounding the bungalows of plantation owners. The plantation managements responded by opening gunfire on workers, injuring fifteen of them. See, "Indian Tea Plantation Owners Shoot at Workers Demanding Bonus", *Reuters*, 18 December 2017, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-labour-tea/indian-tea-plantation-owners-shoot-at-workers-demanding-bonus-idUSKBN1EC1YB>; last accessed 1 January 2018.

20. Samita Sen brilliantly captures the competition between the *sardari* system, professional commercial recruiter agents, and free emigrant workers in her essay "Commercial Recruiting and Informal Intermediation: Debate over the Sardari System in Assam Tea Plantations, 1860–1900", *Modern Asian Studies*, 44:1 (2010), pp. 3–28.

21. Varma does not focus so much on the history of the implementation of these laws and the resultant economy of coercion. On this see, Mohapatra, "Assam and the West Indies, 1860–1920".

unprecedented in the history of post-slavery plantation labour regimes. It gave planters, as Varma shows, a sense of ownership over labourers' bodies. This sense of ownership came from "buying coolies" from recruiters, and the ownership was reflected in planters' account books, where a worker's death and desertion was marked as a loss (pp. 1–2). Contracts and private arrest ensured that the costs of investing in procuring coolies were recovered by the labour of immobilized coolies. Varma shows that what justified these increased police powers of the plantation management was the "exceptionality" of Assam tea plantations – their distant location, the absence of a local labour market, huge labour transportation costs, and a thin presence of the colonial authority in the region.

At the same time, planters used the Master and Servants Act of 1859 (Act XIII) to regulate locally procured labour and contract expired workers (p. 72).<sup>22</sup> Unlike the 1863 Act, the 1859 Act did not have any protective clause specific to the plantations, such as the registration of workers and recruiters, sanitary laws, fixed working days (six days per week) and hours (nine hours a day), coolie hospitals, and a maximum seven per cent mortality rate.

In a fascinating chapter, Varma explores popular perceptions about Assam in labour recruiting regions such as Chota Nagpur. This adds an interesting perspective to the existing historiography on Assam tea plantations and labour catchment areas.<sup>23</sup> Rumours, anecdotes, and stories circulated a notion of Assam that was full of havoc, deception, uncertainty, and death. Varma locates this image of Assam in workers' songs, beliefs, and conversations. In these regions, Assam was seen as a place of no return (p. 108). Varma reads these popular anxieties in the light of peasants' growing "awareness" of events happening in plantations and around the plantation economy, such as deceptive recruitment methods by *arkatis* (recruiters), excessive work hours, terrible working conditions, and widespread use of physical violence in plantations.

From here, Varma shifts to yet another interesting theme – the use of alcohol in Assam tea plantations. He shows that alcohol came to be seen as both a source of work intensity and inefficiency. Many planters distributed

22. On the genealogy and practices of master and servant acts in a global context see, Hay and Craven, *Masters, Servants and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire*; Ravi Ahuja, "Making the Empire a Thinkable Whole: Master and Servant Law in Transterritorial Perspective", *IRSH*, 52:2 (2007), pp. 287–294.

23. Sen, "Commercial Recruiting"; Prabhu Mohapatra, "Coolie and Colliers: A Study of the Agrarian Context of Labour Migration from Chotanapur, 1880–1920", *Studies in History*, 1:2 (1985), pp. 247–303; K.L. Chattopadhyay, "Labour Migration and Labour Recruitment in the Tea-Plantation of North-East India", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 61:1 (2000–01), pp. 894–901; Rana Behal, "Coolie, Recruiters and Planters: Migration of Indian Labour to the Southeast Asian and Assam Plantations", *Crossroads Asia*, Working Paper Series No. 9, July 2013, pp. 1–29.

rum as *bakshish* (rewards) to their workers on the occasion of contract renewal, labour-intensive workdays, festivals, and marriages. Rum, in planters' discourse, was a stimulant that not only increased labour productivity, but was also an antidote to the unhealthy conditions on plantations. The practice was part of a strategic shift in controlling plantation life through contracts and violent force to "cultural artefacts" of "great symbolic and ritual value" to workers (pp. 130–131). Labour intensive workdays resulted in excessive drinking, marking a shift in the drinking patterns and in the drink itself – from home-brewed rice beer consumed on festive occasions to drinking distilled, shop-owned liquor over the weekends. Varma locates this increased drinking behaviour in the growing excise revenue of the province in the 1880s and 1890s (p. 143). Excess drinking and liquor shops at the gates of plantations posed a greater threat of inefficiency and absenteeism (pp. 139–141). This fear of losing a healthy workforce was drawn from the emerging medical and missionary temperance discourse.<sup>24</sup>

Varma finds that by the late nineteenth century, planters were not only concerned with workers' desertion, but also with their insubordination and defiance. He finds considerable evidence of violent conflicts between plantation authorities and workers. Workers not only struck work, but also assaulted authorities. This, according to Varma, had to do with the breaking of *dustooors* (customs) by plantation owners. Over the decades, certain practices in plantations had acquired the status of unwritten conventions, norms, and customs. While these customs were not always fixed and kept changing over the time and from one plantation to the other, they defined the work rhythm of plantations.<sup>25</sup> When these *dustooors* were disturbed, workers did not hesitate to resort to violence.<sup>26</sup> For example, in the Surma Valley, workers were customarily given a piece of cultivable land for subsistence as part of their wage. When planters stopped the practice because it intervened with the work regime of plantations, workers resented the move collectively. Similarly, the use of umbrellas while working in tea fields was a custom. Employers' introduction of hats instead of umbrellas, which would keep both hands of workers free, was met with protests and assaults. The intensification of the workday, extraction of work on a non-workday, wage cuts, non-delivery of rice supplies, leave suspension on festive occasions,

24. To read more on the colonial regulation of working class drinking habits see, Nikhil Menon, "Battling the Bottle: Experiments in Regulating Drink in Late Colonial Madras", *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 52:1 (2015), pp. 29–51.

25. On the making and remaking of customs in the light of colonial codification practices see, Neeladri Bhattacharya, "Remaking Custom: The Discourse and Practice of Colonial Codification", in Romila Thapar, R. Champakalakshmi, and Sarvepalli Gopal (ed.), *Tradition, Dissent and Ideology: Essays in Honour of Romila Thapar* (Delhi 1996), pp. 20–51.

26. On the conflicts of the poor over the infringements of their customary rights see, Edward P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London, 1993).

and sexual harassment of female coolies resulted in assaults by workers on the management, sometimes with sticks.

Varma finds that workers' resistance intensified with the emergence of Gandhian mass nationalism, which was also a time of tea resurgence in the global market after the recession of World War I. Plantations, for the first time, were influenced by external politics. Workers' neighbourhoods and market places became the site of nationalist and counter-nationalist propaganda. Workers demanded a wage hike in 1921 and deserted tea gardens en masse. They believed that Gandhi baba would liberate them from the shackles of the plantation bondage. Planters noted a total of thirty to sixty per cent labour shortage (p. 205). The most affected regions were the Chargola and Longai Valley, where out of the 15,000 workers, 8,000 had left. Surprisingly, workers continued to desert even after getting a wage hike. They refused to accept rice and salt given by planters (pp. 216–217). Varma reads these unprecedented actions of workers as the bankruptcy of the legitimacy of planters' authority and their inability to absorb labour within a smooth plantation capitalism.

Varma has brilliantly captured the making of coolie labour relations and suggests that the subjective formation of coolie labour was a project that was always in the making. While he shows that plantation life created certain shared cultural codes and practices, and plantations often ran on what was acceptable to workers and not just to employers, he does not tell us what happened to workers after violent protests. Were the defiant demands for the status quo settled with peace, negotiation, or punishment? How were offenders selected from a collective action of violence? This chapter, where workers seem all-powerful, defiant, and violent against the management, is in contrast with the chapter on contracts, where workers often appear as powerless and lacking violent protesting agency in the face of contracts, *arkatis*, and legalized oppression. This sharp transition in workers' behaviour when it comes to contracts (including forced recruitment and work confinement) and when it comes to the breaking of customary codes calls for a more extensive explanation than has been offered by Varma. It is not that workers do not protest against contracts or for their rights enshrined in contracts, as Varma himself shows (p. 54). Coolies did go to the office of the commissioner and to the courts to raise their grievances. What they did was to combine violent protests with peaceful petitioning, and each form of protest had its own strategies, calculations, and repercussions. I think exploring how, when, and why workers made these shifts from one form of protest to the other would have expanded our notions of workers' resistance.

## CONCLUSIONS

Together, the two books offer an interesting perspective on the relationship between immobilized labour and colonial capitalism. Immobility of labour

emerges as a fundamental feature of the capitalist agricultural production. Labour, whether brought from outside or internally procured, was bounded at the worksite through force, debt, laws, power hierarchies, advance wage payment, wage withholding, and welfare measures. The category of immobilized labour allows us to examine labour regimes beyond the dichotomies of free and unfree, capitalist and pre-capitalist relations, and wage and non-waged labour.<sup>27</sup> The nature of labour immobility was transformed both from above, through laws and visions of the master, and from below, through workers' actions. Those who were immobilized and bonded constantly transformed the infrastructure and degree of bondage. Workers' struggles and practices constantly disturbed employers' calculation and desired results. But these changes were also accompanied by other global and local forces, such as the rise of anti-colonial nationalism, commodity market shifts, the critique of forced labour by a section of liberal bourgeoisie in the metropole, and the emergence of newer types of immobilized labour regimes (based on free migrant labour bounded by law and debt) at the global level. Breman's book, though not taking a global history approach, would have benefited from integrating the effects of these global and local forces in his conclusions and engaging with the historiography on free and unfree labour regimes of coffee production outside of colonial Java. While Varma is sensitive to the global conversations in the introduction to his book, especially the interaction of the tea plantation coolie labour regime with the offshore indentured migration and the ship labour, these conversations are not systematically integrated into the main chapters, where workers' resistance, colonial laws, labour shortage, worker recruitment networks, and the internal life of tea plantations are central in explaining the coolie labour regime.

Capitalists' inherent desire to immobilize and bind labour at the worksite in various ways continues till today, and it is here that these two books leave a significant mark. Contemporary investigative journalism shows that the phenomenon of exploitation and the extreme poverty of workers producing these commodities for a more global market has not ended. Tea and coffee continue to have a cruel record in terms of labour conditions to this day. It will not be a surprise that, as you sip your morning or afternoon tea, the peasant-producer of the same tea lives in an insanitary house on India's Northeastern Assam tea plantations and receives less than the minimum daily wage (Rs. 115 or about 2 Euros).<sup>28</sup> The below-minimum wage is not

27. Brass and Linden, *Free and Unfree Labour*; Tom Brass, "Some Observations on Unfree Labour, Capitalist Restructuring, and Deproletarianization", *International Review of Social History*, 39:2 (1994), pp. 255–275.

28. A 2015 joint investigation by the *BBC News* and *BBC Radio 4's File on 4*, on the lives of Assam's tea plantation workers revealed that workers live in inhuman housing conditions, get below minimum wages, use child labour to augment income, suffer from malnutrition, work in

enough for workers to feed their malnourished children and relieve them from work. Either by force or by conditions, the cycle of endless bondage continues for some. The picture does not change if you start drinking coffee. In Kenya, a coffee grower earns only twelve dollars per month.<sup>29</sup> In many tea and coffee plantations around the world, advance payment and debt remain the dominant mode of immobilizing workers. The contemporary coffee agro-industry thrives upon child and informal labour paid below the minimum wage. In December 2016, a report titled “Certified Coffee, Rightless Workers”, conducted by the Reporter Brasil, a civil society organization, was published. The investigation revealed that certified coffee farms in Brazil employ workers without proper contracts (informal labour), withhold salaries of workers, pay below minimum wage, refuse mandatory benefits, and compromise the safety and health of workers.<sup>30</sup> The report refers to slavery-like conditions on farms: “forced labour, exhaustive working hours, debt peonage, and degraded working conditions”.<sup>31</sup> Top tea and coffee brands, such as the PG Tips, Tetleys, Twinings, Nestlé, and Starbucks, often buy their products from these farms located in Asia, Latin America, and Africa.

hazardous conditions (spraying pesticides without protective equipment), and live oppressed lives under the tight control of tea estate management authorities. Justin Rowlett and Jane Deith, “The Bitter Story behind the UK’s National Drink”, *BBC News*, 8 September 2015, sec. India, available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-34173532>; last accessed 3 February 2018.

29. “Bitter Brew: The Stirring Reality of Coffee, Food Empowerment Project”, available at: <http://www.foodispower.org/coffee/>; last accessed 1 January 2018.

30. Marcel Gomes (ed.), *Certified Coffee, Rightless Workers*, Monitor 5, December 2016, pp. 1–25; Dom Phillips, “Coffee from Rainforest Alliance Farms in Brazil Linked to Exploited Workers”, *The Guardian*, 4 January 2017, sec. Guardian Sustainable Business, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2017/jan/04/coffee-rainforest-alliance-utz-brazil-pesticides-exploited-workers-pay>; last accessed 1 January 2018.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 5; Kate Hodal, “Nestlé Admits Slave Labour Risk on Brazil Coffee Plantations”, *The Guardian*, 2 March 2016, sec. Global development, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/mar/02/nestle-admits-slave-labour-risk-on-brazil-coffee-plantations>; last accessed 1 January 2018.