

OCCASIONAL PAPER

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**Understanding Coercion
as a System and Practice:
Tea Plantations of West Bengal**

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Understanding Coercion as a System and Practice: Tea Plantations of West Bengal

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Abstract:

Scholarship on labour has viewed coercion almost as a default, an abstraction with little attention paid to concrete mechanisms and systems through which it takes place. Taking the specific context of tea plantations in Dooars located in the eastern region of India at the foothills of Himalayas, the article unpacks how systems of coercion are put in place, operationalised and resisted. The configuration/assemblage of coercion in the tea plantations are made up of multiple, easily overlooked practices structuring and manipulating time and space on the plantation. In this article I identify key aspects of this configuration and historicise it. I also show that resistance takes place as a part of the same cycle. The article looks closely at how work-day and worksite i.e. the aspects of time and space are managed to keep a coercive system in place with minimum cost to the planters. intricate workings of coercion in the everyday configurations of time, space and their interaction. Coercion as the foundational logic of a plantation regime is both systemic and practice. Originating through the recruitment process, laws and contracts it endures and nuances itself through subtle manipulation, cheating and

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other covert means of exercising control. While identifying both systems and practices as the infrastructure of coercion, the article argues against creating a binary or hierarchy between these two. Rather it intends to show the co-constitutiveness of these as mere devices through which coercion is exercised, endured and often even legitimated. Coercion is hardly ever absolute and there is sustained examples of workers' resistance to these. Workers' resistance everyday and insignificant are a constant challenge against the colonizing of time and space as currencies of coercion. Based on labour reports from the colonial and immediate post-colonial period along with ethnographic research in the region, makes an empirically grounded analysis of what could constitute coercion.

Keywords: labour, resistance, space, time, women

Labour regimes globally and across time have been read as coercive. While being ubiquitous in labour history, there is relatively little scholarship that critically engages with coercion as a historical experience. More generally coercion has been viewed as a default, almost an abstraction with little attention paid to concrete mechanisms and systems through which it takes place.¹ Taking the specific context of tea plantations in Dooars located in the eastern region of India at the foothills of Himalayas, the article unpacks how systems of coercion are put in place, operationalised and resisted. The scholarship on tea plantations in the sub-continent have illustrated deftly how

1. E.g. Tom Brass and Henry Bernstein, 1992 *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*. Routledge.

histories and sociologies of labour in these sites are also accounts of coercion.² While the article contributes to this scholarship, it focusses on illustrating how coercion was not incidental to the functioning of the plantation. It looks to 'unpack the very bundle of material and discursive practices that shape asymmetrical relations among individuals, groups and territories'.³ The configuration/assemblage of coercion are made up of multiple, easily overlooked practices structuring and manipulating time and space on the plantation. In this article I identify key aspects of this configuration and historicise it. I also show that resistance takes place as a part of the same cycle.

A labour regime needs to establish labour as a coherent system, made predictable and easily controllable by the manager.⁴ Labour regimes are a product of both system and practice. Without resorting to reifying binaries between these two mechanisms of coercion, the article argues for system and practice to be understood as co-constitutive and making up the infrastructure of a coercive labour regime such as the plantation. An active involvement of the state and law creates a site of coercion, this site and its consequent labour regime can only sustain itself at the back of everyday labour practices. These everyday practices, mundane and invisible, conversely become effective and sustainable, only when they manipulate fundamental elements such as (in this case) space and time. The state often finds it in its interest to argue for a separation between system and

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2. Sarit Kumar Bhowmik 1981. *Class Formation in the Plantation System*. Kolkata: People's Publishing House; Behal, R. (2014). *One Hundred Years of Servitude: Political Economy of Tea Plantations in Colonial Assam*. New Delhi: Tulika Books. Mytheri Jegathesan, 2019 *Tea and Solidarity: Tamil Women and Work in Postwar Sri Lanka*, Seattle: University of Washington.
 3. Heinsen and Schiel, 2022
 4. Fredrick Cooper 1992. 'Colonizing Time: Work Rhythm and Labour Conflict in Colonial Mombasa', N.B. Dirks (ed.) *Colonialism and Culture*: 209-244. 238

practice, whereby it can foreground the latter as aberration—a societal failure or a bureaucratic oversight. But empirically grounded histories of coercion as practice, shows that such separation is artificial, and incomplete. The article looks closely at how work-day and worksite i.e. the aspects of time and space are managed to keep a coercive system in place with minimum cost to the planters. Chatterjee argues the daily discipline that constructs plantation order rests upon shared understanding of what constitutes ‘rational’ planning and behaviour with order and discipline being the twin arms of this dominant ideology of rule.⁵ These elements of labour regimes, the everyday life of plantation workers illustrates the everydayness of coercion, the subtle ways in which control shapes the lives of the labourers.

In the 1850s, at the time of setting up of the plantations, the colonial state and the planters of the Dooars plantations were particularly eager to deny a systemic nature of coercion in the recruitment practices. Migration to Dooars was to be ‘voluntary’ using only persuasion and/or monetary inducement.⁶ The labourers in Dooars were not a part of the indentured system, like in the case of Assam, thus allowing the state to emphasize their ability to dictate their terms of recruitment and classify reports of kidnapping, force etc. as aberration of practice.⁷ Labour historians have, however, pointed out that the conscious use of the category of ‘free’ by the administrators hardly meant anything in the recruitment experience of the migrants.⁸ Further the Dooars plantations fell under the non-Regulation tract implying that most of the laws and regulations generally enforceable could

5. Chatterjee 2003: 170

6. Samita Sen, “Question of Consent: Women’s Recruitment for Assam Tea Gardens, 1859–1900,” *Studies in History* 18, no. 2 (2002): 231–260.: 253.

7. Arbuthnot Report, 1904, Labour Enquiry Commission Report, 1910 emphasize the absence of contractual bondage in recruitment and settlement of workers in the tea plantations of Dooars.

8. Samita Sen, 2002

not be applied to the region giving unlimited power to the planter therefore already carving these out as sites of exception.⁹ The enclave like structure of the plantations, migration from far-flung areas and punishment on escape made exit from plantations difficult. Low wages combined with non-wage benefits of housing, subsistence farming also further embedded control over workers' lives. The endurance of the systemic/structural nature of coercion in plantations, however, cannot be understood without reference to the everyday practices of labour, the subtle ways in which fundamental yet mundane aspects of workers' lives were manipulated. The operationalisation of plantation system operated in reference to a distinctive command structure based on a mix between a paternalism (through the construction of the manager as *mai-bap* or guardian) and coercive control.

Various sources are used to map the timeline of two centuries covering colonial and postcolonial period, though the focus is on the latter. The emphasis is in unpacking coercive practices through the perspective of the coerced. To do this, it privileges ethnographic and oral history methods. The paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a tea plantation in Dooars, Daahlia between 2010 to 2012. Daahlia (name anonymised) tea plantation belongs to Duncans tea company, which owned a large share of the total Dooars plantations. The fieldwork and oral histories draw on other plantations in the region too. The article is also informed by archival research. Oral histories are read alongside Labour Reports of 1910, 1931, 1946 and 1958 and labour dispute files available in West Bengal State Archives and the British Library Archives. Combining ethnography with archives can provide immense possibilities of studying lives across space and time.¹⁰ The Labour Commission reports especially its appendices, the various letters and deputations

9. Chatterjee, 2003

10. See for example Tony Bennett 2014. "Liberal Government and the Practical History of Anthropology." *History and Anthropology* 25

in labour dispute files reveal how the records are not devoid of the 'voice of the subject'¹¹ as it contains accounts of managers, labourers, trade unionists as well as various colonial officials. Reading this material in interaction with fieldnotes allows one to locate how power creates various ways in which coercion is actualised and legitimized. Placing the archive in conversation with fieldwork participants allows one to interrogate and concretise the various material and discursive practices through which coercion is actualised.¹²

The labour regimes in the plantations reproduces the patriarchal authority in the women's lives in the villages with the rights of working men to rule over working women sanctioned by the command structure through which work takes places. This chain of command originating from the office of the upper-caste, non-tribal, middle/upper class men to the tribal/lower caste, working class women through layers of mediation mapping onto existing and accepted hierarchies illustrates powerfully how coercion draws on and is legitimized through existing power structures.¹³ Placing the women in centre stage of the article is thus not incidental but rather key to unpacking the abstraction that scholarship on coercion often tends to lean towards.

The empirical section of the paper is divided into three parts—space, time and resistance. Coercive practices are disaggregated into temporality and spatiality for analytical understanding. While

(2): 150–170; Brian Keith Axel 2002. *From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and Its Futures*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

11. Punthall, 2021: 320

12. Olívia Maria Gomes da Cunha 2006. "Imperfect Tense: An Ethnography of the Archive." Translated by David Allan Rodgers. *Mana* 1, Selected Edition: https://socialsciences.scielo.org/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0104-93132006000100001&lng=en&nrm=iso.

13. Bhowmik, 1981; Pia Chatterjee 2003. *A Time for Tea: Women's Labor and Post-Colonial Politics on an Indian Plantation*. New Delhi: Zubaan.

acknowledging the constitutive nature of these, the delineation helps in breaking the abstraction associated with the systems of coercion and forces us to look at its nitty-gritties through the realm of practice.

Coercion as Practice: Time

Temporal control as a mechanism of coercive labour practices lie in time-motion manipulations.¹⁴ The plantation management sought to consciously restructure working habits through the use of time to maximise production. The control over time-use by systems of production has been shown to be one of the classical forms of labour coercion.¹⁵ But it was evident that while the colonial planters sought to construct time as a mechanism of labour control, the workers tried to remake it in another direction. The experiences from the working lives of the plantations, in fact reveals that in the post-colonial societies of the global South binaries between pre and industrial time, as proposed by Thompson, could not be seen to operate in a linear fashion.¹⁶ This section locates how temporality is used as a mechanism of control and coercion and its changes and continuities over time.

Contestations over duration of work days have been subject of much of labour history scholarship focussing commonly on the actions of trade unions. The legal contestation over maximising workday constitutes systemic mechanisms of coercive labour regimes and response to it. Time, however, does not seem to be a critical issue of labour dispute in the tea plantations with relatively little labour disputes dealing with the issue. What

14. E.P Thompson 1967. "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism, Past and Present 38: 56-97.

15. EP Thompson

16. also see Jonathan P Parry 1999, "Lords of Labour: Working and Shirking in Bhilai", *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 33 (1 &2): 108-139 ; Thomas C Smith 1987, "Peasant Time and Factory Time in Japan", *Past and Present* 111: 165-197.

becomes evident from both a careful reading of labour reports and the ethnographic fieldwork are minute negotiations around control of time, showing how practices of time-use/abuse enables labour regimes in the tea plantations to be coercive. Time then emerges as a key element of how work is formally organised and experienced by the workers.¹⁷

Tea plantation work is dependent on the seasonality of the crop itself, which partially contours the workday. In this sense the temporal frame of the labour regime described in the reports of colonial India such as the 1910 Report of the Duars Committee or nineteenth century planters' diaries¹⁸ show a continuity. The Report on Minimum wages (Tea Plantation) Committee West Bengal 1948 describes this temporality of the plantation in details:

The nature of work in the tea plantations varies with different seasons of the year which can broadly be classified into two distinct categories, viz., the busy or plucking season and slack or off season. The busy season generally starts from the month of April and continues up to the end of November, the remaining period of the year from December to March being generally known as the slack or off season. In the busy season the tea leaves are collected from the gardens and are deposited in the factory, where they are manufactured into tea (black or green) through various processes. The volumes of work both in the garden and in the factory, is however, dependent on the quantity of leaves available for being plucked in the gardens...The supply of leaves gradually come down in the late season. In the off season no

17. Greene, 1951: 179

18. See for example, Jim Glendinning 1990. *Tale of a Tea Planter* The Felpham Press: West Sussex ; Typescripts compiled by Richard Davidson, "Old Dooars Days", and "Tea in India". Name:Davidson, Richard, India, tea-planter, fl 1930. Unit ID : Acc.9024.

plucking or manufacturing work is done and the work is mostly confined to maintenance jobs both in the garden and in the factory.¹⁹

As is evident from these reports then the seasonal nature of tea makes it imperative, from the point of view of the management, that the workday be flexible such that they can capitalise on it fully.

Working hours are not bound by any hard and fast rules as the leaves cannot be sent to the factory until they are well withered which depends solely on weather conditions.²⁰

This apparent compulsion to keep the working hours flexible bred a mechanism of coercion. This is evident from accounts which illustrate how this flexibility of the seasonal day was mapped onto the workers' workday. The account of eighty-year-old Nirala illustrates the operation of workday in late colonial plantations

During my father's time we saw how they had to toil from dawn to dusk. There was no rest and no break. If the *sahib* felt more leaves were required, they had to continue to pluck forgoing their lunch or *chai* (tea). It was only the setting sun and darkness which brought them some relief. But even then, some had duties at the manager's bungalow.

The workday was not framed through the definiteness of number of hours but the indeterminate sunlight. The duration of sunlight naturally varies across months and seasons but could also differ between days of the week. While negotiations to determine working hours as constituent of workday are unequal

19. Report of the Minimum Wages (Tea Plantations) Committee, West Bengal. Industrial dispute between 43 members TE of the ITPA and their employees. Labour Dept (Dispute branch). File no: D/96-10/54.

20. Royal Commission of Labour in India 1930 (Written Evidence, Part I and II: pg 42)

negotiations; once agreed upon, the limits of such working day are defined allowing workers more control, something that was not the case with light and darkness as determining workday. This task orientation of the workday made the whims of the manager a major determinant with 'setting sun and darkness' as the only limit. It can be estimated fairly certainly that this meant longer working hours in the summer and shorter in the winter.

Artificial extensions of 'natural' workday also allowed extraction of labour power without having to negotiate with consent. One such example was use of alcohol by the colonial management to stretch the workday.

One old overseer recalls, "The sahibs would give us daru [liquor] to make us quiet and drunk, some would keep on working. We were given half a bottle each, and there were no limits to hours worked."²¹

Encouraging consumption of alcohol to extend the working day or as an incentive and/or reward for good work was a practice in Assam-Dooars plantations in the 1880s.²² Holding out an intoxicant as a stimulant to extract more work from the labourers revealed the instrumental purpose that the workers had for the management where maximisation of labour was plotted even at the expense of the health of the workers.

Possibly the strongest codification of the utilisation of sunlight as a way to maximise the workday was evident in the practice of 'garden time' i.e. setting the clock of the plantation one hour ahead of the subcontinent time. With the sun rising in the eastern states earlier, this device made it possible to utilise the extra sunlight and extend the working day and also minimise loss from early sunset. This practice in tea plantations in colonial

21. Chatterjee, 2003:212-13

22. Varma, 2003, 'Drink, Labour and Plantation Capitalism in Colonial Tea Plantations of Assam', in Marcel van der Linden and Prabhu Mahapatra (ed.) *Labour Matters towards global histories*.

India has been documented in late nineteenth century plantation life in Assam which was scheduled according to this so-called “garden time.”²³ The peculiarity further lay in that garden time only operated for the gardens and not in the factories where time was kept in accordance with the standard subcontinental time.²⁴ Some of the interviews suggest that this practice was prevalent in the Dooars too.

That (garden time) was a colonial device and is no longer in practice. As working day was measured by the presence/absence of light, garden time was put an hour ahead of the IST. It was a same 24-hour day but started and ended an hour earlier than the day in other parts of the country. (M. Dasgupta, Indian Tea Association, interview conducted in ITA office in November 2011)

While seasonality seemed central to how work time was experienced by the workers, the post-colonial laws addressing the plantation such as Plantation Labour Act of 1951 and the Tea Act of 1953 did not base itself on the seasonality of plantation work regime. It capped working hours to 54 hours a week with one rest day (which accounts for 9 hours of work per day).²⁵ Legally then working hours no longer foregrounded seasonality but was homogenized with other sectors. But controlling time as constitutive of a coercive labour regime was not just the function of legality and administration but continued through everyday mechanisms. Temporal control continued to operate as an everyday work practice. The insinuation of the clock into the daily life as a feature of British colonialism was evident in the highly visible clocks, factory bells, regular rhythms of school periods, practice of clocking-in workers (a variation of this in the

23. Behal, 2014: 65

24. Behal, R. 2006. Power Structure, Discipline, and Labour in Assam Tea Plantations under Colonial Rule. *IRSH* 51 :143–172 , 159.

25. <https://labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/The-Plantation-Labour-Act-1951.pdf>.

plantation was the attendance book where their attendance was marked).²⁶ But more than the forceful injection of time regime in the everyday lives of the tea plantation workers, temporal control was achieved through appropriating banal aspects of their everyday lives and focussing it towards time-budgeting.

The ubiquity of the factory siren was one way in which the plantation work regime invisibly crept into the everyday work routine of the workers. The siren sounded at regular intervals to indicate beginning of shifts, change of shifts and the like. Elderly workers remember how from their childhood this siren served as a beacon of time though it was not clear whether it was prescribed or nudged on by the management or adapted by the workers. Bandhain, a woman in her late seventies, says,

The sound of the factory siren has been a part of my life forever. When we were small, we had no clock or nothing to tell the time. But at the sound of the first siren, I remember the flurry of activities like my mother and her friends getting ready to leave for work...the siren seemed to tell us when to do what.

Bandhain's recollection of her childhood can be approximately dated to a period seventy years ago i.e., mid twentieth century. While we can safely guess that the factory siren must have originated right at the inception of plantations with the factories, it is difficult to say whether the siren was always also used as a way orienting not just the workday but rest of the workers' days towards work. The continued existence of temporal control through the siren can be seen in how women in present day too talks of it. While task may remain the original conceptual unit through which such activities were defined and allocated, the intrusion of the siren converted this into the metric of time. In some ways it calls into being an attitude to time (passed on

26. Cooper 1992

through generations) which foregrounds the plantation work as the organising principle of the day.

You know how we, women, can while away time chatting not keeping an eye on the clock. What will happen is that in this we might get late in finishing the work, needing to stay up late. Waking up will be difficult the next day. This either makes you late or else you will be too tired to work well. The 9 pm bell actually helps us in managing our housework and be energetic next day. What is the point in wasting time in gossip? (Daahlia, March 2011)

Puja's reflections of time-budgeting, in some ways, suggest an internalization of the primacy of paid work as is evident in characterising certain activities as 'waste'. The success of the siren lies in its banality, its unobtrusiveness and yet its embeddedness in passage of time through generations. Puja's reflections, echoing that of many others like her suggest a successful normalisation of the very intention of the siren—the division of the day into plantation work, housework and replenishment of labour power for the next day's work. It is evident, however, that the rhythms of women's unpaid domestic labour hardly ever remains fully attuned to the measurement of the clock or the siren in this case.²⁷ So while creating a kind of division, at least in the women's perception, between time allotted to productive/plantation work and reproductive/house and other carework, their days are not in reality broken into an exact rhythm of work and non-work. Most women cannot afford to wake up to the sound of the siren. Fetching water, preparing food, cleaning the house all had to be accomplished before the household wakes up and sets about on its way. The siren, in this case, was merely a warning bell, an evaluation of the absolute limit of time for their housework. Similarly, times when the siren is silent like the lunchbreaks and early evenings, are also shifts

27. Thompson 1967:79

of work—collecting water from the communal tap being one of the most significant ones. That these are essentially gendered use of time becomes evident from the complete absence of men in these contexts—usually to be found in workers' canteens, in shifts in the factory or resting in the home, in some ways replicating more closely the periods of rest and work framed through the sirens.

The tea plantations for long functioned as isolated from other time regimes, most evident in the existence of garden time. The enclave like structure with provision of hospitals, schools and markets meant that for a long time, no other time regime really featured in the workers' lives.

But from the end of the twentieth century other conceptions of time intruded and the singularity of the way in which time was utilized in the plantation was challenged even if minimally. The mobile phones as a device of time, for example, made time more accessible enabling other kinds of negotiations. Similarly, the satellite television and the popularity of Hindi serials also unsettled the clear division of the day into tasks. Cooking and dinnertimes were now often built around the shows that the women watched. This reshuffling of leisure and housework did not, however, alter the regime of the sirens in a fundamental way as that was still a reference point for the workers, as the most central of the time regimes that regulated their lives.

Beyond the everydayness of time and its use in coercive practice, time was also weaved into work practices in overt and covert ways as further mechanism to control labour time and extract surplus labour. Garden work was time-rated work and not piece-rated. But during the peak plucking season (April-September) the workers had to pluck a designated minimum within their working day, failing which they got their wages deducted. Plucking above the set task or *thika* entitled them to an overtime of Rs. 2 per extra kilo plucked. The working pattern of the plucking season with the

element of overtime, as an equation between time and money, introduced an element of self-exploitation.²⁸ In comparison to the huge profit the tea companies made off the backs of the women's labour, overtime was a pittance meant to keep the women working rather than provide them an incentive/reward for working well. Speaking to the women it became evident that the company sought to deny them even this little extra money. This denial was effected through subtle manipulation of time.

Deploying a multi-tiered hierarchy was a tactic used by the planters from the early twentieth century to discipline the workers in this regard. The Royal Commission labour reports of 1910, 1931 and 1946 show the workers were bound to their *sardars* in multiple ways. They were recruited either as families or single males (who later brought their family) from their villages by the *sardars*, owed advance to them and were reliant on them in case of emergencies. The dependency relation this created through the first half of the twentieth century was inherited by following generations and further embedded in the everyday village life of the plantation where the hierarchy of age and status was naturalized. When reproduced as worksite hierarchies, the effectiveness of supervision was enhanced. The chain of command functions in such a way that the lower echelons of the command structure become collaborators in denying the workers their dues. The weight of the leaves plucked by each individual woman was noted down in a ledger book by the supervisory staff overseen by the assistant manager. Both the 1910 Report of the Duars Committee and the Royal Commission of Labour India Evidence Report Vol 6 (1931) illustrate the absence of any regulatory mechanism for ensuring the verifiability of these weights noted and the deductions made. In my ethnography too I observed that the weight on the scale and that noted down

28. The Report of the Duars Committee 1910 and Glendinning's diary (1990: 48) mention the extra payment granted to the workers during plucking season from the first half of the twentieth century.

showed consistent discrepancy.²⁹ While it was a rule that some weight was to be deducted on account of the wetness of leaves and the weight of the sack in which they were stored, it seemed evident that the figures noted were random. The manager of the plantation too alluded to such randomness in deduction in his interview.

The idea is to maintain a fair control by taking care that the weight of wet leaves and the weighing sack are deducted. Without doing this the women would try to increase the weight through using illegal means, they still do, such as putting twigs with the leaves. So, we have to ensure some control from our end too. We generally leave it to the experience of the person at hand. (Manager, Daahlia, October 2011).

This deduction then is conceived more as a matter of discipline and control rather than being grounded solidly in the logic of work. It is intended to dissuade the women from tricking the plantation into paying them more than their wages. In the vastly unequal systems of power and the very low wages, such suspicion and an entire labour practice based on that enduring through decades illustrates with resounding clarity how coercion is really weaved into the very basis of understanding of labour relations in the plantation. The various forms in which surveillance takes place and control is exercised over micro-aspects of plucking makes it evident that in spite of being framed within paternalistic notions of hierarchy the labour relations were not really based on trust. This seemed to be a co-constructed relation where the management's distrust of workers and conceiving of surveillance strategies fed into and reinforced the workers' efforts to cheat the system.

In addition to surveillance and control strategies, the plantations in the contemporary period also use other aspects of labour

29. see also Chatterjee, 2003

practice to cheat the women from making this extra earning. The *doubli* (overtime) is calculated on the basis of fifteen days of work. If the women pluck surplus amounts consistently for the entire period, the extra weight of the leaves is then calculated as overtime and paid to them. But in case they fail to meet the task assigned for the period of fifteen days the deficit is offset from the extra leaves plucked on particular days.

The management is *harami* (sly), in the first few days they will assign you work in sections with many leaves so that you can easily get your *thika* but for the last days they will put you in less growing sections. They keep the task at the same high level as it would be in a fully grown prosperous section. The number of leaves plucked is less on those days and they use these deficits to then not pay us our *doubli*. As if by stealing our few pennies they will become richer. Some get so disgusted they do not pluck *doubli* anymore. (Madeeha, Daahlia, March 2011)

This practice illustrates how a combination of coercive rules with subtle forms of cheating, maximises extraction of surplus labour and also deprives the workers of the meagre benefits promised by incentives. This holding out of incentive and its subsequent denial in practice through another set of rules becomes a complex mechanism through which consent to, or at least a resignation to, coercion is created.

Coercion as practice: Space

Labour practices designed to create a coercive labour regime control and steal workers' time. In the tea plantations, one of the main devices for controlling time was manipulating the space. Just as space emerged as a mechanism of coercive control, subverting spatiality also became a means of resistance, as we will see later. The spatiality of the tea plantation was unique. Conceived as enclave societies they are the space where the workers work as well as live thus making the negotiation of the

for the plucking season and also during winter for pruning when the work began an hour to hour and a half earlier.

Sometimes when we get work in the direction of the bungalow and factory, it is quite alright. But walking to section 12 is a pain as it takes almost forty minutes to reach. This is even more difficult during the winter when we have to leave even before daylight to reach the section. It is still dark cold and there is mist everywhere (Madeeha, 20.10.2010)

The start of labour time before the actual workday was a common enough practice in most kinds of work but often obtained special significance in the case of the plantations because of the great distances that needed to be travelled. At the same time women also tried to use this time to check on each other, subverting work time to also mean social communion time, somewhat contesting the absolute managerial control over their time and lives. This overlapping of work practices and sociability was possible due to the specific spatial arrangement of the plantations.

The diagram of Daahlia above gives us some sense of how the space can be directly manipulated by the employers to maximise labour extraction from the workers. The arrangement of the plantation allows the management to use spatial tactics to maximize extraction of labour. The manipulation of the workday is most evident during the plucking season and the most common means are waiting and walking. Not only are the tensions of the task greater during the peak season, the duration of work in itself is subtly transformed.

As the various reports on the tea plantations (1910, 1931, 1946) show while the ways in which spatiality is deployed has changed, its deployment continued to be a technique of labour control.

Conditions of Labour in Plantations do not mention anything about the distance between work and coolie lines in their enquiry into conditions of labour.

A characteristic of the plucking season, as is evident from reports as early as the 1910 Report on Duars Committee to my fieldwork, is the greater frequency of weighing.

The workday is divided into three parts—the two hours punctuated by a fifteen-minute tea break, then another two and half hours of work followed by 45 minutes of lunch break and then another two and a half hours of work. While in the lean season weighing of the leaves were done by the women twice, once in the middle of the day before lunch break and another at the end of the day, during the plucking season there were three weighing done, one before each of the three breaks. (fieldnotes, Daahlia, July 2011)

The increased number of weighing demanded more time to be spent at the job over and above the actual task of plucking which are subsumed as unpaid labour time. The 1910 Report of Duars Committee mentions the weighment shed where the workers were expected to come to get their leaves weighed.

Women are always known personally, as they bring in the leaf, and weighing of the leaf is done in the presence of the manager or assistant.³¹

Usha, an elderly retired worker, reminisces about this practice during her working life in Daahlia.

Now things are so easy here. When we used to work there was no van. We had to trudge to the factory ourselves carrying those heavy bags on our heads. Not once but at least twice in a day. In the factory there was so much chaos, everyone wanted theirs to be weighed first. Of course can you imagine all these women had to get back home and had to soon start cooking, the quicker they finished the more time they will have to sit quietly before

31. Evidence by Mr. TA Whitmore, manager of Grassmore TE 1910, Report of Duars Committee (1910, 69)

starting the home-‘shift’. But those were difficult times. On days when we had work at the other end of the gardens, it was dark before we could get home.’

Usha’s point is borne out in the 1948 Report on an enquiry into the living conditions of the tea plantation workers in Darjeeling, Terai³² which states that of the tea plantations surveyed in Dooars, ‘...A substantial portion of the families i.e. 30.22% of the total have to traverse a distance ranging from 1 to 5 miles from the factory to their huts’. The spread-out nature of the plantation with the factory at the centre and garden-sections all around enabled the employer to make use of this spatiality to maximise work-day.

The 1958 Labour Investigation Committee report however suggests that often subtle manipulative control co-existed with straightforward coercive practices.

The pluckers need not attend the evening muster but have to carry the plucked leaf to the factory which takes an hour or so. Again, although there is a provision for mid-day interval of one hour, it was almost a universal complaint by the workers that they were not allowed to avail themselves of the interval. On many estates no worker other than nursing mother is allowed to go to his or her quarters during the so-called mid-day break. (pg 133-134)

What was a system of walking, at present times has been replaced by waiting. In Daahlia and commonly in most other middle to big size plantations, workers no longer had to go to the factory to weigh leaves. Instead weighment trucks came to the work sections during the breaks to weigh and take the leaves to the factory. Apparently this eased the women from trudging to the factory with heavy loads on their back but in reality we see how the weighing times were now manipulated in ways to

32. Report of an enquiry into the living conditions of the Tea Plantation Workers in Darjeeling-Terai, West Bengal 1948. File no: G/2R-29 SI no. 1-4. August 1952

maximize the active working day. The weighings were to happen before each break. But in practice the weighing vans reached the sections during the break and almost never before it. It can be speculated with fair bit of certainty that this was done intentionally to capitalise on the active labour of women during the work-hours and put all the non-productive parts of the task such as weighing during their leisure time. In Daahlia there were two weighing vans supposed to cover fifteen sections, obviously leading to long periods of waiting in the sections they went to later. This resulted into the women losing ten to fifteen minutes of their work-sanctioned leisure in performing tasks subsumed as unpaid elements into their paid work. This too is enabled by how the plantations are spaced and the distance of most of the work-sections from the factories where the weighing vans were stationed. The distance could be used then to justify the waiting, drawing little more than passive complains from the workers.

The subtle temporal coercions increase the duration and intensity of work.³³ The *sardar* or supervisor as the only one with the wristwatch in the field was able to control time and shift duration—a mode which makes the supervisor too a collaborator in this scheme of exploitation through investing in extraction of labour of the women. While this has now come to be challenged with some of the women carrying mobile phones to the garden, the supervisor remains vested with the authority to delegitimize challenges to his timekeeping.

Coercion as practice: Resistance

Labour regimes and practices while highly unequal and exploitative are not all encompassing. Labour relations are never just functions of systems put forward by the employers or practices slipped in by them. The rich scholarship on tea plantations document how sustained experience of coercive mechanisms builds up some instances of push back. The accounts of workers' resistance are

33. Chatterjee 2003: 190

expectedly preserved in the colonial archives not as accounts in themselves but as criticism or rebuke to the workers for failure to abide by the workday practices prescribed by the management. A deep reading of these accounts and placing them in context of present ethnography makes it evident that workers, more specifically women in this case, strategized in multiple ways to subvert the managerial design of maximising productive labour during assigned work hours. The ways in which the women resisted the complete dominance of the workday was made possible in large measures by the spatiality of the field, revealing how women used gendering of spaces and its practice at times to subvert the coercion afforded by the plantation's control over their time. Resisting temporal and spatial control also owes to the workers' sense of ownership of time and space. Thompson, for example, in illustrating the minute ways of resisting the 'tyranny of the clock', views the workers as merely respondents to a temporal system. A close look at the workday of the tea plantations however suggests that resistance and/or negotiation as everyday practices of manipulating workday in fact comes from the workers' own notions of ownership of time.

In his memoirs of his time in Munglass Tea Estate in Dooars, Richard Davidson writes: Fourteen to eighteen days per month is all that can be reckoned on from the best class of coolie. This does not mean that the coolie is unwell the rest of the time. He just does not go to work and there is nothing more to be said. Domestic cares, attendance at unnecessary markets, social events, the care of cattle, and most of all the mere feeling of slackness, these all account for time lost and incidentally show that wages are sufficient for common needs.³⁴

While the 1910 Report on Duars Committee contests this notion of inherent laziness by pointing out poor physical health, anaemia as well as malaria present in the labour lines which creates

34. Davidson, 1990, 3

lethargy in those afflicted, there seems a general agreement among the managers about the inherent laziness of the coolies to be a function of shirking, cunning as well as alcoholism. The 1931 Labour Enquiry Commission Report too reveals the same anxiety around high absenteeism which is mapped to the 'lazy' nature of the coolie with managers reporting that very few people in the garden work for a full month and most only work for 15 days.³⁵ Reports of garden managers as well as health officials reveal the considerable anxiety that the colonial planters had regarding alcohol consumption and its fallout with regard to work capacity and absenteeism.³⁶ This is ironical given the plantation management's strategy of using alcohol as a stimulant to make more productive workers as noted above.

It is clear then whether evidence of the workers' intention or circumstance or both, absenteeism has marked labour practices of the tea plantations from its early days. And absenteeism by its very definition being the opposite of all consuming work hour provided a challenge to subsuming the workers, their lives and time completely into the work day of the plantations. The difficulty of getting workers to comply with work hours and practices of temporality is also brought up in the discussions regarding the expenditure needed for implementation of the Plantation Labour Act of 1951. Both the representatives of Indian Tea association (for European owned tea plantations) and Indian Tea Planter's Association (ITPA) talk about the 'unwillingness of the workers to put in full day's work'.

The labour reports based primarily on the views of the managers and/or evidence of a specific kind gathered from the workers, does not allow us to speculate too much into the intentionality of this absenteeism. My later ethnographic fieldwork, however, suggests that shirking is a deliberate act of the women. While the various reports and later interviews with the managers

35. 1931 Labour Enquiry Commission Report (Evidence vol VI): 443

36. Varma, 301. Chatterjee, 2003:

reveal how they perceive such laziness as stealing of labour time, the women consider it just the opposite, the taking back of time that the plantation has stolen from them. The laziness or unwillingness to put in full days' work is therefore agential response to the onslaught of coercive labour practices.

There was almost half an hour to go before the work for the day will be over. But the women are not working now. Binita stands and keeps a watch while we all sit round her between the tea bushes munching on the flowers of the tea-bushes. I say 'So tomorrow is Sunday. A day of relaxation finally after a long week of hard work.' Sita (laughs): 'Relaxation on Sunday? No it is the day we have to work the hardest. All the pending housework, children irritating you for cooking them a nice lunch, washing clothes, grocery there is no end to work on Sunday'. Binita chimes in: 'The work of plucking is better. We can chat and gossip while doing it. But at home no. Once you wash clothes, then run to clean the house. No chance of relaxation.' Sheila says, 'actually we have to find leisure in work. This sitting together and chatting this is our leisure. We get depressed when Sunday is here.' (Fieldnotes, Daahlia, February 2011)

The women note the drudgery of unpaid housework which is embedded in the days marked 'holiday', where work has to be often carried out in isolation. 'Finding leisure in work' not only allowed them to steal some time for themselves but also in fact resist the surplus labour accrued by the company to some extent. As opposed to the company extracting unpaid labour from the worker, in these instances the company was actually paying them for an hour in which they did not work. The commodification of time implicit in surplus labour is reversed by the women in such cases through practices which obfuscate the strict boundaries between labour and 'time pass', a mechanism reversing temporal control where the deliberateness of time utilization for production is replaced by the passivity of the passage of time.

Any form of resistance, however, miniscule against such an enormous establishment was difficult to accomplish on one's own, and this is where the groups or *dols* in which the women functioned became significant. The women's names grouped under a supervisor/*sardar* suggest that the postcolonial women's *dols* have inherited these structures of labouring kinship from their foremothers of the colonial plantation.³⁷ These *dols* are also groups of camaraderie, friendship and solidarity, the only resources that women had in this vastly unequal system of which they were the lowest rung.

Aparna had a stomach ache. She found a shade and lay there. The other women in her group were plucking. I go to her and ask her why she is not going home. She said she does not want to waste a leave. Rather she can lay here and rest. 'At home there will be something or other to do'. Confused I ask her how will she manage during the weighing as she has not plucked any leaves. She smiles and points to her group mates, 'They are plucking the leaves and if we weigh together it will be fine.' 'So they will pluck your share too?' I ask. She says, 'Not really. At this time leaves are less and there is no *thika*, so if all of them pluck about 5 kgs extra it will be fine. I can always say I could not pluck too much as I was not feeling well. The *sardar* will understand.' (fieldnotes, September 2011, Kaalka)

The co-operation between the women ensures that Aparna does not lose a day's wage. The jointly regulated upper limit on the leaves plucked similarly protected the women from maximisation of their exploitation without getting into trouble for it.³⁸ The extracts illustrate not just a blurring of the boundaries between workday and leisure but also an implicit ambiguity of

37. Chatterjee, 2003: 183

38. See also Buroway, M. (1981). *The Politics of Production: Factory Regimes under Capitalism and Socialism*. London: Verso. See pg 131 for concept of 'making out'.

the workplace. The strategies collectively taken by the women allow them to find relaxation in the place of work, even if for a short while. Such incidents illustrate how time (both its saving and its passage) was not understood by the women as their personal possession but was communally shared among friends, kin and community. Pointing out similar experience of time, Smith argues that the active negotiation of the workers with the dual use of time—economic value placed on time and social value placed on its group control and use, further challenges Thompson's assumption of workers' casual approach to time and illustrates that high consciousness of time need not lead to its individualisation but might as well be utilised through high degree time-socialization.³⁹

The attitude to lazing or otherwise subverting the workday was pragmatic among the women, a means to mitigate to the extent possible the exploitation they faced and through this to re-embed their ownership of time. This becomes more evident when we see women engaging in other gainful activities within their workday. Sometimes the women brought in some housework to the garden so that they could finish that off and get some rest at home instead.

Nalini took out a bag of the flowers of the tea-bushes and started separating out the bitter parts. This will be used the next day for cooking breakfast for the family. By doing this labour-intensive part of the work now she can wake up a little late and just fry these for tiffin. 'In this cold I hate getting up early in the morning to do these and then wash them with cold water. I can do all that tonight and just fry them for tomorrow. Even if I save fifteen minutes, that's fifteen extra minutes of sleep.' (Daahlia, fieldnotes)

Nalini did not just manipulate the boundaries between paid work and unpaid housework but also the durations allotted to these.

39. Smith, 1986: 167

This manipulation allowed some to access leisure during work, for others it allowed them to finish parts of their housework such that they were able to get more rest or watch television in the evening. In order to get the maximum productivity, the management looks to limit the pursuit of leisure activities of the workers. The strategies the worker used in such cases resisted and often reversed, to some extent, this agenda. Berkley argues that the trading of formal hours of employment for minutes of workday allows for adjustment of 'at-work' time to respond to the demands of 'at-home' time. While she refers to how this flexibilisation allows women to dedicate more time to housework and childcare, these plantation women show that such negotiated flexibility also allows them some access to leisure, gossip and communion with friends.

While most women used slacking as a means of access to leisure, some used it to pursue other gainful activities.

Silvina used to sell paper garlands for additional income. On many of the days during the off-season she would bring these coloured papers and work on making the flowers. 'In the morning half of the workday I pluck quite a bit extra but keep that aside in a smaller bag. In the second half I don't do any plucking but just finish this work. In these winter months there are lots of Christian weddings and I don't want to turn away orders. After all, how can you survive with the paltry wages that plucking fetches us?' (November 2011, Daahlia)

Silvina used the workday to buttress her income. Not only did she get paid for time not spent on the job but in fact used that time to engage in other money-making activities. The stories and experiences of the women show that slacking, using the time for other work, all of this happened with an implicit cooperation between the workers and manipulation of the supervisory regime (Banerjee, 2017). Further the seasonality of the plantation is

closely connected to the slacking, shirking was often a result of idleness afforded by the conditions of the work such as in this case slack season, lack of leaves and task.⁴⁰

Conclusion

The article unearths the material practices through which coercion is actualized and maintained. Through an empirically grounded analysis of coercion the article addresses what constitutes coercion—materially and discursively. It traces the intricate workings of coercion in the everyday configurations of time, space and their interaction. Coercion as the foundational logic of a plantation regime is both systemic and practice. Originating through the recruitment process, laws and contracts it endures and nuances itself through subtle manipulation, cheating and other covert means of exercising control. While identifying both systems and practices as the infrastructure of coercion, the article argues against creating a binary or hierarchy between these two. Rather it intends to show the co-constitutiveness of these as mere devices through which coercion is exercised, endured and often even legitimated. Coercion is hardly ever absolute and there is sustained examples of workers' resistance to these. Workers' resistance, everyday and insignificant are a constant challenge against the colonizing of time and space as currencies of coercion. The workday has been operationalized as a mechanism of coercion through control over labour time by both naked force and cheating. Though vastly unequal workers' resistance shows that it is not a homogenous unit of time utilization as it is actively resisted, negotiated and adapted by the workers in their everyday labour. Similarly space too, becomes both a means of operationalizing exploitation of labour time and of resisting it.

40. Also see Parry, 1999: 126

The article also shows that practices of coercion and resistance are intersectional. Empirically grounded analysis of coercion illustrates how practices of coercion and resistance are intersectional. Coercion does not take place in abstraction rather builds upon extant hierarchies of identities which then allows it to further embed itself as an everyday and ubiquitous way of work. Gendered use of time, social norms around gendering of spaces all build on an already deeply gendered labour hierarchy of the plantations. Women workers' experience of coercion in their working lives will not be identical to the others as the specificity of gendered norms create the very frame of the material and discursive practices of coercion.

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