CULTIVATING AN INDUSTRY:
A SURVEY OF THE LIVES OF BRITISH TEA PLANTERS IN ASSAM, INDIA, 1860-1936

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Glossary of Terms

ayah. Native nurse/nanny; lady's maid

bungalow. Country house, in this case inhabited by the manager and/or assistant manager.

burra-sahib. Big sir, in this case the manager of the tea estate.

chota-sahib. Junior sir, in this case the assistant manager of the tea estate; also the term for the son of the manager.

chowkidar. Watchman, in this case guards the tea garden or aides in managing the labor.

coolie. Indian laborer

coolie protector. Looks after labor welfare

dak-bungalow. Government staging house, acting as a hotel along river/railroad routes.

dhobie. Washer man

hatti/hathi. Elephant

hazur. Your honor

khansama. Cook

kitmugar. Head of staff in the household

ma-bap. Mother and father, in this case in reference to the paternalistic figure of the manager.

memsahib. Lady, in this case, the wife of the *burra-sahib.*

pani-wallah. Water man, fetches water for household or garden workers

punkah-wallah. Man who would pull the fan

sirdar. Recruiter and manager of labor

sepoy. Indian soldier

Abstract

"Cultivating an Industry: A Survey of the Lives of British Tea Planters in Assam, India, 1860-1936."

A.H. Spielman

This paper examines the lives of British tea planters living in Assam, India during the mid-nineteenth century until the period prior to World War II. Examining their life stories will lead to a better understanding and appreciation for the legacy they left behind. This paper explores their responsibilities as planters toward their workers and their crops as well as other aspects of their lives such as their health, family, recreation, and duties to their country. The traditions and methods established by the tea planters in the early days of the tea industry have been passed on and are still used by the tea planters of today.

Introduction

India was changing. In Calcutta the air was filled with tension as British soldiers lined the streets armed with machine guns. A.R. Ramsden was aggravated and uneasy as he tried to make his way to the Great Eastern hotel. The front of the building was well guarded, but it did little to comfort him. Inside Ramsden and a friend who was also in the tea business reminisced over the good old days, but eventually they returned to the news of the present; Gandhi and Indian nationalism.

The next day Ramsden was with his friend on the way to catch the boat train when the taxi driver stopped in the middle of a bridge where an angry crowd had gathered. No doubt the last place anyone wanted to be stuck, the taxi driver gave them an ultimatum: either they give him more money or he would let the crowd have them. Luckily for Ramsden, his quick-thinking friend was able to strike the driver over the head and take control of the taxi. After arriving at the station, Ramsden discovered that the increased aggression was due to eight Hindus having been killed by Muslims the night before.

Finally, Ramsden arrived at the pier where the ship that was to carry him back to England was anchored. As he departed, shots rang out from the ship as a warning to any who might interfere. Again Ramsden noted the change that had taken place, “Is ball ammunition necessary? It wasn’t in the India I thought I knew, where I’ve lived, worked, sweated and had such a fine time for twelve years, the India that--- why, yes, damn it, the

India I've come to love."[1] The period of British rule in India was coming to a close, would the tea gardens suffer the same fate?

Ramsden's return trip to England was not unique; tea planters rarely stayed in India long. In fact, Ramsden's stay lasted longer than many, but it was the period of time in which Ramsden chose to leave India that was unique. In 1936 India was uniting under nationalism, but dividing under religious sentiment. As Ramsden mentioned, a division between Hindus and Muslims was creating violence, especially in Calcutta. The period of the British Raj was ending and India would become independent eleven years later.[2] Indeed the tea industry would change as would all of India, but the methods and knowledge that the British planters instilled in the peoples of the regions where tea was grown would continue.

Throughout the history of the tea industry in India and through today, one region in India produces over 50 percent of India's tea and is the largest tea producing region in the world: Assam.[3] The entire economy of Assam is dependent on its tea and has been since tea was first "discovered" there in 1823. Today the same system and structure are used on tea estates, except that Indians run the majority of the management and agencies instead of foreigners.[4] Improvements, of course, have been made, especially to the benefit of the laborers. Nevertheless, the legacy of the British tea planters lives on,

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[1] A.R. Ramsden, *Assam Planter: Tea Planting and Hunting in the Assam Jungle* (London: F.J. Parsons, 1945), ch. 14.

[2] S.L. Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam* (New Delhi: Musnshiram Manharlal Publishers Pvt., 1985), 618.

[3] D.K. Taknet, *The Heritage of Indian Tea: The Past, the Present, and the Road Ahead* (Jaipur: Indian Institute of Marwai Entrepreneurship, 2002), 160.

[4] Ibid., 38-39.

despite the lack of scholarly sources on the subject. This paper endeavors to illustrate the lives of British tea planters between the late 1860 and 1936. In order to have a context in which to place these planters, the history of Assam prior to British involvement must be taken into account. Then the life of the planter may be examined, focusing on five areas: tea garden responsibilities, health concerns and other dangers, the *memsahib* and the pet (looking at family life), recreation, and duty. The goal of this study is first to, give the reader an idea of what the life of a British planter looked like, and second, to reveal the impact their work had and still has on the tea industry in India.

Secondary sources on the subject of British tea planters in India were difficult to obtain. Instead, I had to rely on sources that discussed the tea industry in India as a whole and connect my primary sources to that. There were three sources from which the majority of my contextual information was gathered.

Percival Griffith's *The History of the Indian Tea Industry* is considered by historians of Indian tea to be one of the best books written on the subject. Griffiths utilizes official government reports, annual reports of tea associations, records of companies, and his own personal knowledge of the subject. Indeed, what makes the information in the book so thorough is due to Griffith's experience in the Indian Tea Association as a central advisor. His experience in the Indian Civil Service and his work for the Government of India also give him insight into the various regulations put forth by the Government of India regarding labor in the tea industry. Griffith's book focuses mainly on the history, economics, and laws of the industry. The laws are mainly in regard to the *coolies* and expansion of their rights[5]. Little is written on the subject of the

[5] The term *coolie* has a derogatory connotation and is used to reflect the terminology of the Imperialist period, in this case meaning a laborer of Indian/Bengali descent.

British tea planter, except in a section pertaining to World War II. I used this source as a reference to history and legislation concerning the industry in Assam.

The only secondary source I was able to find that directly correlated with my specific topic was John Weatherstone's *The Pioneers 1825-1900: The Early British Tea and Coffee Planters and Their Way of Life.* Weatherstone employs a variety of secondary sources, most of which focus on the tea and coffee industry in Ceylon. His primary sources consist of various memoirs of tea and coffee planters, which I found more useful and applicable. Weatherstone himself grew up on a rubber plantation in Malaya and later became a tea planter in Ceylon. I looked at the second and third chapters of this book because those are the two chapters that deal with tea planters in India; the second specifically dealing with Assam.

Dr. D.K. Taknet's *The Heritage of Indian Tea: The Past, the Present, and the Road Ahead* concentrates on the economic importance that tea had and continues to have on India. Dr. Taknet is a business writer and an authority on Indian business.[6] Taknet uses a wealth of primary and secondary sources including government reports, newspapers, journals, speeches, company reports, interviews, and books. The portion of the book that I used the most was chapter one, which looks at the establishment of tea gardens in India. However, the rest of the book gave me perspective of how the tea industry continues to impact India, especially Assam, today. This source did give me

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[6] Columbia University, "D.K. Taknet (Indian Institute of Marwai Entrepreneurship)," Columbia University, http:www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/data/indiv/area/idsas/TAKNET.D.htm (accessed March 15, 2009).

some insight into the life of a tea planter both historically and currently, but it served as more of an overview.

R.M. Nath's *The Back-Ground of Assamese Culture* and Dr. S.L. Baruah's *A Comprehensive History of Assam* were useful for establishing a background on Assam. I relied on their information to set up the context of Assam prior to British involvement.

The primary sources I used were memoirs and oral histories of British planters and families that lived in the region of Assam from the late 1860's until 1936. My study centers mainly on the experiences of four men: George M. Barker, W.M. Fraser, F.A. Hetherington, and A.R. Ramsden.

Unfortunately I could not find any background on George M. Barker other than what was included in his work. Since it was published in 1884, he can be placed first chronologically. Barker's account was more of a guidebook for those thinking of becoming tea planters in the future.

W.M. Fraser left England at age twenty-one in 1894 and stayed until 1934. Fraser spent time throughout various regions of northern India, but began his journey in Assam. Fraser wrote brief biographical accounts of nearly everyone he met during his stay, making it difficult to extract his own story amidst the others.[7]

F.A. Hetherington was twenty-two when he left for Assam as an engineer on a tea garden and later took charge of another estate for a brief period of time after the manager

[7] W.M. Fraser, *The Recollections of a Tea Planter*, ed. J.T.M. McNie (1935; rep., London: Argus Press, 1997), http://www.koi-hai.com/jamesmcnie-book.html (accessed March 18, 2009), 2.

there died. After Hetherington married, he was transferred to be manager at another estate where he stayed until leaving India in 1908.[8]

A.R. Ramsden was born and raised on a tea garden in Assam. After serving in World War I, Ramsden returned to India in 1924 and served as an assistant on a tea garden and later built and established a new garden that he managed. He left India after having a serious case of blackwater fever.

In addition to these four planters, I also used some of the oral histories published in *Plain Tales from the Raj: Images of British India in the Twentieth Century*. The main history that I took into account was that of Kenneth Warren. Warren's father was a tea planter in Assam in the 1850's and in 1906; Warren took over the business until he retired in 1926.[9]

A Brief Overview of the History of Tea in Assam

It is thought that as early as 1788, indigenous tea was reported to have been discovered in Assam by botanist Sir Joseph Banks. However, nothing was done about the discovery until the 1820's, most likely due to the conflicts with the Burmese as well as the Marathas.[10] Assam had been under the rule of the Ahom dynasty since the 13th century, but in 1821 the invasion of the Burmese led to their takeover of the kingdom.

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[8] F.A. Hetherington, *The Diary of a Tea Planter* (Sussex: Book Guild, 1994), vii.

[9] Charles Allen, ed., *Plain Tales from the Raj: Images of British India in the Twentieth Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 13, 226.

[10] John Weatherstone, *The Pioneers: The Early British Tea and Coffee Planters and Their Way of Life, 1825-1900* (London: Quiller Press, 1986), 32.

The Burmese invasion allowed the British the opportunity to get a foothold in Assam under the pretense aiding the Ahom dynasty.[11] The first step taken was dividing Assam into two regions: Upper Assam (containing the Eastern portion of the region) and Lower Assam (consisting of the Western portion), and placing them under the control of a commissioner.[12]

Meanwhile, Major Robert Bruce, who "discovered" the plant in Upper Assam in 1823, resumed the search for indigenous tea in Assam.[13] Bruce, a Scottish trader, heard that the tribes in Northeast India consumed tea. He met with the Singhpho tribe chief, Bessa Gaum and arranged for samples to be taken and analyzed.[14] The tea discovered was indeed indigenous and efforts were made to begin cultivation starting with the formation of the Assam Company in 1839. The joint stock company was required to purchase land from the East India Company, having ended its monopoly in China, the Company now held control over trade in India. The East India Company's years were dwindling, however, and in 1840 most of the tea gardens were transferred over to the Assam Company.[15] Until 1859, the Assam Company's only competition was from small private companies, but in this year the Jorehaut Tea Company was created.[16] Other

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[11] S.L. Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam, 367.*

[12] Ibid., 459.

[13] Ibid., 471.

[14] D.K. Taknet, *The Heritage of Indian Tea: The Past, the Present, and the Road Ahead*, 18.

[15] Sir Percival Griffiths, KBE, CIE, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1967), 61-63.

[16] Ibid., 72.

companies in other districts formed throughout the later 1800's as India was being developed further by the British. Although hired under companies, tea planters were still acting individually. In 1879 the Indian Tea Districts Association was formed in London with the objectives of unifying, communicating information, and serve as an advocate for the various tea planters in the various districts. The Indian Tea Association was created in 1881 in Calcutta with the idea that because the location was closer than London, there would be more direct support. By 1884 a variety of district committees were formed in addition to the main office in Calcutta.[17]

The Journey Out

George M. Barker described his voyage from Great Britain to India as taking between thirty-three to thirty-five days. He mentioned the benefits of taking a little extra time on the first voyage out to see the sights- Malta, Port Said, Suez, Aden, Colombo, Madras, and finally Calcutta- among the most common.[18] F.A. Hetherington took a train to Marseilles and then disembarked on ship to Calcutta. Along the way, he discussed the gradual rise in temperature between Marseilles and Calcutta, usually noting the biggest change around the Gulf of Suez.[19] All mention the relief and excitement in seeing India.

From Calcutta, the journey north to Assam was always difficult, but with the evolution of transportation, it became much more efficient. John Weatherstone writes

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[17] Sir Percival Griffiths, KBE, CIE, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry*, 513-517.

[18] George M. Barker, *Tea Planter's Life in Assam* (1884), http://www.archive.org/details/ateaplanterslif00barkgoog (accessed March 18, 2009), 7.

[19] F.A. Hetherington, *The Diary of a Tea Planter,* 5.

how the early trips from Calcutta to Assam were made using country boats and usually took ten weeks, but by 1856 government steamers were starting to carry passengers and supplies up the Brahmaputra River.[20] By Barker's time, railroads were already in use in some areas, most notably the Eastern Bengal Railway. The most efficient way, he stated, was to take the Eastern Bengal Railway via Goalundo (taking about a week) and then transferring to a river steamer to Gauhati. Barker also points out the importance of the *dak-bungalow*, which served as a hotel for travelers waiting to embark on a steamer.[21] Once reaching Assam, the best method of transportation prior to the automobile was either pony/buggy or *hatti/hathi* (elephant). If the roads were especially treacherous, or worse, flooded, a *hatti* was the only way to go.[22]

Tea Garden Responsibilities

Upon reaching Assam, finding a place to establish the garden was of utmost importance. It is important to note that planters did not simply go and claim a share of land to start tea cultivation. A.R. Ramsden pointed out that tea companies would rent the land from the Provincial Government. The tea companies often had main offices in London as well as Calcutta.[23] Once suitable land was found, the process of establishing the garden would begin. All gardens had a similar layout, but varied slightly as to the

[20] John Weatherstone, *The Pioneers: The Early British Tea and Coffee Planters and Their Way of Life, 1825-1900*, 61, 64.

[21] George M. Barker, *Tea Planter's Life in Assam*, 38-59.

[22] Ibid., 91.

[23] A.R. Ramsden, *Assam Planter: Tea Planting and Hunting in the Assam Jungle*, 64.

number of buildings and sophistication depending on the overall size and success of the garden. Weatherstone provides an excellent blueprint for the layout of a tea garden.

The main components of a tea garden were: 1) the "factory,"[24] 2) the tea box making factory, 3) the bungalow of the *burra-sahib* (literally 'big sir,' in this case denotes the manager of the estate), 4) European staff bungalows, 5) *coolie* huts, 6) the nursery, 7) other crops, and 8) *coolie* hospital.[25]

Before any building could be done, the jungle and brush had to be cleared away. Both Barker and Ramsden recommended forming contracts with Assamese laborers in order to clear away any timber.[26] Bungalow building methods and styles varied depending on the materials available and the region of India in which one lived. Barker recommended building the floor of the bungalow as high above the ground as one could because it was believed to decrease the susceptibility for malaria. He also added that he would use wood as a building material for the walls and floors, and heavy thatch for the roof because of the heavy rains.[27]

Ramsden, on the other hand, built his bungalow with a wooden floor that "had deep grooves cut round each wooden pillar and filled with dirty engine oil in the hope of preventing ants and other insects from crawling into the bungalow." He also used a

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[24] Factory is placed in quotations to indicate that the first tea gardens were not factories in the sense that tea was produced via machines. Machinery was developed over time and some tea gardens still preferred to manufacture tea by hand after the introduction of machinery.

[25] Later gardens would often have a school for children of laborers, but this was not common until after World War II.

[26] Ibid., 65.

[27] George M. Barker, *Tea Planter's Life in Assam*, 95-96.

corrugated iron roof as opposed to a thatch one in order to prevent excessive heat.[28] The staff bungalows were built in a similar manner, but the *coolie* huts were usually a simple thatch, bamboo, and mud dwelling.

The nursery was where tea seeds were initially planted and experimented with. Upon successful germination, the tea plants would later be transplanted.[29] The actual tea "factory" was where the tea was processed after being plucked and weighed. With regard to the design of the factory, the same materials were used as those used to build the bungalow. However, Barker pointed out that one should use iron instead of thatch for the roof because thatch would likely catch on fire from the oven used to "fire" the tea. A variety of methods were employed in the processing of tea, some of which employed machinery. Tea withering involved placing the tea on mesh or wire netting and then placing these in a rack to dry, which according to Barker, took between ten and twenty hours. After withering, the tea was rolled.[30] This could either have been done by hand or by machines like the Kinmond rolling machine, which Fraser described:

> It consists of two circular wooden discs, the upper one moving on the lower, with an eccentric motion. The adjacent faces of the said discs are made rough by steps in the wood, cut in lines diverging from the centre to the circumference, and over these rough faces is nailed coarse canvas. The leaf is placed between the discs and rolled by the motion described. The lower disc is arranged, by means of weights running over pulleys, so that it shall press against the upper, with any force desired.[31]

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[28] A.R. Ramsden, *Assam Planter: Tea Planting and Hunting in the Assam Jungle*, 72-73.

[29] John Weatherstone, *The Pioneers: The Early British Tea and Coffee Planters and Their Way of Life, 1825-1900*, 43.

[30] George M. Barker, *Tea Planter's Life in Assam*, 125, 139-140.

[31] W.M. Fraser, *The Recollections of a Tea Planter*, 107.

Rolling machines like Kinmond's were certainly beneficial in reducing the amount of labor needed as well as increasing efficiency. After being rolled, the tea was fermented, sometimes sifted through sieves, and finally ready for firing. Firing consisted of a large oven with trays in which the fermented tea was placed. Finally, the tea was sorted, sifted again, and placed in boxes.[32] The Chinese were initially brought to Assam to aid in the planting of tea, but were especially employed to make tea boxes. Since the tea trade in China was so successful and well established, certain Chinese workers were skilled only in the art of making tea boxes. The British used these skills in Assam and passed on the knowledge to the *coolie* laborers who took the place of the Chinese, as they would work for lower wages. When the tea was packed properly, it was shipped down the Brahmaputra River until it arrived in Calcutta.[33]

The *coolie* hospital was established to treat those laborers who were seriously ill. If there was a health concern of a less serious nature, a native doctor would usually provide the treatment, but for a more serious issue, a European doctor would be consulted. Larger gardens had European doctors staffed on-site, but on smaller gardens the European doctor would travel from one garden to the next.[34] In the early days of tea the *burra-sahib* or *chota-sahib*[35] would often act as the doctor. E.G. Fley explains, "When I was an assistant it was my duty to administer the medicines to all the sick

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[32] George M. Barker, *Tea Planter's Life in Assam*, 145-148.

[33] John Weatherstone, *The Pioneers: The Early British Tea and Coffee Planters and Their Way of Life, 1825-1900*, 42-43.

[34] George M. Barker, *Tea Planter's Life in Assam*, 325-326.

[35] *Burra-sahib* means "big sir" and on tea gardens usually refers to the manager. *Chota-sahib* means "small sir" and in this context usually refers to the assistant manager.

workers who were brought to me by the line *chowkidar* [watchman]. And with the aid of Dr. Goodeve's book, I did my best. The specifics were quinine, chlorodyne, and castor oil … naturally the mortality of the gardens was a very high percentage."[36] As tea gardens became more established and the development of India continued, the addition of the *coolie* hospital and doctor was gladly welcomed. One of the most devastating illnesses for the *coolie* was cholera. Heatherington mentioned in one of his diary entries that sixteen Assamese died on one garden, while at his garden ten people were ill with it and one died as a result.[37] Cholera can more easily be prevented with proper water sanitation. Barker emphasized the importance of having wells and tanks that were filtered or at least monitored.[38] This was one of many important tasks the *burra-sahib* or the *chota-sahib* had to take on.

The *burra-sahib* had to have a specific personality in order to survive all of the responsibility placed upon him. Barker described the ideal *burra-sahib* by saying:

> To be of any use he must be of strict integrity, in order to gain the confidence of his employers; sober, business-like, a good accountant, not easily ruffled, handy at carpentering and engineering, know something about soil, and have a smattering of information on all subjects; or, to put it concisely, he must be a veritable Jack-of-all- trades.[39]

The *burra-sahib* and to some extent the *chota-sahib* were viewed as the fathers of the garden. The *coolies* were their responsibility, to such an extent that they punished *coolie* children when they felt their behavior to be unacceptable; punished adult *coolies* for the

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[36] D.K. Taknet, *The Heritage of Indian Tea: The Past, the Present, and the Road Ahead,* 32.

[37] F.A. Hetherington, *The Diary of a Tea Planter,* 88-89.

[38] George M. Barker, *Tea Planter's Life in Assam,* 223.

[39] Ibid., 126.

same reasons, acted as a judge in disputes, and even blessed marriages. Kenneth Warren, also a tea planter in Assam during this period, summed up the *ma-bap* (mother father) system of the tea gardens, "It was customary for a member of the labour force who had a request to make to come to you and first address you as *Hazur* – Your Honur, and then *ma-bap* – you are my father and my mother, I have this, that and the other request to make."[40] Ramsden recollected several instances in which he acted as the father figure of the garden. Two people from two well-established families on his garden wanted to get married and it was customary for them to receive a blessing from the *burra-sahib.* In this particular case, he gave the newlyweds some money, a portion of land to rent for cultivation of produce, and labor to help build their new home. Another instance that he remembered involved disciplining children. A *coolie* had been accused of stealing eggplants from another *coolie's* garden. After further investigation, Ramsden discovered it was actually the nephews of the accused *coolie* who were responsible. He called the families in question into his office and questioned them. The two guilty boys tried to escape, but Ramsden caught them and gave them a "thrashing" and reprimanded the family (including the accused) for lack of discipline.[41] Hetherington encountered an example of assistant managerial paternalism when he heard that a cobra had bitten one of the coolies. After further investigation, he found out that it was a pet of one of the other *coolies*. The cobra was eventually captured after it had bitten the snake's owner's wife in the hand. As punishment the *coolie* who owned the snake had to kill it in front of

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[40] Charles Allen, ed., *Plain Tales from the Raj: Images of British India in the Twentieth Century*, 183.

[41] A.R. Ramsden, *Assam Planter: Tea Planting and Hunting in the Assam Jungle*, 114-117.

Hetherington and the *burra-sahib*.[42]

There were various important positions in a tea garden, the two which, the *burra-sahib* and *chota-sahib*, were already discussed. Three other significant positions were the *sirdar, the chowkidar*, and the *coolie* protector. The *sirdar* was described as the foreman, but he was really more than that. While it may be easy at first glance to compare him to an overseer, he also played a part in the *ma-bap* system. According to Barker, a *sirdar* was usually a more seasoned worker who was respected by most. The duty of a *sirdar* was to look after his workers to make sure they were performing their job to the utmost capabilities and to reprimand them when they were not. A *sirdar* would usually carry a stick for such reprimands.[43] The organization and amount of authority given to various positions varied from garden to garden and from region to region. The *sirdar* also had a more controversial role, that of the recruiter. Prior to using *sirdars* as recruiters, contractors had been used, but they developed the negative connotation of being a *'coolie-catcher.'* Finding sufficient labor had been a problem in Assam ever since the establishment of tea gardens. The solution was to import labor from neighboring districts, most notably from Bengal.[44] Numerous pieces of legislation were established regarding this issue, all under the name "the Bengal Acts." These Acts attempted to establish controls on the importation of labor from Bengal as well as thwart corruption via *sirdars.* Under the Bengal Act III of 1863, *sirdars* were required to be licensed and their monetary reward was not only based upon the number of the recruits gathered, but

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[42] F.A. Hetherington, *The Diary of a Tea Planter*, 91-92.

[43] George M. Barker, *Tea Planter's Life in Assam*, 135-136.

[44] Assam and Bengal were grouped together until 1847 when Assam was made into a Chief Commissionership.

also the health of the laborers. The Bengal Acts were, above all, created to better the conditions of the laborer and prevent exploitation by planters, companies, and contractors/*sirdars.*[45]

Chowkidar means "watchman" and there were various roles *chowkidars* played in the tea garden. The first was the garden *chowkidar,* whose job it was to guard the garden, usually against theft or destruction by animals.[46] Line *chowkidars* seemed to have a similar role as that of the *sirdar* with the exception that the *chowkidar* did not recruit labor. Night *chowkidars* guarded the garden at night from thieves or animals and some night *chowkidars* served as night watchmen for the bungalow as well.[47]

The role of the *coolie* protector was added under the Bengal Act VI of 1865, stating that "managers were bound, on pain of a fine of 500 rupees, to notify to the protector the fact that any *coolie* wished to make a complaint and if it was found that the *coolie* had been ill-used, his contract could be cancelled by the protector."[48] Thus the *coolie* protector was established to prevent abuses of labor by the *burra-sahib* and in reaction to the earlier issues of abuse. Barker had some insight into the appointment of the *coolie* protector, which he felt was an unnecessary appointment. His rationale was that it would be disadvantageous for a *burra-sahib* to mistreat his workers in that it would affect the outcome of his tea production. Barker spoke to a *coolie* protector and the protector noted that a change occurred in the relationship between the labor and the

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[45] Sir Percival Griffiths, KBE, CIE, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry,* 273-276.

[46] Pranab Das Gupta and Iar Ali Khan, *Impact of the Tea Plantation Industry on the Life of Tribal Labourers* (Kolkata: Gupta Press, 1983), 4-5.

[47] A.R. Ramsden, *Assam Planter: Tea Planting and Hunting in the Assam Jungle,* 23.

[48] Sir Percival Griffiths, KBE, CIE, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry,* 270-271.

manager. The necessity of a protector to look after labor welfare suggested that the *burra-sahib* may not be acting in accordance to the *ma-bap* system and doubt was placed in the laborer's mind. This corroded the relationship of trust built between the *coolie* and the *burra-sahib.*[49]

Other positions of *coolies* on the garden were usually decided based upon the caste and region of the laborer. Ramsden commented that "all blacksmiths were invariably *Kammars* and *Lohars;* men and women moving earth and bricks were *Gondas*; *Partas, Mundas* and *Uraons* were the élite amongst the cultivators; *Kois* and *Santhals* did bamboo work, and so on."[50] There were some basic distinctions among the sexes that were found on all tea gardens. For example, the plucking, sifting, and sorting of the tea leaves as well as transplanting plants from the nursery to the garden were done by women and children because it required a more delicate touch. Men were generally in charge of the more manual labor such as hoeing and working inside the tea factory.[51]

The daily schedule usually required the *burra-sahib* and *chota-sahib* to wake up around 5 a.m. and work until 11 am, followed by *hazri* (lunch) and rest until 2 p.m. From 2 p.m. until 6 p.m. work was completed with dinner following. The schedule for the *coolies* was similar, except during the off-season work would begin later. If the day's picking was especially fruitful, it was not unlikely for those working in the factory as well as the *burra-sahib* and *chota-sahib,* to be working until early morning the next day

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[49] George M. Barker, *Tea Planter's Life in Assam,* 161-162.

[50] A.R. Ramsden, *Assam Planter: Tea Planting and Hunting in the Assam Jungle,* 104.

[51] George M. Barker, *Tea Planter's Life in Assam,* 133-135.

as tea had to be processed immediately upon plucking.[52]

Payday for *coolies* varied depending upon the garden, but it was always a ceremonious process. Barker commented that the entire families would line up wearing their best clothing and wait for their names to be called to receive their wages, which were generally given weekly or monthly.[53]

The rest of the staff on a tea garden was employed in the bungalow of the *burra-sahib* and the *chota-sahib.* The structure of the house staff on tea gardens was the same as that in any European household in India. The *kitmugar* (waiter, often head of staff), *khansama* (cook), *dhobie* (washer man), *pani-wallah* (water man), and *punkah-wallah* (person who would pull the fan prior to mechanical fans) were all part of the basic staff. An *ayah* (nurse or attendant of the *memsahib*) was essential for ladies and children in the house.

Health Concerns and Other Dangers

India contained an abundance of hazards for a European who was unused to the change in climate, exotic wildlife, and volatile weather. By far the greatest danger for the European planter living in India was malaria. Many planters seemed to come down with the fever shortly after arriving in India for the first time. Hetherington had malaria at least ten times, his first time being one month after his arrival. His wife, Agnes had it seven times

[52] Ibid., 102, 134-135.

[53] Ibid., 176.

and even his baby daughter succumbed to the illness once.[54] Fraser also came down with malaria soon after arriving and later had three episodes of blackwater fever, which is a complication as a result of malaria that can involve kidney failure.[55] For Fraser, blackwater fever meant traveling to Darjeeling to get to a hospital. He noted that the *coolies* carried him in a litter (the earthquake of 1897 happened just prior to this and made most roads impassable) and at one point had their hoes along side them for convenience if burial was necessary.[56] Fortunately for Fraser, he survived the ordeal, but had two more attacks of blackwater fever and consulted a specialist in London while he was on furlough. The man recommended Fraser take "ten grains of hydrochlorate of quinine two times a week so long as I was in a region, of intense malaria, and with this direction, which I religiously carried out, I never suffered from malaria again."[57] Some form of quinine, which is an alkaloid derived from cinchona bark,[58] was usually the medication prescribed for malaria. In addition to quinine, many believed that a trip along the Brahmaputra River would rid them of malaria. After having malaria, Barker warned against long periods of exposure to the sun, as the climate of India was very exhaustive even if one was not ill. Barker also explained that "the river is much frequented as a health resort. No better remedy can be prescribed for an invalid just recovering from an attack of fever, or who has been laid on his back by any of the many ills to which flesh is

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[54] F.A. Hetherington, *The Diary of a Tea Planter,* 13, 21, 25, 58, 177, 207, 208, 210, 211, 214, 217, 218, 226, 227, 233.

[55] *Webster's New World Dictionary*, 2nd college ed., s.v. "blackwater fever."

[56] W.M. Fraser, *The Recollections of a Tea Planter*, 54.

[57] Ibid., 105.

[58] *Webster's New World Dictionary*, 2nd college ed., s.v. "Quinine."

heir in- this country, than a few days spent in this way." However, it must have depended on the particular location along the river because a few paragraphs later, he warned about the abundance of mosquitoes along certain sections up river.[59]

Besides malaria and the threat of mosquitoes, other diseases were prevalent in India. I have already mentioned the epidemic of cholera among the *coolies*; other diseases included typhoid, scarlet fever, and dysentery. Fraser mentioned his friend Denne dying of typhoid and his (Fraser's) wife being ill with dysentery.[60] Hetherington suffered from ophthalmia, which is an inflammation of the eye.[61] The entire ordeal lasted over a week and during the period he was given tinted glasses to wear, however at one point, it was so bad he could not read or write, so the glasses would not have been much use anyway.[62] Dental hygiene was also poor because there were a lack of dentists in India at that time. Barker remarked that tooth decay was extremely prevalent among the Indians, but many Europeans suffered from toothaches.[63] Hetherington also mentioned toothaches and tooth pulling in his diaries. At one point his manager needed to have teeth pulled and luckily found a dentist in the area to do the job. Hetherington himself had what he called a toothache, which after days of neglect, was turning into gumboil. The doctor planned to operate on his mouth, but the problem seemed to have

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[59] George M. Barker, *Tea Planter's Life in Assam*, 57, 62, 216.

[60] W.M. Fraser, *The Recollections of a Tea Planter*, 150.

[61] *Webster's New World Dictionary*, 2nd college ed., s.v. "ophthalmia."

[62] F.A. Hetherington, *The Diary of a Tea Planter*, 37-38.

[63] George M. Barker, *Tea Planter's Life in Assam*, 137.

resolved itself.[64] Hookworm was prevalent among the Europeans and Indians both. It was not uncommon for at least 75 percent of the *coolies* to be infected.[65] Ramsden remarked that at the School of Tropical Medicine in Calcutta, they were aware that lower doses were necessary for Indians with hookworm as opposed to Europeans.[66] The remedy was a dose of carbon tetrachloride, which was a common cure for hookworm at least up until the mid-1960s. It was found to cause liver injury if taken in higher doses and could even be fatal.[67] Another danger, slightly less common, was rabies. Ramsden recalled an incident where the manager of a grog shop (situated on and under the control of the tea garden) was bitten by a rabid dog and failed to report it. The garden manager went to check on him:

> Taking a pick handle along with him he very quietly and carefully opened the door of the shop. Suddenly there was a crash as the madman hurled himself furiously at the door. He was in a horrible state, foaming at the mouth, mewing and running in circles. Snowy [the tea garden manager] did the only possible thing: hit him hard on the head with his pick handle. Then he ran back to the office and telephoned for the European doctor, who on arrival also did the only possible thing: gave the poor man a socking dose of morphia, how much may be left to the imagination.[68]

Thus, medicines brought by the Europeans aided in combating diseases like cholera and malaria as well as parasites like hookworm. However, there were some dangers for which Europeans did not have an adequate medicinal cure. One that was mentioned by

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[64] F.A. Hetherington, *The Diary of a Tea Planter*, 102, 194.

[65] John Weatherstone, *The Pioneers: The Early British Tea and Coffee Planters and Their Way of Life, 1825-1900*, 69.

[66] A.R. Ramsden, *Assam Planter: Tea Planting and Hunting in the Assam Jungle*, 22.

[67] Grafton Chase, Richard A. Deno, Alfonso R. Gennaro, Melvin R. Gibson, Stewart C. Harvey, Robert E. King, Alfred M. Martin, Ewart A. Swinyard, Clarence T. Van Meter, Bernard Witlin, *Remington's Pharmaceutical Sciences*, Managing editor John E. Hoover, 14th ed., (Easton: Mack Publishing Company, 1970), 1269.

[68] A.R. Ramsden, *Assam Planter: Tea Planting and Hunting in the Assam Jungle*, 119.

many was the snakebite. Due to the fact that there were so many venomous snakes in India, antidotes were either not effective or not available. So they would adopt the Indian method of creating a paste out of herbs and covering the area with a sort of patch.[69] The most dangerous of all snakes, as described by Ramsden, was the Hamadryad or King Cobra. Apparently the snake was so quick that it could travel as fast as a horse and the poison injected was enough to kill a man in about fifteen minutes.[70] Barker focused much of his attention on the wildlife of India, looking at insects like white ants and stinking bugs, to mammals like mice, rats, bats, and especially tigers. Tigers were not only dangerous, but also wreaked havoc on the animals employed on tea gardens. Besides eating cattle, a tiger could attack a pony, horse, or a dog. *Coolies* were especially upset by the presence of a tiger and would go to the *burra-sahib*, or any European with guns, and either ask to borrow the weapons or implore the European to shoot it. Many Europeans enjoyed hunting game and especially large cats like tigers (see section entitled **Recreation**), so it was not usually difficult to convince them.[71]

Among the worst of the insects was the white ant (or termite). Barker stated that it would eat anything except products manufactured from metal and kerosene oil. This is why many planters went to such great lengths in deciding materials to use for building a bungalow, as the termites would eat through normal wood. Barker recommended smearing kerosene oil over anything one did not wish the white ant to destroy. Any insect that could be found in England was at least two times larger in India, according to

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[69] George M. Barker, *Tea Planter's Life in Assam*, 228.

[70] A.R. Ramsden, *Assam Planter: Tea Planting and Hunting in the Assam Jungle*, 92.

[71] George M. Barker, *Tea Planter's Life in Assam*, 89.

Barker. Judging from Barker's memoirs, his least favorite insect had to be what he called "the stinking bug." The following account should perhaps serve as a warning for anyone who would underestimate the tiny black beetle, "Once I inadvertently squashed one in my eye, a sensation as if the pupil had been suddenly seared with a red hot iron seized me, and for the next half an hour the intense agony prevented the possibility of opening either one eye or the other. I never expected to look out of that eye again."[72] Wildlife in Assam could be breathtakingly beautiful, but as these planters described, it could also be exceedingly dangerous, especially if one was uninformed as to the nature of the region.

The climate of Assam was extreme, from monsoons to earthquakes. Thunderstorms were apparently quite a spectacle in Assam. One storm experienced by Ramsden was so bad it ripped the roof off the factory and it took himself and the rest of the staff a week to repair it.[73] Cyclones, or at least what Ramsden called cyclones, were extremely detrimental for the garden. Though he was living on a new tea garden, the roof of this factory was ripped off as well and all of the tea crop was destroyed as a result of hail. This would set a planter back at least three years as that was the amount of time it took for a tea plant to produce a crop.[74] While Fraser was in Assam in 1897, there was a great earthquake that was felt from Tibet to Calcutta. Fraser remembered how the earth shifted and rolled and water shot up from the ground. He does not mention major destruction in the area where he was, except that there were some cracks in structures. Although other districts had considerable damage, Fraser pointed out that the casualties

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[72] Ibid., 191-193.

[73] A.R. Ramsden, *Assam Planter: Tea Planting and Hunting in the Assam Jungle*, 42.

[74] Ibid., 108.

of the earthquake were low.[75]

The Memsahib and the Pet

Amidst the countless dangers and unpredictability of life on a tea garden, some planters managed to raise families in as normal a manner as one could in the jungles of Assam. For the "pioneers" of tea planting, as Weatherstone calls them, marriage was less common, especially for an assistant. Conditions were harsher in the beginning as tea gardens were being established and the life of an early planter was often a very isolated one. As gardens became more established and the development of India continued, it became increasingly possible for women and children to stay in Assam. A sign of improved conditions was the length in which a planter stayed. In the 1850's the typical length of a planter's stay was around three years, whereas in the 1880's, the average length was increased to five years.[76] Despite improved conditions, many assistant managers found it impractical to have a wife with them until they secured a more stable position, usually that of a manager. Then the planter would have the opportunity to settle down and build a respectable bungalow. Fraser's reaction at being offered the position of manager at Phoolbarrie was mixed. In his opinion the garden was not particularly successful, but it did mean that he could marry. In 1903, Fraser's fiancée sailed from England to Calcutta and they were married.[77] Hetherington also waited until he was

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[75] W.M. Fraser, *The Recollections of a Tea Planter,* ch. 7.

[76] John Weatherstone, *The Pioneers: The Early British Tea and Coffee Planters and Their Way of Life, 1825-1900*, 77-80.

[77] W.M. Fraser, *The Recollections of a Tea Planter*, 76.

promoted to the position of manager to marry. His fiancée also made a voyage to Calcutta from England and they were married in October of 1907.[78]

The wife was referred to as *memsahib* (lady), and her societal and household duties were equally important, perhaps more so, to those of the *burra-sahib.* The household was under her management and she often went to great pains to re-create an English-style environment; often importing English furniture. Many households had to manage without the modern conveniences of England, such as electricity in the twentieth century. It was not uncommon for the more rural areas to have been without electricity until the 1940's. The *memsahib* also put forth much effort to create an English garden, but unfortunately many English plants did not fare well in the extreme climate of India.[79] The *memsahib* was in charge of the household servants and found it was much easier for her if she treated them with respect. This issue of respect included being conscious of caste and religion. For instance, she should not be "tactless enough to bring bacon back from the Club and hand it to a bearer who was a very strict Mohammedan. One put it upon a table and the sweeper would come and take it away, because he was a Hindu and didn't mind touching bacon."[80]

Despite the fact that a European woman's presence in India was more common by the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, many Indians were still unaccustomed to seeing a white woman. Barker remarked about the fascination his *coolies* had with his wife on her first visit to the bungalow. He stated that many of the Indians brought gifts

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[78] F.A. Hetherington, *The Diary of a Tea Planter*, 171-172.

[79] Ibid., 75-77.

[80] Ibid., 79.

for his wife and the women were so contented to watch her that they stared at her for four or five hours. They finally left after she had retired and it was evident that she would not be coming out of the bungalow again that afternoon.[81] In Assam and other lesser-developed regions of India, women were less common, so the few women in the area were more sought after for social engagements. Barker mentioned that the European women in Assam were constantly called upon for dinner parties, games, and sporting events.[82]

Unfortunately many women and especially young children, were unfit for the intense lifestyle and atmosphere of being a tea planter. If a woman or child was constantly ill, it was decided, usually for the best, that they return to England with the idea that the husband would eventually join them. Both Fraser's and Hetherington's wives left India ahead of their husbands. Fraser's wife was suffering from dysentery and when she had recovered a bit, she was sent home in the company of another couple also returning to England.[83] Hetherington, his wife, and child had a very ill-fated close to their time in India. Shortly after Hetherington's wife, Agnes, gave birth, she contracted "the fever" (presumably malaria), which her baby also caught. After leaving the area for a short time and recovering, Agnes and Hetherington became ill with "the fever" two more times before going to Calcutta to see a doctor. After seeing the doctor, who recommended that they return to England, Hetherington decided it was for the best and

[81] George M. Barker, *Tea Planter's Life in Assam*, 86.

[82] Ibid., 243.

[83] W.M. Fraser, *The Recollections of a Tea Planter*, 105.

they left India for good in 1909.[84]

Another important part of the family, especially for planters who were unmarried and living in more isolated locations was the family pet. Often times, planters collected a menagerie of pets from wild jungle animals to domesticated pets. Ramsden's faithful companion was a bull terrier named Bulbuck, who kept him occupied while living relatively alone in the jungle.[85] In another section of his memoirs, Ramsden explained that while many planters kept dogs as companions, they also amassed a large collection of more native species of India. Birds, bears, monkeys, leopards, sambhurs (deer native to India), horses, ponies, and hogs, among others, were not uncommon sights to be seen in the bungalows of planters. Ramsden reminisced about a time he and a friend attempted to tame a young bear. It seemed to work well for a time until one day, Ramsden woke up to find the bear had escaped and was outside his room. He was able to capture the bear by coating some bananas with opium (which was produced and widely available in the region) and then had the bear shipped to a zoo in Calcutta.[86]

Recreation and Duty

While some planters kept wild animals as pets, more engaged in the hunting of wild animals. India boasted some of the best areas for hunting game and many took advantage of this opportunity. The "pioneer" tea planters had little time for recreation as

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[84] F.A. Hetherington, *The Diary of a Tea Planter,* 233-236.

[85] A.R. Ramsden, *Assam Planter: Tea Planting and Hunting in the Assam Jungle*, 69.

[86] Ibid., 125-126.

survival occupied most of their time.[87] As tea gardens became more established and communities were developed, there were more opportunities for social gatherings and a variety of sports. Ramsden was especially fond of hunting and remembered his first experience tiger hunting. Another tea garden manager had a bullock killed and suspected it to be the work of a tigress and her cub and he asked Ramsden to shoot it for him, as he knew that Ramsden was looking for an opportunity to get one. The manager had a bamboo platform built, from which Ramsden could watch for the tigress. When he heard the tigers coming, he reacted and shot prematurely, but did manage to shoot something. Unfortunately for the manager, it was the cub. Ramsden had the cub put into the back of a car and brought back to the bungalow. The next morning he received a call from the manager saying the tigress had come back and was under his bungalow because the body of the cub was near his bungalow, and that Ramsden had to come back and shoot the tigress. When Ramsden returned to the estate, he decided that the tigress had left for good because he never saw it again.[88] Barker remarked that he believed that India was the premier area for shooting big game, but he confessed that he did not share the same fervor for the thrill of the hunt as many of his fellow Englishmen did.[89]

Other than hunting, various sports were the next source of amusement for many tea planters. Most sports and social events were sponsored through "the Club" in which

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[87] John Weatherstone, *The Pioneers: The Early British Tea and Coffee Planters and Their Way of Life, 1825-1900*, 80.

[88] A.R. Ramsden, *Assam Planter: Tea Planting and Hunting in the Assam Jungle*, 33-35.

[89] George M. Barker, *Tea Planter's Life in Assam*, 90.

one had to be a member in order to participate.[90] Clubs were a common way for Europeans to pass the time. The Club in Assam to which Ramsden was dragged (for it appears he was rather reluctant to go to a club) to was a "one-storied, sprawling brick building with a verandah, a billiard room, a long bar, a room for a cinema and a large ladies' room where dances took place."[91] In larger cities like Calcutta, there were mixed clubs, where prominent Indians and Europeans could go, although there was often an element of segregation involved. Anglo-Indians had clubs of their own in larger cities as well because they were not always accepted in European clubs.[92]

Sports were popular among men and women who lived in India, although as mentioned earlier, women were scarcer on tea gardens. Tennis, polo, riding, squash, cricket, and cycling were among the most popular. Hetherington played tennis on the grounds of the tea garden and mentioned nearly once a week going with his manager, Colin Dunlop, to watch a game of polo being played. Sometimes Hetherington would also engage in a game of golf as well.[93]

Dinner parties were a common form of social event among tea planters. Hetherington recalled one such party in which one man arrived riding on top of an elephant! Parties were usually white jacket affairs for the men and formal evening wear for the ladies. Alcoholic beverages were naturally consumed and activities often consisted of leisure sports, singing, and story telling. A party at Dunlop's lasted until 2

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[90] John Weatherstone, *The Pioneers: The Early British Tea and Coffee Planters and Their Way of Life, 1825-1900,*, 100.

[91] A.R. Ramsden, *Assam Planter: Tea Planting and Hunting in the Assam Jungle*, 47.

[92] Charles Allen, ed., *Plain Tales from the Raj: Images of British India in the Twentieth Century*, 104.

[93] F.A. Hetherington, *The Diary of a Tea Planter*, 89.

a.m., but started up again early the next morning with more drinking, followed by polo. Judging by Heatherington's remarks, the party must have been quite costly.[94]

Not all activity outside of the tea garden was leisurely. Many of the younger European managers, assistants, and staff on tea gardens volunteered to join an auxiliary force. The auxiliary forces grew immensely following the 1857 Indian Mutiny, in which Indian *sepoys* (Indian soldiers) rebelled against the East India Company army in which they were serving, and resulted in massacres of both British and Indian civilians.[95] In 1891 the Assam Valley Mounted Rifles was formed from a conglomeration of several smaller mounted forces. This group was changed again in 1900 to the Assam Valley Light Horse, in which Hetherington was a part. During this period of time, until about 1917, it was the duty of those in the regiments to protect the railroads and telegraph lines. The Assam Valley Light Horse regiment's headquarters in Dibrugarh was strategically situated along the Brahmaputra and served as a port for exportation of tea and coal. Dibrugarh was also a major railway terminus of the Assam-Bengal railway system, which also served as an important means of transportation for the coal and petrol industries.[96] In his diary he illustrated his eight day training session at Dibrugarh. The first few days were filled with exercises and drills, but on the fourth day the troops actually went into the field, which gave them a change of scenery from the camp. In the evenings there was

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[94] Ibid., 158-159.

[95] *Columbia Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Indian Mutiny," *http://www.bartleby.com/65/in/* IndianMu.html, (accessed March 12, 2009).

[96] Mike Nancollas, "Assam Valley Light Horse: How it all Started," Koi-Hai, http://www.koi-hai.com/AVLH.html (accessed March 12, 2009).

some sort of entertainment, possibly a band or some other form of musical diversion.[97] Fraser was a part of the Surma Valley Light Horse, the Northern Bengal Mounted Rifles and the Oudh Light Horse for various periods of time. His brother was in the Behar Light Horse and was sent to Africa to fight in the Boer War.[98]

Conclusion

The tea industry in India owes much of its success to the efforts and perseverance of the British tea planters. Assam being the largest tea producing region in the world and responsible for over 50 percent of India's tea production depends heavily on the groundwork laid by the British more than 180 years ago. Through their trials and diligence a system for planting was established; a system that is still used today. Despite the fact that most of the British planting families are long gone, their legacy remains. Even today the manager is seen as the father figure, responsible for his worker's well being. This *ma-bap* ideology has endured and so have the social responsibilities of the *burra-sahib* and *memsahib*.[99] The tea industry has evolved over time, for the better of the laborers and for India, but the basic foundations laid by the British forerunners have remained.

Further research must be conducted into the preservation of the lives of these planters, especially those during the early period, whom Weatherstone refers to as "the

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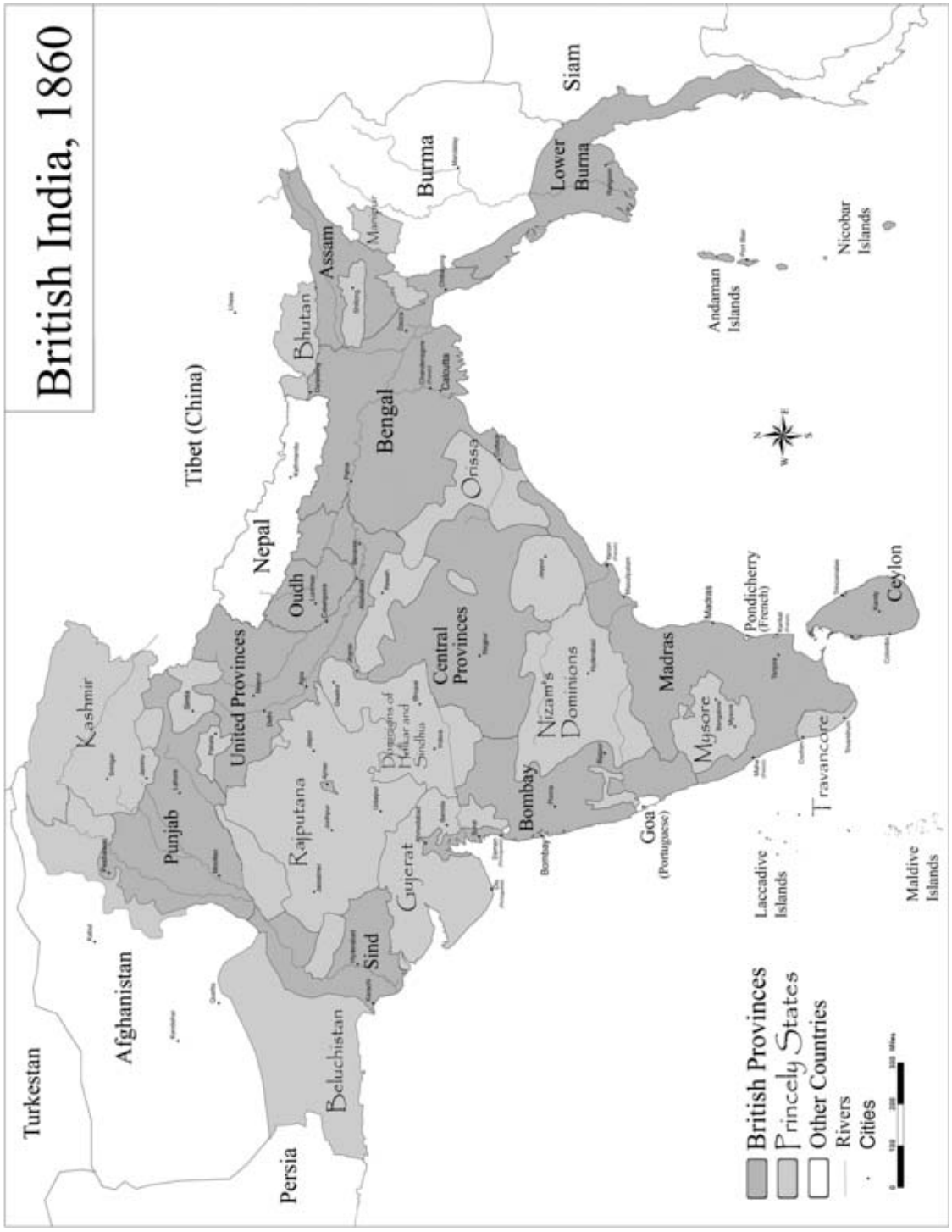
[97] F.A. Hetherington, *The Diary of a Tea Planter*, 44-47.

[98] W.M. Fraser, *The Recollections of a Tea Planter*, ch. 15.

[99] Richard Orange. "Fading Memories of the Raj in the Tea Gardens of Assam" *Spectator*. July, 2, 2008, http://www.spectator.co.uk/themagazine/business/811041/fading-memories-of-the-raj-in-the-tea-gardens-of-assam.thtml (accessed March 17, 2009).

pioneers.” Much is already underway through the efforts of websites like Koi-Hai and authors like Weatherstone, but only the future will reveal whether or not the memories of the forefathers of Indian tea lives on.

Illustrations



Source: Map by Karl Musser, "British India, 1860," Wikimedia, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:British_india.png (accessed May 4, 2009).

Figure 1. British India, 1860.

Figure 2. Assam in the 1950s

Source: Map by Porikolpok, "Assam in the 1950s," Wikimedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Assam_in_1950s.png (accessed May 4, 2009).

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