Locating the Workers 'Coolies' in the Tea Plantations of Colonial Darjeeling: A Historical Retrospect

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[Editorial Note: The paper is an attempt to trace the historical processes in the making of 'coolies' in tea plantations of Darjeeling mostly based on published sources. D.A.]

Abstract:

The labourers are the pillars of every industry. In fact, tea plantation is a labour-intensive industry in which, most of the works is done manually by the labourers. At the same time, it largely depends on cheap labour procured from the migrant population, however, such process entails structural transformations in the economy and society enabling the evolution of waged labour culture guided by the capitalist industrial model. Such arrangements facilitate the creation of a class who works in the plantation in lieu of wage i.e., the coolies. The coolies in general sense, are a well-researched topic in academia. However, tea plantation workers of Darjeeling with different anecdotal experiences cannot be homogenised with those of other plantation industries and the concerned topic requires separate analysis. Thus, this paper intends to trace the historical processes in the making of coolies in tea plantations and their consequences of Darjeeling using different methodological tools.

Keywords: *coolie, plantation, Darjeeling, labour, tea*

Introduction

During the early nineteenth century, the British desperately needed an alternative to eliminate the Chinese monopoly of tea trade as a result of which extensive plantations were started in different parts of the Orient. The opening of Darjeeling as a colonial capital with its modern geographical outline had prompted ardent transformation in its cultural landscape. The introduction of the tea industry had emerged as a watershed episode changing the fate of Darjeeling forever. The history of tea plantation needs critical understanding with rational reinterpretations to have an insight on related culture, and economy. Such attempt is not only essential to probe the colonial imagination of tea plantations rather is imperative in exploring the indigenous perspective. Thus, the paper aims at re-imagining, re-writing, and challenging the existing norms in the study of the tea plantations of Darjeeling.

Historical Backdrop of Tea Plantation in Darjeeling

In the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, the expansion of European colonialism and a capitalist economy led to the emergence of coolies across Asia including India in general, and Darjeeling in particular. The concept of sovereignty in the pre-colonial period has been largely contested and the prevalence of a polity marked by semi-fluidity is generally accepted in the historical discourses. In Darjeeling, such features are quite

pronounced. There are oral and written sources indicating the fact that inhabitants paid tribute to different entities in different historical junctures. However, such sources also attest to the fact that the region before colonial intervention had a predominance of ethnic groups consisting mostly of Tibeto-Burmese dialect speakers who maintained fluid frontier relation with adjoining areas since time immemorial (see Pradhan 1991; Middleton and Shneiderman (ed) 2018). However, the British discovery of Darjeeling brought a standard benchmark in the historiography of the region. The colonial intervention of the territory between rivers Mechi to Tista with different political motives led to obtain perpetual territorial and political stability of this region and creation of modern Darjeeling.

The Deed of Grant in 1835 between the Raja of Sikkim and the East India Company ceded the territory to the new colonial dominion with an agreement of Rupees 3000 per annum as remuneration from the company. The territory was subsequently consolidated with the inclusion of the area east of the river Tista from Bhutan in 1865 (see O'Malley 1907; Dozey 1916; Dash 1947; Hunter 1974). Colonial administrators conveniently called this territory a virgin land replete with dense forests (Ritchie 1891: 18) Thus, the newly assimilated territory was proposed to be a place of rejuvenation and army depot. However, with the advent of A. Campbell as Darjeeling's first Superintendent, a large tract of land was readily sold to the European investors for the development of tea plantation (Bhattacharya 2012: 21-40; see Besky 2014) by declaring it uninhabited and non-revenue producing 'waste lands' (Revenue and Judicial Records from India and Bengal 1837: 5). Simultaneously the native inhabitants were eschewed from the historical records that certainly backed the colonial narrative of virgin territory (Middleton 2018: 30-4). The logic behind the projection of the place as a virgin was to facilitate private investments for the development of plantation economy and eventually making it a 'planters' own colony' or an enclave to dispense colonial administrations of 'Victorian' design (see Bhattacharya 2012). With the success of the experimental tea plantation by Campbell in 1848, Hooker has foreseen the possibility of establishing extensive plantations for commercial purpose. He wrote regarding Lebong that "tea plants succeed here admirably and might be cultivated at great profit and be of advantage in furthering trade with Tibet" (Griffiths 1967: 86-7). Henceforth, the bilateral collusion of colonial governance and planters' capital had transferred Darjeeling into the hands of nascent class of planters who would now dictate and design the fate of Darjeeling in the coming decades.

The triumph of experimental tea plantations encouraged the formation of different tea companies that introduced the commercial tea estate in the 1850s. The inauguration of Aloobari Tea Garden as first commercial plantation in 1856 led to further expansion of plantation in the region and subsequently, by 1870s, there were 56 tea gardens with around 11,000 acres of land under cultivation employing 8,000 labourers and producing a yield of nearly 1,708,000 lbs. of tea (Dash 1947: 113-4). As the consequences of the investment of colonial capital, the development of tea plantation in the region was amplified drastically within a few decades that is cited in the following table:

Table I: **The Growth of Tea Plantation from 1866-1905 in Darjeeling**

Year	Number of Tea Estates	Area Under Cultivation (in Acres)
1866	39	10,000
1870	56	11,000
1874	113	18,888
1885	175	38,499
1895	186	43692
1905	148	50,000

Source: O'Malley 1907: 74

Conceptualizing the Plantation Workers- 'Coolies'

The development of the plantation economy is also believed as an apparatus to tame the wild populace and their land (see Breman 1989). In fact, this has been utilized as a tool to consolidate the newly acquired colonies by the imperialists (see Thompson 2010) and to bring the natives into the light of their civilisation and modernity (see Phillips 1904). The introduction of plantation economy infers to the redeployment of slave relation in new zones of commodity production or the formation of second slavery with indentured labourers in almost all the plantations across the world who are disclosed as spacially and temporarily heterogeneous but at the same time integral aspects of modernity and capitalist transformation (Tomich (ed) 2016: 1-3). Plantations represented the deepest penetration of European power system in the frontier land[1], it brought men under new and stringent order of control (see Thompson 2010) entirely different from their prevailing structure. Coolie as an identity is the construction of colonialism rather it is a composite identity of labourers precisely in the historical landscape of Asia. These labourers in the industrial plantation sector including the tea plantations of Darjeeling hills gradually obtained a distinctive identity as plantation worker or a 'coolie'. The migrants from an agrarian background who lost their ancestral lands were reported to have arrived at the gates of mills, mines and plantations in increasing numbers as waged workers. A coolie is generally termed as a waged worker who has no proper legal securities rather belongs to the lowest unit in the industrial labour market. In the recent days, they are not paid by the hour but in accordance with the assigned task, hence considering the classical politico-economic sense, they cannot be considered as proper wage labourers (Kelly 1992: 252-3). With the introduction of work-time, and clocks in the factories, the work of a labourer in a day essentially in the tea plantations begins and ends with the ringing of bell. Thus, in tea plantation coolie is

[1] An introduction by Sidney W. Mintz and George Baca in Edgar Tristram Thompson's book 'The Plantation' writes affirming plantations as pioneering institutions in frontier areas and deeply penetrated centre of European power and a centre to dispense colonial norms in the newly added territories.

paid both by time and assigned task i.e., *thika.* The aim of the planter was to have his labour reaching the greatest possible degree of efficiency (Phillips 1904: 258-61), During this time, plantation workers were not free to enter or leave the contractual relations with the employer, thus his identity appeared primarily as the seller of labour bonded by contracts, popularly known as *girmitiyas*.[2] This was in vogue in the plantations of Assam and other areas where Indian labourers were indentured (Kelly 1992: 251-2). However, in the case of tea plantations in Darjeeling, the labourers was free and had not enacted with any kind of agreement or controlled by any special legislative enactments, they were free to come and go as they like (O'Malley 1907: 84).

During the concerned time-period, plantation economy recognises the 'ideal coolie' to be the migrant population who had abandoned their families and home who were predominantly male populaces. Women by large could not meet this ideal for planters, as women with young children cannot be utilised to the maximum in procuring their labour, it represented double burden with extra non-productive mouth to feed (Breman and Daniel 1992: 283-5). Women workers had no substantial role in the factories[3] and in the plantations, thus female coolies were not considered to be ideal coolie (Breman 1989:192). The mastery exercised by the planters went so far that the indentured labourers could marry only after obtaining permission from their masters. The identity of female workers were not visible in the moral landscape of cooliedom. Moreover, she was counted among the low10-20 percent of female workers who were wives, mothers and sisters of male workers who were counted as dependants, not workers. Even some men as heads of households refused to count their female counterparts as workers (Breman and Daniel 1992: 287). Certainly, the identity of coolie is masculine projection of hierarchical and patriarchal institutional value as George L. Beckford rightly states plantation to be a 'patriarchal institution' (see Beckford 1972). However, female coolies in Darjeeling tea plantations have had their distinct identity and completely different than their counterparts in other parts of the world which is addressed below in the paper.

The Making of Coolies in Tea Plantations of Darjeeling

> The history of the plantation system has been characterised by the fact that labour requirements could normally be met by the supply of labourers in the immediate neighbourhood of the plantations (Gordon 2007: 314)

The rise of industrial plantations in the nineteenth century is customarily referred to as Second Industrial Revolution that replaced previous traditional cultures with new capital cultures. Through this process of agrarian transformation precisely known as depeasantisation, the transformation 'from peasants and tribesmen to plantation workers'

[2] The Indians called the contract as *girmit*, from the English word agreement. They called themselves *girmitiyas* precisely by those who had entered plantation as labourers through agreement with the planters.

[3] In British India, the Factory Act of 1891 reduced the numbers of working hours that women were allowed to work per day. The prohibition of night work for women was followed soon thereafter.

or coolie or a waged labourer (see Das Gupta 1986) became ardently habitual. The early colonial accounts claimed the region to be sparsely populated by the native tribes like Lepchas, Limbus and Bhutias. However, these colonial demographic numbers are, at best, incomplete (Middleton & Shneiderman (ed) 2018: 6-8) which needs further introspections[4]. W. W Hunter questions the accuracy of the census by calling it fairly accurate for the old hill territory of Darjeeling but incorrect for Tarai sub-division and for the Damsang tract (Kalimpong) to the east of river Tista (Hunter 1876: 41). The settlement of Darjeeling from its very inception was based on logistics that included the presence of large numbers of natives who eventually served not only as domestic labour for the Europeans or as clerks for the civil administration, but also as plantation labourers in the tea estates (Bhattacharya 2012: 51). The development of plantation requires two basic necessities i.e., large cultivable land and a large labour force (Bhowmik 1980: 1524). The newly developed plantation economy in the region required colossal labour supply that could not be secured by the recruitment of natives only, thus Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal facilitated the supply. Certainly, the inhabitants from eastern Nepal moved along the porous and fluid Himalayan frontier to meet the demand of labour pool in the developing Darjeeling (see Pradhan 1991). J. D. Hooker compared the rapid development of Darjeeling with the Australian colony of the British (Hooker 1854: 50, O'Malley 1907: 34), besides he was also astonished to perceive the infrastructural development as well as the demographic transformation of the region. The plantation economy had to depend on migrant labour whose migration was induced by the planters backed by the state. In fact, Campbell was mostly responsible for the demographic transformation of the place as he realised the agrarian and feudal exploitation in the neighbouring kingdom could definitely be the push factor (see Pradhan 1991, Bhattacharya 2012, Besky 2014, Dash 1947, Middleton 2018: 30-3) and subsequently the emergent plantation would pull them in the form of wage labour. Unlike the plantation of the Americas, the labour-power here was not supplied by the slaves but by a workforce engrossed through different labour recruitment procedures. In general, all plantations were settlement, an institution with coerced labour or importation of indentured, contract or slave labour (see Thompson 2010), however in Darjeeling tea plantation importation and incorporation of the population became a major trend in the workforce accumulation.

The British relied largely on informal labour recruiters known as *sardar*s[5] to bring and integrate labour in the developing tea plantation economy. Seemingly they occupied important status in the plantation system. Sir Percival Griffiths has noted that recruiter

[4] The colonial documents itself make contradictory statement on the demographic composition of Darjeeling. Campbell (1869), and Hunter (1876) call it an 'old Gorkha Station' and also validate the inhabitation of different tribal population at different juncture of time. The place had remained a major point of trans-Himalayan trade prior to the colonial intervention.

[5] *Sardars* were Nepali men who used their knowledge of their natal regions in eastern Nepal to bring a steady supply of labour to Darjeeling. They were important intermediaries in the plantation structure and were integral to the maintenance of workers' subsistence.

including *sardar*s used all forms of trickery and deceit to employ people in the tea gardens like by giving promises of better wages and advanced payments (Griffiths 1967: 283). Working closely with the planters, these agents were overall employer, supervisor, guardian and intermediaries between labour and management (Middleton 2018: 37; Sharma 2010: 16). Labourers were directly employed by *sardar*s. The latter generally took advances from the estates or planters on the account of procuring coolies, though having no indentured ties with them as evident from Assam. O'Malley wrote *sardar*s as guardians were looked for advance by the coolies, whereas the *sardar*s were dependant on managers thereby making a financial bondage and rarely escaping the toils of it (O'Malley 1907: 84). *Sardar*s had ethnic ties with the procured workers, which enabled them to gain their confidence and assurance. They tended to recruit from their own ethnic group which fostered that particular ethnic group in making the working-class of tea plantations and ultimately formed a multi-ethnic structure of the working-class in Darjeeling. Later, such *sardari system* was adopted in Terai and Dooars in 1870 in which the *sardar*s were recruited by the manager through the legitimate authority of Tea Districts Labour Supply Association, an organisation of all tea estates managers based in Calcutta (De 2015: 279-83).

This recruitment in the plantation was something more than the abstract flow of people as labourers and was an assimilation of them forming into a new institution, economy, and culture. Precisely this economy gave birth to a new identity of class. As Thompson pointed out, the plantation is a 'race making institution' (Thompson 1975: 19-23) as the composition of the workforce in the tea plantations has heterogeneous ethnic groups with homogenous economic activity that constructs the notion of shared identity (see Bhowmik 1981) among them. The new arrivals with their distinct languages, customs and religious practices had to undertake homogenous economic activity leading to the development of collective class identity i.e., of a worker or coolie. Thus, this assemblage of ethnically plural population with different linguistic background but with homogenous identity of class facilitated to the acceptance and development of Nepali language as Darjeeling's lingua-franca. Rather such shared class identity and language became the crux for the rise of Nepali nationalism too in the region later in twentieth century (Pradhan 2010:1-41). The growth of the Nepali population assured the planters as they secured labour in future, however, the disapproval and hesitance of the Nepali government for the migration of their subjects to Darjeeling created political tension for some period resulting in the refusal of Nepali coolies (Middleton 2018: 34-38)

A Retrospect: Coolies in the Tea Plantation of Darjeeling

The tea planters in Darjeeling needed a section of population to be recruited at low wages, hence they chose the migrants from Nepal on a large scale. The *sardar*s backed by planters, encouraged families rather than individuals to migrate in the plantations by which planters could procure the labour of entire family. Furthermore, it also ensured the future supply of labour as well (Bhowmik 2017: 56-7). The labourers were made free in the tea plantations

of Darjeeling (O'Malley 1907: 84). There are instances of workers moving from plantation to plantation in search of the most favourable living and working conditions for their families (Griffiths 1967: 518–9). In fact, there was no need to indenture or bond them through contracts as the migrants had no choice of returning back to their ancestral homeland due to ongoing political and economic mayhem. As a result of the Gorkha conquest, the peasantry in Nepal had facing an impoverishing state, therefore 'going to Mugalan' (as India was then called in Nepal) to sell their labour might have been the only alternative to escape the oppressive hierarchies of the Gorkha regime. Moreover, it can be considered as a symbolic act of protest against the consolidating empire and its oppressive structure (see Pradhan, 1991).

It is an irrefutable fact that the influx of population in Darjeeling after the introduction of tea plantations (see Hunter 1974, O'Malley 1907) as well as for the availability of 'lands'[6] sufficient for cultivation made drastic transformation in its demographic composition within a few decades (Dash 1947: 49-50). Kiratas[7] seemed to have already settled in Darjeeling by the middle of the nineteenth century and even before the introduction of tea plantations since Hooker enlisted Limbus as an inhabitant of Darjeeling (Pradhan 1991: 211-3). The first regular census of 1871-72 showed the dominance of Nepali population, as likewise, the *matwalis*[8] and untouchables formed the majority among the migrants in Darjereling (Dash 1947: 49). The Kiaratas were largest in number among Nepali population followed by Tamang and Mangars, for whom Darjeeling became an easy refuge to escape from harsh conditions of adjoining eastern Nepal (Pradhan 1991: 211-2). In Darjeeling, the Brahmans formed 2 percent of the total Nepali population in 1901 while Chhetris constituted little more than 1 percent of total Nepali population in 1941. Apparently they chose to become the residents of 'Khasmahals' practising agriculture and started investing capital on land and cattle (Pradhan 1991: 214). However, a little percentage of that population also formed the work force in the plantation. The Census Report of 1891 made clear statement about the predominance of Matwalis population of Tibeto-Burmese language group and Kiratas in Darjeeling in general and tea plantations in particular. The statistical data is provided below:

[6] Land by declaring as 'Waste Lands' was made available by the Company to attract capital and labour for infrastructural and demographic transformation of Darjeeling. Company was aware about the agrarian roots of Nepali population and knew the fact that they would prefer to settle in Darjeeling if cultivable land is made accessible.

[7] The Tibeto-Burmese flock, predominantly the inhabitants of eastern Nepal precisely Limbus and Khambus who shared fluid frontier with Darjeeling and Sikkim from time immemorial (see Pradhan 1991).

[8] It is generally associated with the Tibeto-Burmese groups, who is considered relatively low than Nepali upper castes(*Tagadharis*) and to whom consumption of intoxicant liquor is not a taboo.

Table:II Caste-Wise Population Composition of Darjeeling in 1891

	Caste	1891
1	Brahmans	……..
2	Kshatriyas/Chhetris	……..
3	Newar	4,953
4	Gurung	9,232
5	Mangar	11,412
6	Jimdar / Khambu	29,950
7	Sunwar	5,156
8	Limbu	12,812
9	Kami	7,048
10	Darji / Damai	3,460
11	Kurmi	525
12	Sarki	1,547
13	Yakha	1,250

Source: Census Report of 1891: 13 (Cited in Rasaily 2003)

The Brahmans- Chhetris did not form any sizable part of the nineteenth century migration, however those who got migrated preferred to become cultivators. Sarat Chandra Das in *Journey to Lhasa and Central Asia* mentioned that while travelling to Tibet through Darjeeling and Eastern Nepal, he noticed numerous Nepali settlers with some Brahmans-Chhetris who made their livelihood chiefly by selling milks. However, in comparision, their numbers grew considerably in Eatern Nepal during the corresponding period (Pradhan 1991: 214). In 1848, Hooker while describing Ilam in Limbuan noted that the inhabitants were chiefly brahmans due to the introduction of new land tenure systems and losing of Kipat land ownership by the inhabitatnts as the consequence of Gorkha imperialism (Jones 1976: 70-4, see Caplan 1970). However, it is interesting to note that the people escaped the feudal exploitation in Nepal to endure colonial exploitation in British India (*Mugalan*).Thus, their population migrating from eastern Nepal started increasing in the tea plantations of Darjeeling and adjoining regions. *Sardari* system of labour recruitment can be traced as an another factor for their predominance in Darjeeling plantations as they mainly recruited labours from their ownr ethnic groups. Further, the opening of Gurkha recruiting depot in Darjeeling in early 1890s had significant impact on their increasing immigration. Considering this group including Magar, Gurung, Limbu and Rai as belonging to a 'martial race' encouraged them to migrate in Darjeeling as tea coolies. This, in fact, allowed them of having scope to get recruitment as soldier or police (Middleton 2018: 44-5).

However, Kumar Pradhan held the view that all Nepalis settled in the hills were proletariats as most of them were from working class backgrounds with no intra-community class

exploitations in Darjeeling (see Pradhan 1991, 2004; Sarkar and Khawas 2018: 181). However, he failed to address caste dynamics and locate tea plantation worker as a different entity. Certainly, the caste perspective in the formation of class cannot be overlooked and can be linked with the argument of predominance of alcohol consuming working class (see Mondal 2018) especially among tea workers with *matwalis* and untouchables ethnic roots. In most parts of the world, plantation labour, while remaining one of the lowest paid occupational catagories, has invariably included women. However, during the initial decades after the introduction of tea industry, the women workers were few enjoying relatively low wages as compared to their male counterparts in tea plantations of Darjeeling. Such discrimination was due to the incapacity of plantation structure to locate them as complete workers as they lacked the moral order of coolie identity (see Breman and Daniel 1992). Royal Labour Commission of Labour Inquiry, 1931 stated the minimum earnings of tea workers were about 'seven annas and six pices a day for men, women earned six annas a day while two anna nine pices for adolocents' in Darjeeling (GOI 1931: 399). The table below shows the difference between the male and female composition in the district of Darjeeling when tea industry was in the phase of its intial development where the number of women workers are comparitively low to their male counterparts..

Table III: Sex Ratio of Population in Darjeeling, 1872-1891

Year	Total population	Males	Females
1872	94,712	53,057	41,655
1881	155,645	89,351	66,294
1891	223,314	123,046	100,268

Source: Census Report of 1891, (Cited in Rasaily 2003)

A.J Dash reports 34 per cent of men, 49 per cent women and 17 per cent children in 1939 (Dash 1947:119-20) and Labour Investigation Committee found employment of women and children higher suggesting the increase of women workforce in the plantations of North Bengal (Bhadra 1985: 93, 2004: 53-5). Female workers started forming a major workforce in the tea plantations right from the beginning of the twentieth century (Bhadra 1985: 93). The sardari system encouraged family migration and their recruitment to meet the growing demand of labour. Furthermore, it would prevent the workers from escaping to other work sectors (Sharma 2010: 16). Initially, tea workers used to escape from their job to work in railway and roadway construction sectors. Planters too encouraged the recruitment of women workers by considering them submissive who would not bargain even if they were being exploited (Banerjee 2018: 3-6). Their task in the garden mainly plucking, pruning and other garden maintenance were considered unskilled, low-skilled and of low prestige and therefore, were entitled to a low wage. The intention of the planters had eventually become more manipulative by recruiting more female workers with less

wage and were conscious enough to identify those migrant women from eastern Nepal with agrarian backgrounds would easily adapt to the work in tea plantations because of its agrarian characteristics. Recruitment of female coolies along with their families would also secure future labour supply. In fact, the planters made desperate pleas to the government to stop the incursion of their workers in other occupations including military to preserve and retain their workforce for the development of gardens (Middleton 2018: 45-6). The male workers have been encouraged to join British Army abandoning their previous work to enjoy job security, pension benefits, land grants, and relatively high status were whereas their female counterparts due to their gendered responsibilities of domestic work and child-rearing could not move out from the garden (Sharma 2018: 86-7) and would remain as stable workforce who would not abandon their work in the middle. Certainly, such situation facilitated in the rise of the number of women workers in the tea plantations of Darjeeling thereafter.

The emergence of women workers efficient in the plucking of tea leaves and their specialisation on the task is the result of embedded socialisation with training and practice that has been prevailing since centuries (Banerjee 2018: 6). Perhaps, the narrative of 'nimble fingers enabling better plucking of tea leaves without damaging the bush' (Banerjee 2018: 6-7) is the desperate gendered attempt of the colonial planters to make women work in comparatively low wage and to avoid labour shortage when men workers started moving out of the plantation in search of better wages and opportunities. Women workers too focussed on plucking intensively certainly to enjoy the incentives (amount per kilogram) provided after the completion of allocated task, *thika* in order to earn similar to their male counterparts

Conclusion:

The tea plantation introduced the natives with the western model of industrial capitalism and bestowed them with a new identity in Darjeeling. The tea plantation, a labour-intensive industry, that needs a huge workforce largely relied on the transformation of agrarian and tribal populations into plantation workers (see Das Gupta 1986). These structural transformations among the population not only acquainted them with the western values of civilisation but they were also tamed by the planters to become a perfect coolie (see Breman 1989). In fact, plantations made the 'barbarian and uncultured flocks of tribes and peasants' to accept and adapt the European model of civilisation. The white planters and managerial class were something to be idealised (see Phillips 1904) and to be addressed as Sahib and Memsahib having sole authority like an official of the state. It is of little wonder that the plantation system has actually been embedded with feudal structural values, and it was subsisted on the capitalist-industrial norms of labour control. *Sardari* system further institutionalized such feudal values by which *sardar*s became the overall recruiter, guardian, and representative of the workers. In most of the cases, this mechanism had

completely denied the basic rights of the coolies, thereby making *sardar*s the only legitimate head.

There are a very few instances that Nepali migrants occupied high or significant positions in governmental and non-governmental offices unlike the *sardar*s who was being mostly acknowledged as the first-class contractor, even achieving the title of 'Rai Bahadur' (Sharma 2018: 88-91) and 'Mandal' (see Sarkar 2010) Thus, they failed to play a decisive role in power structure of the colonial plantation economy. Perhaps, such denials are the reason for the lack of political representation of coolies in Darjeeling.

Alternative employment was totally barred for the coolies making them reliant on plantations. However, some of them managed to get recruited in the army or other sectors but still bearing their roots in the plantations. Thus, the workers or coolie of tea plantations in Darjeeling faced utmost and strict surveillance through garden chowkidars and special North Bengal Mounted Rifles formed in 1872 to protect the interests of the planters (Bhowmik 2011: 246-7). Though the coolies in Darjeeling were neither indentured nor enslaved, the relation between the planter and the coolie was much less than that between employer and employee and more like master and slave (Bhowmik 1981: 135).

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