

A Colonizer or an Anthropologist? Locating the Identity of the Christian Missionary vis-à-vis the Tea Garden ‘Coolie’ in Colonial Assam

Anisha Bordoloi¹

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to study the role played by Christian missionaries in carrying out Mission work among the tea plantation labourers of Assam during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It explores how politics of power can function through multiple identities apart from the one that seems more visible revealing the non-monolithic identity of a colonizer. It also argues how the world of the general (the tea garden coolies) is constructed through perspectives emanating from the particular (individual Christian missionaries). Missionaries performed a political role in the way they carried out mission work in the tea gardens while simultaneously producing information and knowledge like an anthropologist about the tea garden migrant labourers amidst whom they set out to preach. Especially significant is the search for the ‘heathen’ that became a prime requisite for mission work, the construction of the tea garden as a ‘field’ through mission tours and visits, missionary interests in the plantations and the usage of print culture in the form of a newspaper such as the “The Indian Churchman” where debates between Charles Dowding, a missionary and colonial officials entrenched the idea of the subject and the colonizer further.

Introduction

Colonialism was made possible, and then sustained and strengthened, as much by cultural technologies of rule as it was by the more obvious and brutal modes of conquest that first established power on foreign shores.

-Nicholas B. Dirks²

A connection between the idea of civilisation and culture is an important factor in determining the identity of the colonizer and the colonized. Notions such as ‘cultured’, ‘civilized’, ‘cultural/civilizational progress’ and ‘cultural/civilizational

¹Anisha Bordoloi, (anishabordoloi.8@gmail.com) Research Associate, OKD Institute of Social Change and Development, Guwahati

²Dirks, 2001, p. 9.

backwardness' were very often used and referred to as part of an intellectual understanding of different human societies by those in authority of knowledge production. 'Culture' represented a context in which the phenomenon of power can be understood by setting the 'powerless' within the framework of their own virtues as the 'powerless' according to terms defined by the 'powerful'.

Interests of the tea industry compelled the colonial government to unearth features that homogenised different populations from different regions leading to deeper political ramifications other than the economic. It contributed in creating a wider and stronger hold of the empire over lands and people located at a distance from each other with Assam being connected with the empire more firmly and its easy access with a difficult geography no longer difficult to achieve. Studies associated with race science such as anthropology provided a rational basis and eased the pursuit of such colonial interests. Through an exploration of the origins, customs, religious systems and language of the subjects, the colonizer assumed the dual role of an anthropologist too. As the civilizing mission formed an integral part of colonialism, it not just signified the transformation of a colony from a stage of primitivity and barbarism to one of modernity, progress and development in relation to economy and society. This transformation attained an unofficial character too in aiming to change the nature of economy and society. Especially, if colonialism could find deeper roots in the lives of the people through a moral fabric provided by religion. In this case, Christianity.

Although it is convenient to locate many works associated with Christian missionaries and the impact of their philanthropic activities on the society and culture of Assam and other states of the North East, there are very few works that examine the relation between the missionaries and the tea plantation labour community in Assam. Therefore, a parallel can be drawn between the peripheral location of the tea labour community in relation to the larger society in the region which is reflected even in the number of historical literature produced on the subject. The subject finds mention in passing as part of a larger literature produced on Christian missionaries in Assam and the North East in general.³ Most works have focused on various aspects of the impact of missionary work upon the culture and life of the natives, the way natives were represented in missionary literature, the association of Christian Mission with the greater colonialist project and linked with it the efforts to establish the superiority of Christianity over Hinduism, the way churches sprung up in different places and conversions had taken place, their contribution towards the development of English education, starting of schools and efforts in developing a vernacular language such as Assamese.

³ Mention may be made of works such as Neill, 1966; Dharmaraj, 1993; Sangma, 1987; Downs, 1992; Sangma & Syiemlieh, 1994; Dena; Karotemprel, 1993; Stadler & Karotemprel, 1980; Kolsky, 2011; Gogoi, 2016; Ghosh, 2011; Bora, 2009.

What do these endeavours speak about the identity of the Christian missionaries themselves? Given that there are many layers and facets of their approach to native society, what does this kind of multiplicity of motives, narratives or the production of knowledge entail? The fact that the tea plantations of Assam provided a suitable ground for carrying out Mission work among the newly recruited labour population, what remains to be addressed is the way Christianity perpetuated the stereotype of the ‘coolie’⁴ in the literature of the Mission. The way a large section of a subject population was easily accessible to the Christian missionaries, the way missionaries worked amidst the tea garden labour population treating the tea garden as a potential field of work, preaching the gospel among them, producing knowledge about them in their literature from a position of economic, political and psychological superiority, one is hence, compelled to draw parallels between the position of a Christian missionary and that of an anthropologist. More so because missionaries were central to the emergence and professionalization of ethnology and anthropology in Britain and in the way Britain envisaged its role in the colonies. Missionary education was a crucial factor in the emergence of secularizing strategies in colonial India.⁵

Keeping this possibility in mind that men and women of faith who carry out religious and welfare activities among the native communities could very often function like an anthropologist, this article attempts to explore how politics of power can function through multiple identities apart from the one that seems more visible. It is to be seen how the state operates through multiple domains of power that function along inter-personal lines in an unofficial manner.

The first section of the essay throws light upon how the search for the ‘heathen’ or the ‘truly pagan’ turned the tea garden ‘coolie’ as a suitable subject to carry out the Mission. The second part of the essay explores the anthropological treatment of the tea garden as a ‘field’ with a focus on the frequent ‘tours’, ‘explorations’ and ‘visits’ to the field. This is followed by an examination of how the Christian missionary’s role as an anthropologist gets camouflaged into that of a colonizer as well. The essay ends with an examination of a primary text such as *Tea Garden Coolies in Assam- A Letter by the Hon’ble J. Buckingham, C.I.E., replying to a communication on the Subject which appeared in “The Indian Churchman”*. With Introduction and an answer by the Rev. Charles Dowding set in the year 1894 that further entrenched the image of the Christian missionary-cum-anthropologist-cum-colonizer and the tea garden ‘coolie’ through the medium of print culture.

⁴The term ‘coolie’ emerges in most colonial documents as a common way to refer to the tea garden population recruited to work in Assam. It is also used as a general terminology to refer to labour in the colonies who carried load or worked in construction sites for roads and railways during the colonial period. Hence, the word would be used at various points in the essay in order to understand the colonial construction of the term.

⁵Pels, 1997, p. 172.

Mission Work and the ‘Heathen’ Coolie

Missionaries like Nathan Brown saw a tremendous potential to nurture the growth of mission activities in Assam, thus, compelling him to consider Assam as “one of the most important and encouraging fields in all the east”⁶ with a promising supply of the ‘heathen’ – a requisite to create believers. The presence of the ‘heathen’ was identified by their qualities of ‘primitivity’, ‘barbarism’, ‘lack of civilization and religion’ which created a challenging task for missionaries to realize the worth of the Mission if they were successful in civilizing the ‘wild’, familiarizing with the mysterious or knowing the unknown. The ‘heathen’ as primitive, barbaric and uncivilized was synonymous to the identity of the tribe in colonial European racial vocabulary.

In missionary opinion, the solution to ‘heathenism’ or ‘primitivity’ lay in the idea of service to Christ which appeared synonymous to the idea of service to the colonizers. This kind of pre-occupation with the ‘primitive’ or the ‘heathen’ enabled the Christian Missionary to cope with one’s sense of alienation from his/her own culture as well as advance oneself professionally. The very identity of a ‘primitive’ which is romanticized in several missionary writings, is an identity which was unacceptable in the missionary’s own culture, thus precisely becoming the target of spreading the missionary zeal.⁷ Therefore, what was admired in a state of primitivity was detested in a world of civilization.⁸ With missionary efforts towards improvement of agriculture and industry, the planting of tea received a religious/moral sanction as a ‘noble’ venture started by Europeans as benefitting a colonized population given that it would contribute in improving their economic conditions by providing employment to the colonized.

As availability of a large number of the ‘heathen’ became an important factor for the success of mission work, the failure to influence the minds of Hindus and Muslims, turned the Christian missionaries to pay attention to races with the absence of caste or religion. Hence, when the Court of Directors in 1831 suggested the government to follow a policy of religious neutrality among natives,⁹ in so far as the tribes were believed to be ‘ungodly’ or ‘without religion’, missionary interference among the tribal population of the land was not inconsistent with such a policy of ‘religious neutrality’. Part of the missionary interest in the

⁶ Sangma, 1987, p. 30.

⁷ Ward uses the terms ‘unenlightened people’ and ‘rude race of savages’ while citing the significance of *Orunodoi*, a journal begun by the Christian Missionaries in spreading knowledge of the gospel among the natives in Ward, 1884, pp. 9,10 ; Nathan Brown’s reference to the native population as ‘heathen’ as cited in Sangma, 1987, p. 30; Reference to ‘savages skilled in barbarous warfare’ in *The Whole World Kin*, 1890, p. 111. The author further adds that ‘the more cruel, ignorant and dangerous they were, the greater the reason for the work just undertaken’ (p. 111) and refers to the ‘heathen who are given to lying, theft, opium smoking...to everything wicked, rude and unlovely’ (p. 140).

⁸ Lewis, 1973, p. 584.

⁹ Downs, 1992, p. 37.

tribals of North-East India also needs to be traced to Christianity's own pagan origins. The tribal population and their ethos of egalitarianism provided sites for missionaries to romanticize Christianity's own past, all the more so, when Sebastian Karotempel, a man of the faith is driven to call Christianity as a "truly tribal religion".¹⁰

Populations which exuded tremendous potential for the development of evangelism and among whom it was the most successful in the plain areas were the tea tribes, especially, Oraons, Mundas, Kharias, Kols and Santhals. These included both the ex-tea tribes that settled in the villages near the tea gardens as well as those who lived and laboured within the premises of the tea plantations. For Christianity to avoid being portrayed as being imposed upon natives but embraced by natives out of their own will, it was important to target those populations who exuded a sense of vulnerability, who faced exploitation by colonial authorities and experienced a loss of dignity and discrimination at the hands of upper caste local Hindu population of the region. Immense potential to spread the faith was thus found among the tea tribes of Assam giving the Christian mission a cause, a reason to prevail in the region. Some among these tribes were already converted Christians before embarking on their journey to Assam. In missionary parlance, calling the community of tea tribes as "ignorant but sincere"¹¹, implied the ignorance of the community as essential precisely for the creation of a sincere population. A population, given their ignorance of the inherent meaning of Christianity, served it with loyalty. The attribute of ignorance that determined the position of the community as subjects, readily accepting the filtration of European Christian ideals ran as a parallel theme with a similar position of the community within the framework of a wage-labour regime in the colonial tea plantations. The English government commenced the cultivation of the indigenous tea plant in Jaipur in the year 1835 and in 1836, the year of the founding of the Mission, the first pound of Assam tea was sent to London.¹² Nathan Brown was hopeful that growing wild in abundance in Sadiya and its vicinity, there were great prospects if proper cultivation of the tea plant could be ensued.¹³ The frequent visits of missionaries in the tea tribe inhabited villages and tea gardens indicate these spaces as strongholds of mission presence. In the year 1893, out of a total Church membership of 354 in the Sibsagar district, only 38 were Assamese while the rest comprised of tea tribes.¹⁴ Success of missionary zeal among a large number of tea tribal population in a particular district implied success of the same for the entire district with tea planters too contributing towards its accomplishment by building Churches such

¹⁰ Karotempel, 1993, p. 520.

¹¹ Sangma, 1987, p. 57.

¹² *The Whole World Kin*, 1890, p. 124.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Sangma, 1987, p. 59.

as those at Amguri and Teok.¹⁵ Although it is difficult to trace the first tea garden where missionary work actually began, nevertheless, it is possible to state that the Kols were the first community of tea plantation workers to be baptized in 1871 by the American Baptist Missionary E.W. Clark in the Sibsagar 'field'.¹⁶ The kols are imported tea labourers from Chota Nagpur in Central India. The community of Kols from Mackeypur and Dolbogan tea gardens of Sibsagar district can be said to have first experienced the impact of missionary work for whom the main church branches consisted those located in Tiok, Bebejia and Mokrung. After Clark, A.K. Gurney took up the responsibility of conversion in the three stations mentioned above. Even W.E. Witter was another significant Christian missionary who carried out mission work among the tea garden population in the Sibsagar district of Assam.¹⁷ In 1889, C.E. Petrick became a regularly appointed missionary for work at Sibsagar.¹⁸

Christianity can be linked to colonialism in so far as the veil of humanity was used to justify and conceal inhuman motives and treatment of the colonized such as in the case of the tea plantations of Assam. It was the success among the tea tribes that enforced the significance of Sibsagar as a possible station for the missionaries and preaching was expanded further from the tea gardens and villages to the bazaars too. In the opinion of colonial officials like Col. Hopkinson, the Commissioner of Assam, conversions were necessary to turn Assam into a land of settlement and tea gardens.¹⁹

Although efforts at affiliating the tea tribes with higher education by missionaries is highly questionable, education at the primary level was mostly confined to the teaching of the gospel, of spreading Christian ideology. Spread of Christianity through education helped in building an intimate connection with the tribal worker who was otherwise placed at a distance in the lower rungs of the civilizational ladder. Begun in 1927, the Don Bosco school-cum-boarding organized by Catholic missionaries in the centres of Guwahati, Dibrugarh and Tezpur played an important role in spreading evangelization among the Adivasis/ the tea garden labour community in Assam.²⁰

The tea tribes provided a safe gamble among whom missionaries were able to establish a stronghold given the loss of native roots from their original homeland as a result of displacement. Establishing a stronghold among this group helped missionaries to spread their influence outside this group and preach among those

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *The Assam Mission*, 1887, p. 26.

¹⁷ Ibid, pp. 27, 28.

¹⁸ Bora, 2009, p. 19.

¹⁹ Dena, p. 25.

²⁰ Karotemprel, 1993, p. 156.

who were placed at the lower rungs of the Hindu social ladder such as fishermen, farmers and traders.

After carrying out work among the Mundari speakers in Sibsagar, Lakhimpur too attracted the attention of missionaries as a prospective field with numerous tea gardens in its vicinity. Lakhimpur not just provided opportunities among the tea garden labour community but also for the mission to be carried out among the Garos, Daflas and Miri inhabitants of the nearby hills. Though communication and access to the hills was a major hindrance, most tea gardens, however, were located conveniently in the plains near major towns and well-connected with roads, waterways and railways. Many from the tea garden tribes were already converted Christians before they arrived in the gardens. Being displaced from their roots in their original homeland, weak links of identity with their native land exposed these people as easy targets for evangelism.

The Tea Garden as a ‘Field’

Tea gardens were constantly referred to as the *field*. The extensive ‘touring’ and ‘exploration’ of the districts by missionaries like Nathan Brown, Oliver Cutter, O.L. Swanson, C.E. Petrick, Joseph Paul and John Firth provides us a glimpse of the anthropological role of the missionaries. The frequency of ‘tours’, ‘explorations’ and ‘visits’ was possible once the plantation as a field could be created. Tours and explorations formed an important aspect of the spread of Christianity and selecting converts. Their tours and explorations involved a process of selecting those populations who were easy and ‘suitable’ to baptize. In the bargain, the populations who acted as a hindrance to the cause of western religion and ideology were excluded from the religious propaganda of the missionaries, as in the case of high caste Hindus and Muslims.

On most ‘tours’, missionaries visited villages, markets (bazaars), road-side gatherings, gardens and coolie lines to name few spaces of daily activity of the selected groups of colonized subjects. The penetration of missionaries into such spaces of daily activity turned these spaces into areas of Christian conquest as they preached, sold books, distributed tracts, answered enquiries and baptized a few.²¹ The missionary-cum-anthropologist hence, gained “unlimited right of access to data”.²² A subject-ruler dichotomy was realized in populated public spaces such as these through encounters, resistance and acceptance ultimately putting to test the success of the Christian ideology when natives positively reacted to it. Similar to an anthropologist, the “indigenous people were readily accessible to” the missionary too. “Preferential treatment” was received by him/her “not only from other Europeans in position of political power, but also from the subject

²¹ Sangma, 1987, p. 146.

²² Lewis, 1973, p. 583.

people themselves” as he/she “was a member of the group in power”.²³ Peter Pels compares the study of Christian missionaries as a major area of innovation in the anthropology of colonialism. He calls them ‘colonialist indoctrinators’ with ‘harmless curiosity’.²⁴

If preaching through tours, explorations and visits connected the different worlds of the missionary and the potential convert, then a relation between the two contrasting worlds was built also through language. Urged by the necessity to communicate the gospel, missionaries did probably more substantial recording of unknown languages than all anthropologists taken together. As all colonial relationships required a language of command, hence, very often, its dictionary and grammar were provided by missionaries.²⁵ C. E. Petrick notes that the ‘aborigines’ from West Bengal, Chota Nagpur and Central India form ‘the best object for mission work’ clearly indicating that for the best experience of mission work among the ‘aborigines’, it became utmost important to develop the language widely spoken by the ‘aborigines’.²⁶ Given that a majority of the tea garden immigrants were acquainted with the Hindi language, especially, a large number of Kols, Mundas and Oraons, provisions were made at the Assam Mission Conference for examinations to be conducted in Hindi as well apart from Assamese, Garo, Mikir, Ao Naga, Angami Naga, Tangkhul Naga and Rabha.²⁷ Members of the Conference deemed it as the duty of the missionaries to outline a course of language study in the prescribed vernacular and to conduct the language examinations in accordance with the rules of the Exam Committee of the American Baptist Mission Union. The pastors of churches which had a large population of tea garden coolies such as Kols and Mundas preached in Hindi.²⁸ Mundari too is said to have been the vernacular of most of the Church goers and it was the language in which they conducted most of their meetings.²⁹ In fact, the New Testament was being sold at five annas per copy in Hindi and Mundari too apart from the above-mentioned languages.³⁰

Due to the tremendous success of American Baptist missionaries among the tea garden coolies, their mission was termed as the “Cooly Mission”.³¹ A.K. Gurney points out that from 1876 onwards, the Mission was extremely dependent on the Kols, who were imported tea garden labour from Chota Nagpur as they were

²³ Ibid, pp. 582, 583.

²⁴ Pels, 1997, p. 171.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Petrick, 1899, p. 68.

²⁷ The Assam Mission of the American Baptist Missionary Union, 1899, pp. 5,6.

²⁸ Examples can be cited of Udmari and Balijuri churches in Nowgong district. Ibid, p. 26.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Moore, 1899, p. 22.

³¹ Sangma, 1987, p. 163.

considered 'a race without caste'.³²Gurney wrote several letters and reports to the Missionary Magazine detailing the particulars of his work among the Kols, the Assamese and station work in general.³³Kols and Santhals formed a large number of 'races without caste' (around 10,000) who were brought to the gardens. Sibsagar being a large tea district of Assam, the Mission received more of these converts than any other. The most important churches that constituted a large number of Kols were at Teok, Bebejia and Mokrung. In 1878, Henry Osborne proposed the sustenance of two native preachers in his tea gardens at Dibrugarh.³⁴

A sense of permanency to the field was attached under the religious fold through frequency of tours and visits. For example, out of twenty five people who were baptized in the North Lakhimpur district during the year 1895-96, twenty were from the Joyhing tea garden.³⁵ Preaching and Baptisms eventually carved the way for securing land and compound in the station and clearing trees in the forest for building posts for a bungalow. The 'field visits', thus, not only led to a transformation in the identity of the population but also leading to a transformation of the landscape too. In the words of Firth, touring by missionaries revealed to them 'a region of darkness' in fields such as North Lakhimpur which had a large number of tea garden coolies.³⁶ The revelation of 'darkness' of a prospective field of work not only coolified the identity of a population with that of the field but also essentialised missionary work through a constructed image of 'darkness' both in physical/racial terms as well as metaphorically revealing ignorance and lack of knowledge. Firth further adds that benevolence to the 'dark', 'heathen' coolie lay in his/her conversion into a subject by proving 'faithful' to the way he/she would be shaped as a 'coolie' under the Mission.³⁷ The success of the Mission was determined by the number of heathen they could baptize indicating the worthiness of a tour which could successfully bring the intended subject within the realm of an intended politico-religious experience.

So much significance was laid on visits and tours to the heathen stations that if coolies did not turn up at the verandah of the Mission bungalow, then the visits and services are held in their villages in one of their houses. Even though it can be cited as a matter of convenience, it signifies the essence of the missionary 'field' as a space of deep intrusion even into the coolie homes to carry out 'field work'. The deep intrusion of the 'field' also gets reflected in the details produced in numbers about the 'field'. The detailed number of coolies who spoke Hindi, the number that resided in each district, the number of tea gardens in each district,

³² Gurney, 1887, p. 26

³³ Ibid, p. 27.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Firth, 1896, p. 48.

³⁶ Ibid, pp. 48, 49.

³⁷ Ibid.

the number of different tribal groups that constituted the 'tea coolies', how many of them were already converted Christians and who were not - created a vastness of the 'field' reflecting potential, a precision in which data was collected and the missionaries' incredible access to organized information generated by the state through the instrument of the census – an important combination of knowledge creation and domination.

Association with stations such as Teok, Bebejia, Madhopur, Mackeypur etc. are defined in terms of 'trips', 'visits' or 'tours' to the fields and comparisons were made among them in terms of any interesting observations during the visits, trips or tours.³⁸ Trips, visits and tours to the mission field was not bereft of methodology and planning as outlined in the chapter titled 'Methods of Mission Work' by M.C. Mason in a mission report.³⁹ The anthropological way is laid bare by Mason through tests and experiments in the field and in whose understanding-

*Mission methods are human adaptations....to special conditions. Any method, therefore, must be measured, first by its harmony with the divine principles and second by its adaptation to its special conditions, not forgetting the characteristics and abilities of the man who is to execute the work. A method or man successful in one field might be quite the reverse in another. The question for us therefore, is what are our best methods?*⁴⁰

A systematic outline is laid under the terms 'Guiding Principles' that combined religious preaching with a methodology beginning with preaching, persuasion, charities, creating signs for confirmation, teaching and building character.⁴¹ In the case of 'Application of Principles', united effort was to be followed by division of labour and knowing one's field under which emphasis was laid on acquainting oneself with the field, knowing the habits, customs, beliefs, prejudices and labours of the people.⁴² Travel was considered a beneficial change for the missionary from office and class-room work.⁴³ Missionary work, according to Mason is best realized when 'the roaming preacher does a good work clearing the way, surveying the field and in selecting sites'.⁴⁴ Work that was carried out by missionaries among different populations, villages or tea gardens, was reported in detail in the form of papers that were published in journals and magazines such as Report on the Assam Mission, *Orunodoi*, Baptist Missionary Magazine and

³⁸ Gurney, 1887, p. 28.

³⁹ Mason, 1887, p. 96.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid, pp. 96-102.

⁴² Ibid, p. 102.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 104.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Missionary Conference Reports in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The way data is organized and compartmentalized after a field visit, similarly, one of the final tasks for the missionaries was to organize ‘the Assamese and Kols’ into Churches.⁴⁵

Interlinking the Missionary-Anthropologist and the Colonialist

One of the main reasons for missionary interest among the tea tribes of Assam was determined by missionaries’ own interests in tea gardens. Either some like Reverend Charles Dowding were heavy investors in tea plantations or some like Reverend Henry Osborne were themselves owners of tea gardens. At many instances, where missionaries embarked on preaching, they ended up securing land for themselves and building bungalows to preach. Apart from preaching, the vast availability of the ‘primitive’/the ‘uncivilized’ in the form of the newly arrived numerous tea tribes in Assam provided prospects of improving their career and personal mobility in the social ladder too. Working among ‘the wild’, ‘the primitive’ and ‘the uncivilized’ was meant to expose the masculine, paternal and courageous attributes of missionaries thus, placing missionaries in the same platform as the colonizers. Assam opened up opportunities for those for whom all avenues of self-improvement seemed bleak back home. Concern about their own future was very much reflected in the words of missionaries like O.L. Swanson-

...I became more and more concerned about my future...Pastor Peterson and other friends encouraged me to consider the possibility of full time Christian service...I was not educated, I had no talents, I was successful in business and must not leave it, and when all else failed the tempter, I was confronted with the compromise of doing what I could in the church, but leave the idea of the gospel ministry alone. But the Holy Spirit did not cease to remind me of the fact that I must do the will of God.⁴⁶

Invoking “the will of God” justified the evangelical work undertaken by missionaries like Swanson as a natural phenomenon with those like Swanson being naturally the ‘chosen one’ to spread the message of the Lord. There was a new found glory, pride and dignity at being referred to as the “sahib”⁴⁷ by the locals. Preaching elevated their stature as few individuals like them were now responsible for the life and future of a large number of subject population. Pride was derived at being treated like the “absolute monarch”.⁴⁸ Personal convenience was one of the important factors while pursuing evangelism in the colony with a good communication system as mentioned earlier. Their preference for areas

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 116.

⁴⁶ Swanson,1944, p. 24.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 48.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 52.

which were well administered by the British determined their choice of tea coolies as preferred subjects who could be found in and around “semi-civilized”⁴⁹ territories of the tea garden.

Mission work among the tea garden labour community received mixed reactions from planters. While some welcomed the spread of Christianity among the coolie population in the gardens, others expressed vehement opposition to the same. In plantations where Christian doctrines were allowed to be preached, missionaries believed that Christianity worked in favour of the planters as it contributed towards curbing labour unrest or any kind of opposition to the established hierarchy in the plantations. Christian coolies “took no active part in...demonstrations, but were loyal to their employers and reasonable in their demands.”⁵⁰ The rigid time-work-discipline routine which workers were forced to follow, not just played to the advantage of the smooth workings of the plantation but also in the words of a Christian missionary : “once accustomed to a strict discipline the worker (found) it easier to adapt himself to the demands of his Christian faith and conduct too.”⁵¹

Just like anthropologists’ engagement with field work was derived “from the subjugation by his own government of the people he was studying”,⁵² similarly, a Christian missionary’s engagement with the natives was derived from a similar position of subjugation of the latter by the government in power that he was a part of. A validity was derived from a shared position of power that also enabled missionary activities. Preaching was considered among the tea tribes, especially in the gardens, to prevent their minds from plotting evil against those who oppressed them. Christianity provided a channel to vent out their anger, frustration, dissatisfaction or the breeding of revolutionary thought against the planter-colonizer nexus. Although Christianity helped these people to build their lives around the cult of faith, regain a lost sense of self-respect and find solace in their service to Christ, Christianity did not really prevent them from the evils of colonialism. An oppressive structure provided significance to ‘humanitarian’ projects and the survival of the latter was very much dependent on the former. No matter how great a Christian missionary’s aversion to the colonial system, just like an anthropologist, he too was unable to function outside its realm. It was not easy for him/her to remain in a colony without participating in the power and privileges of the dominant group.⁵³

Religion, thus, acted as an important agent in the production of loyal subjects to colonial capitalist imperatives. ‘Peace’, therefore, was believed could prevail in

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 64.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 149.

⁵¹ Stadler & Karotemprel, 1980, p. 69.

⁵² Lewis, 1973, pp. 582, 583.

⁵³ Lewis, 1973, p. 583.

the colony if all the ‘heathen’ were Christianized – peace as a necessity clearly from the colonial point of view.

In some cases, missionaries contributed towards organizing the tea garden labourers into communities of tribes, districts of origin and gathering general information regarding their life in Assam in order to prevent labourers from escaping the garden premises into the vast wild expanse of Assam under the veil of extending them ‘pastoral care’. Missionaries, thus, helped planters better manage their labour force, prevent them from intermingling with locals outside the premises of the garden and maintain the essence of the colonially created plantation as a ‘garden’, as a civilized territory and as a paradise. For such a purpose, Fr. Carbery in a compilation titled *Missionary work among the Tea Garden Coolies and Settlers in Assam*, detailed information concerning emigration, tea plantations, tea tribal colonies in Assam, their living and working conditions.⁵⁴ Others like Fr. Rudolf Fontaine, brought together scattered populations of tea garden workers and arranged them into small settlements in the vicinity of the tea gardens.⁵⁵ These settlements formed a prelude to villages inhabited by tea tribes which also ensured a steady supply of labour to the planters. Whether it was the hill population who were prevented from intermingling with the plain population or the tea tribes prevented from being ‘lost’ in the vast Assam plains, an important link in all of this can be traced to the interests of the tea industry. The protection of the tea industry was a vital factor in determining colonial and evangelical policies in dealing with a varied population in the North East for maintaining peace, law and order for a smooth functioning of the former.

Dowding’s Letters

If Christianity in the North East helped cater to the interests of the fertile agricultural plain tracts and particularly, the sustenance of the tea industry, then an examination of a primary text such as *Tea Garden Coolies in Assam- A Letter by the Hon’ble J. Buckingham, C.I.E., replying to a communication on the Subject which appeared in “The Indian Churchman”*. With Introduction and an answer by the Rev. Charles Dowdingset in the year 1894 would help in a deeper understanding of missionaries’ perception about the colonial functioning of tea plantations and treatment of its coolie inhabitants in Assam.

The significance of the text lies in the fact that it is a lengthy tract containing back-and-forth correspondence between a number of men-of-opinion ranging from government officials like J. Buckingham, planters, civil surgeons and those of the clergy such as Rev. Charles Dowding. The newspaper that provided the refurbishment of their opinions was *The Indian Churchman*. I have chosen this

⁵⁴ Karotemprel, 1993, p. 155.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 399.

text for review in order to draw insights into the views of individuals like Charles Dowding, a Christian missionary, who was situated outside the confines of the territorial space of the tea 'garden' regarding the idea of the tea garden and its coolie inhabitants.

If I am to quote Satadru Sen-

For an imperial state, a frontier –i.e., a politically empty or exempted space - has a certain ideological value : it facilitates various kinds of escape, experimentation, differentiation and fantasy [emphasis in italics are mine]...a realm beyond the nation and yet located within its claimed boundaries.⁵⁶

The tea garden within this 'frontier' had to be compatible with the notion of empire where the untamed are tamed for the benefits of empire and the territory of the tea garden turned into a museum for an exhibition of the 'exotic' and the 'wild' quite similar to M.V. Portman's attempts at trying to reduce the Jarawas in the Andamans to the status of animals in a forest reserve in the 1890s⁵⁷ thus creating a group of people who represented the inverse ratio of the modern⁵⁸, making them attractive enough to populate a landscape (Assam) similar to their image- 'jungly' and 'primitive'. The idea surrounding the 'primitive', the 'jungly', the 'wild east' in the north eastern region of the sub - continent just got intensified in the confines of the colonial tea garden especially when the 'primitive' was placed in the same territorial space as the 'progressive' and the 'modern'⁵⁹.

The well-being of the coolie as a crucial subject of back and forth correspondence between Charles Dowding, a Christian missionary and various other men-of-opinion seemed more like a means of establishing their own positions of reason and power by choosing an object of unreason - the tea garden coolie. He/she has been cited as an object of unreason/irrationality because the coolie as in this text, is known by the contractor who supplied him/her, the planter who ruled over him/her, the Christian missionary and the various correspondents who discussed over him/her, the garden that he/she lived in and the region that he/she hailed from but there is no information coming from the coolie himself/herself. Thus, the identity of each of the above is entrenched upon a body provided by the coolie disallowing the coolie to exist on one's own. He/she is perhaps assumed not to possess the freedom and the reasoning/thinking potential to identify himself/herself but is identified by others who recognize 'the coolie'. This very capacity to think and

⁵⁶Dowding, 1894, p. 8.

⁵⁷Sen,p. 7.

⁵⁸Here, the term 'modern' refers to a comparative positioning of a group of people who constructed their superiority by identifying the non-progressive and backward nature of an 'other' and the identified 'other' representing the past of a people who consider themselves progressive and technologically advanced compared to the 'other' in 'a' present.

⁵⁹The 'progressive' and the 'modern' implied the white planters.

be able to identify the 'self' over the 'other' prepared the imperialists as distinctly different from indigenous society.

While the torchbearers of empire are debating amongst themselves, there is no space left for the native/indigenous response with the entire series of correspondence compiled primarily for British readership – here a crucial role played by print culture, for example, newspapers like *The Indian Churchman* which gave voice to opinions of those in authority and in making authority be heard. This equalled a written stamp on the non-malleability on the position of those who wish to be heard because to be heard also meant an acknowledgment and legitimization of the existence of the dominant and the influential through writing about them. Without a dismissal, the 'experts' like Dowding might have sought a privileged location among the natives from a perspective of the metropole, the civilized and the centre which makes it pertinent to think about the history of the coolie in the modern state where he/ she is placed in a geographical location far from the metropole and the centre.

The significance of state sponsored newspapers like *The Indian Churchman* can also be gauged from the fact that they enabled a colonial, 'white' journey into the realm of the 'dark', the unknown and the exotic. Prevalence of sheer anonymity of knowledge about themselves-

I saw a court Babu recently trying to find out by question from some score or more of people, where their homes were, that they might know where they were to be sent. They were asked what was the name of the Railway Station nearest their home. "who knows!" some replied. "How far is it from the Railway Station to your home?" "Who knows – ten kos". "How many days to do that Journey?"- "eight days or six days..."⁶⁰

made memory look blurred and uncertain often leading to an erasure of knowledge about oneself and therefore relegating such individuals to the thin margin between remembering and forgetting. Such blurring of memory as evidence from a text from the colonial era such as this can be seen as an attempt to deprive the migrant labouring community of a sense of history, to 'know' about themselves and what better way to show such fading of memory when it comes from the coolies' themselves as if to legitimize a 'truth' by Dowding by adhering to his European Enlightenment roots of proving the 'truth' through evidence provided by the coolies themselves.

The real motive could have possibly been to establish the fact that the superiority of the European body with knowledge in its possession can best understand a

⁶⁰Dowding, 1894, p. 61.

native body as though the very act of ‘thinking’ is completely a domain of the whites. Dowding himself says-

*I am myself, a small shareholder in a very large tea concern. This greatly quickens [...] my interest in the subject.*⁶¹

One is left to wonder whether Dowding would be really concerned with the death rates of the coolies if he did not possess any shares in the industry? Being a shareholder meant that he equally participated in the entrenchment of the empire and his concern over the death rates was to probably open the eyes of the colonists to the fact that increase in death rates also meant a defeat in the logic of empire as it showed nothing but a reduction in the number of subjects.

By throwing light upon the motives of Christian missionaries like Dowding who took interest in native matters, one thing seems clear that Dowding does not speak against colonization anywhere in the text. He only seems concerned over the death rates. Dowding’s references to the facts produced by the Sanitary Commissioner of Assam and the Chief Commissioner- both government officials, underlined the necessity to substantiate the arguments put forward by him.⁶² Similar examples can be cited from other regions such as Chotanagpur where Christian missionaries like Father Constant Lievens, although sided with the tribals in helping them fight court cases against their oppressors, at the same time, he was very careful not to alienate the British government⁶³.

The discussion over the death rate of the migrant tea labouring community makes it pertinent for us to talk about the tea ‘garden’ and its significance as part of the empire. This showed an urgency on the part of the collaborators of empire such as Dowding to keep the romantic aspect of the ‘garden’ alive, to keep a past alive which was not possible if the coolies kept dying. Hence, the need to do away with the perils of modern elements like capitalism to preserve a romantic past - a pre-modern nostalgic past of the colonizers themselves which they seemed to have lost in the present. Romanticisation of this past involved in keeping the coolies in a romantic state of decay but not upto the extent of their perish.

When we are discussing about Charles Dowding, a Christian missionary and his sympathetic stance towards the coolies, it is important to build a connection between religion and empire which attaches the notion of morality in the way capital is extracted, hence, emphasizing the moral aspect of obtaining profit. Morality provides a kind of legitimization to the goals of the empire, all the more

⁶¹ Ibid, p. iv.

⁶² Ibid, p. 2.

⁶³ Sinha, 2010, p. 17.

so, if it can successfully bring the subjects too under the sphere of domination and exploitation, thus lending a moral legitimation to their exploitation. However, the very lack of consideration for the migrant labourers' well-being had the tendency of turning colonial rule as inhuman, immoral and illogical, "...nothing less than a blot on the Administration, and a discredit to Englishmen."⁶⁴ Colonialism is marked as an era of violence that completely drained the humanitarian aspect out of such a venture. It also endangered the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized. In order to rectify the saturation of such a situation, colonialism had to penetrate the lives of the subjects in a more subtle, non-aggressive manner. Here, religion seemed like a prospective criterion that could further the task of colonialism.⁶⁵ Therefore, Dowding attempts at making the authorities as well as men of the Company realize the 'illegitimacy' of such a rule that does not follow the norms of religion and morality as he laments-

*...we might also sin through becoming the tools of a system.*⁶⁶

Or for another instance-

*...a great and honourable profession, such as that of the lawyer, and that of the clergy, has again and again, arrived at a point, where it stood convicted, by the outraged conscience of its fellows of the most inhuman injustice, harshness, cruelty, greed, ambition; so, a propertied class has before now come to build up its stability in the most monstrous oppression.*⁶⁷

Dowding's sympathetic approach towards the coolies lent a personal and intimate edge to the understanding of his relationship with them which would, otherwise, jeopardize the task of subjugation. Such sympathy had the tendency to camouflage a relationship of domination governed along the lines of the family⁶⁸-with a personal and intimate side to it. S. Endle, another missionary from Assam attempts at bringing the reader's attention to the act of the recruiting agents who-

*send up sometimes the father of a family, with perhaps one grown-up son and daughter; the wife and other children remaining behind. Many obvious evils follow from this vicious system, the father perhaps forming new (i.e., criminal) ties in his new home, and the deserted mother perhaps doing the same.*⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Dowding, 1894, p. 25.

⁶⁵ Lewis, 1973, p. 581.

⁶⁶ Dowding, 1894, p. v.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. v.

⁶⁸ The family forming the basis of dominance, order and discipline through the establishment of personal, intimate relationship between members such as the father-the head of the family vested with authority and the rest of the family members vested with the duty of obedience and discipline.

⁶⁹ Dowding, 1894, p. 37.

From the perspective of someone devoted to the Church, forming new ties were termed as criminal because it defied the notion of the family and its moral boundaries. New families were formed on immoral grounds in the new land. Therefore, whatever did not suit Christian and European notions of morality were viewed as ‘immoral’, ‘criminal’ and ‘illegal’-

But if in future, recruiters of labourers can be prevailed upon to avoid sending up isolated members of families, and will, in particular, take care not to separate husband from wife, and parents from their children, then no small service will be done to a cause which we all have at heart, that of morality and righteousness.⁷⁰

By calling the Church as the “natural protector of the weak”⁷¹, the Church’s position of authority and the position of the weak - both are assumed to be pre-given and thus, natural. To be called the ‘natural protector’ also meant the wiping out of contestation to the Church’s position of power. Therefore, it seemed important to create categorization of those who are being ruled under the terms ‘weak’, ‘poor’ and ‘jungly’ in order to erase any potential threat to its seat of authority. Discussing issues related to the natives within a religious framework tended to impose a sanction of legality, morality and subjugation along with instilling a sense of authority and dominance upon the forbearers of religion when they talked about a group of people, thereby, appointing themselves in the seat of authority while the coolie becoming the site of contest for the harbingers of religion and those of capitalist enterprises for the conquest of a ‘pre-modern’ people.

Even when Dowding refers to the migrant tea garden laboring community as ‘coolies’, through the usage of such pre-given categories, he is not really contributing in reducing the social difference between the subject and himself even when he talks in favour of the former and hence, as a consequence only further entrenching such pre-given categories and naturalizing them.

Dominance, in the words of Franck Poupeau, “...is an illegitimate exercise of power by a fraction of the population which masks particular interests under the general interests, the critical project then linked to an emancipatory interest.”⁷² I quote Poupeau here because the power of the speaker (Dowding) is established not just by what he/she says but because those to whom it is conveyed (the British colonial audience) recognize them as possessing the authority to say it or rather, recognize the institution through them which gives them the right to say it.⁷³

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 38.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Poupeau, 2005,p. 95.

⁷³ In this context, the institution being the Church.

This also brings us to an interesting observation by Satadru Sen in the context of the aborigines of Andamans, for whom “to discipline the drinking habits and sexual habits of tribals meant mapping and patrolling the zone of exclusion” of natives from the realm of authority⁷⁴ with administrators and missionaries like Dowding imagining the ‘savages’ as normatively free and therefore, patrolling this freedom.

Conclusion

The anthropological sway is very much reflected in the travel writings, reports or visits penned down and published by Christian missionaries as they encountered new cultures and ways of life in the colonies. The missionary-cum-anthropologist struck a balance and a negotiation between primitivity and civilisation. Missionaries clearly performed a political role through textual representation of native society. In order to avoid colonial struggle, anthropological knowledge and planning became a part of colonial strategy of rule which also suited missionary approach towards their dealings with a colonized population. Their writings and representations became sites of struggle which got produced in the form of texts, archives and reports as a result of encounter with a section of population who represented living specimens of the missionaries’ own romanticized, utopian, uncivilized, exotic past. The exotic was turned into a ‘field’ of numbers to be observed, worked with or worked upon that also paved the way to visual bias. The practical visits to the field get translated into documentation evidence from the missionary anthropologist’s perspective in the form of autobiographies, travelogues or reports. Missionaries thus, engaged in a simultaneous process of religious preaching and information gathering and producing which in turn contributed towards the construction of what the idea of a ‘tea garden coolie’ was like and what it ought to be like through religious preaching. Colonialism was much more than official administration. It can be said to be an outcome of complex practical interactions.

Through the examination of a primary text such as Dowding’s letter not only has one been able to establish a history of generals, i.e., the native ‘others’ through the perspective of a ‘particular’ (Dowding), but one is also able to gain an insight into the general world of the ‘particular’ (his religion, race, nationality) from where these ‘particulars’ derive their authority to talk on behalf of the natives. Second, it has brought to focus the non-monolithic identity of the colonizer vested not just in the authority of the governmental officials or the planters but also in the ‘moral’, ‘humanizing’ endeavours of the disciples of religion such as Charles Dowding. The tea garden and the coolies within it become sites of realizing the relative supremacy of those who speak about them or discuss what ought to be done about them. The absence of voice of the subjects themselves who lived in the

⁷⁴Sen, p. 4.

tea plantations of Assam as is revealed from a text such as this, makes one come to the deduction that those situated outside the territorial confines of the tea garden played a major role in deducing ideas about its inhabitants and where they ought to be placed in the social ladder depriving any sort of agency to natives to define themselves and this is precisely what defines the logic of a colonial tea ‘garden’ in Assam - a product of modernity sheltering the ‘pre-modern’.

As mentioned earlier, the politics of power can function through multiple identities apart from the one that seems more visible. As anthropology itself emerged as a discipline to further colonial endeavours through information gathering and knowledge dissemination, the identity of a Christian missionary as an anthropologist as well as a colonizer cannot be seen in disjunction from each other and it is this idea of multiplicity that this essay attempts to convey.

References

Bora, Sheila (2009), “The American Baptist Missionaries amidst the Tea Garden Workers in the Brahmaputra Valley (1886-1936)” in Sengupta, Sarthak (ed), *The Tea Labourers of North East India: An Anthro-Historical Perspective*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi.

Brown Nathan (1890), *The Whole World Kin: A Pioneer Experience Among Remote Tribes and other Labors of*, Hubbard Brothers Publishers, Philadelphia.

Dena, Lal, *Christian Missions and Colonialism: A Study of Missionary Movement in North East India with Particular Reference to Manipur and Lushai Hills 1894-1947*, Vendrame Institute, Shillong

Dharmaraj, Jacob S. (1993), *Colonialism and Christian Mission : Postcolonial Reflections*, Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (ISPCK), Delhi

Dirks, Nicholas B. (2001), *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Princeton University Press, Princeton

Dowding, Charles (1894), “Tea Garden Coolies in Assam” - *A Letter by the Hon'ble J. Buckingham, C.I.E., replying to a communication on the Subject which appeared in “The Indian Churchman”*.

Downs, F.S. (1992), “North East India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries” in *History of Christianity in India*, Vol. V, Part 5, The Church History Association of India, Bangalore.

Firth, John (1896), “Report from the North Lakhimpur Field”, *The Assam Mission of the American Baptist Missionary Union : Minutes, Resolutions and Historical Reports of the Fourth Triennial Conference held in Sibsagar*, December 14-22, 1895, Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta.

Ghosh, Anupama (2011), “Conversions, Education and Linguistic Identity in Assam : The American Baptist Missionary 1830s – 1890”, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 72, Part-I, pp. 863-874.

Gogoi, Hasnahana (2016), “Missionary Travel Literature and the Representation of Assam”, *The NEHU Journal*, Vol. XIV, No. 1, January-June, pp. 39-50.

Gurney, A.K. (1887), “History of the Sibsagar Field”, *The Assam Mission of the American*

- Baptist Missionary Union*, December 18-29, 1886, Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta.
- Karotempel, Sebastian (ed)(1993), *The Catholic Church in Northeast India 1890-1990*, Vendrame Institute, Shillong.
- Kolsky, Elizabeth (2011), *Colonial Justice in British India: White Violence and the Rule of Law*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi.
- Lewis, Diane (1973), "Anthropology and Colonialism", *Current Anthropology*, Vo. 14, No. 5, Dec.
- Mason, M.C. (1887), "Methods of Mission Work", *The Assam Mission of the American Baptist Missionary Union*, December 18-29, 1886, Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta.
- Moore, P.H. (1899), "Report from the Nowgong Field", *The Assam Mission of the American Baptist Missionary Union : Minutes, Resolutions and Historical Reports of the Fifth Triennial Conference held in Dibrugarh*, February 11-19, Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta.
- Neill, Stephen (1966), *Colonialism and Christian Missions*, Lutterworth Press, London.
- Pels, Peter (1997), "The Anthropology of Colonialism: Culture, History and the Emergence of Western Governmentality", *Annual Reviews Anthropology*.
- Petrick, C.E. (1899), "Tea Garden Coolies", *The Assam Mission of the American Baptist Missionary Union : Minutes, Resolutions and Historical Reports of the Fifth Triennial Conference held in Dibrugarh*, February 11-19, 1899, Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta.
- Poupeau, Franck (2005), "Reasons For Domination, Bourdieu versus Habermas" in Derek Robbins (ed), *Pierre Bourdieu 2: Sage Masters of Modern Social Thought*, Sage Publications.
- Sangma, Milton S. & Syiemlieh, David R. (ed) (1994), *Essays on Christianity in North-East India by F.S. Downs*, Indus Publishing Co., New Delhi.
- Sangma, Milton S. (1987), *History of American Baptist Mission in North- East India (1836-1950)*, Vol. I, Mittal Publications, New Delhi.
- Sen, Satadru (2008), *Aboriginality and the Modern State*, Paper for Nehru Conference at Jamia Milia Islamia (2008).
- Sinha, Shashank Shekhar (2010), *Adivasis and Witchcraft in Chotanagpur (1850-1950)*, Unpublished Ph. D Thesis, University of Delhi.
- Stadler, G. & Karotempel, S. (1980), translated and (ed), *History of the Catholic Missions in Northeast India : 1890-1915* by Christopher Becker, Calcutta : Firma KLM, under the auspices of Vendrame Missiological Institute, Sacred Heart College, Shillong, 1980.
- Swanson, O.L. (1944), *In Villages and Tea Gardens: Forty Three Years of Missionary Work in Assam*, Conference Press, Chicago.
- The Assam Mission of the American Baptist Missionary Union. Papers and Discussions of the Jubilee Conference held in Nowgong, December 18-29, 1886*, Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta, 1887.
- Ward, S.R.(ed), (1884), *A Glimpse of Assam*, Thomas S. Smith City Press, Calcutta.