

***AXOM DESHOR BAGISARE***  
***SOWALI: THE GIRL FROM***  
**THE TEA GARDENS OF**  
**ASSAM**

—

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# TRACING THE HISTORY AND MEMORY OF MIGRATION OF TEA PLANTATION LABOUR THROUGH JHUMUR SONGS

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## ABSTRACT

*This essay discusses the history of migration among tea plantation workers and places the migrant population's role in shaping the history and culture that can be seen in jhumur songs and performances. It also explores how memory, history, and identity are kept alive through jhumur music, songs, and oral histories which live as testimonies of the lives of tea plantation workers.*

Music, when it speaks to us often speaks for itself and takes us on a journey through space and time. The time, space, matter, and circumstances from which songs and music come are never really static and are always making and unmaking themselves, but what remains an interesting insight is the changes and unfolding of time which bring about a change in the very fabric of the social, every day, and lived

realities. These changes, upheavals, and the process of making and unmaking come to work in the ruptures in the social fabric, and it is in these fissures that life truly comes to take meaning. It is in these fissures that music is created and comes to life. Music takes a form and a life which tells a lot about living in a particular moment of time. The endless possibility of making music in a society that is deeply fragmented gives music the power to express and mobilise. *Jhumur* songs, which tell us so much about the making and unmaking of tea plantation workers, is one such genre of music that this paper explores.

Tea plantations in Assam, much like in the rest of the world, were built on exploitative relations in the process of production. The social life of a tea plantation, its cultural realm, and the relational ties within it are built on relations of power which play out in the tea estates. The historical trajectory of tea has a plethora of fragmented, violent, contradictory, and ambiguous histories. From Chinese emperors and the bone-china tea cups of aristocratic British ladies and working-class English households, to the *chai-walas* (tea stalls) at every Indian street corner, all have been part of its 'alluring' journey. In the Indian subcontinent, what is now the state of Assam was one of the first sites of tea production. Tea is consumed in more than a 100 countries and India is one of the largest producers and consumers of tea in the world. Assam is the largest tea producing state in India and contributes about 60 per cent of the total production of tea in the country. Tea is an important agro-industry in Assam, which contributes to the state's economy.

'The romance of Assam is a romance of commerce, the history of a savage country brought under civilized rule through the cultivation, by alien labour, of a single product,' wrote a European traveller in 1906, (Gupta 1986). Complex processes of colonialism, imperialism, dispossession, circulation of global capital, exploitation, resistance, local cultural formations, and contestations all make what is known as 'Assam's Cup of Tea'. Vast tracts of 'virgin' forests in Assam were destroyed under the Waste Land Acts of 1838, after the official 'discovery' of tea in December 1834 to make way for the

establishment of the empire's glorious gardens through an endemic vision of conquest. The indigenous tea plants that grew wildly to a height of 30 metres in Assam were tamed, ordered, and disciplined by the knowledge of Victorian science and experimentation for large scale commercial cultivation and production for a global market through which the British sought to break the Chinese monopoly in the ever-growing market for tea. The British enterprise of converting Assam from a seemingly wild, jungle-laden frontier with 'primitive' practices of commerce and agriculture into an export-oriented tea industry built on 'modern' ideals of 'improvement', 'advancement', and 'progress' changed the physical and socio-economic landscape of Assam forever (Gupta, 1986). The abysmally low wages offered in the tea industry in a context of a highly favourable land to man ratio and land fertility meant that the colonial enterprise was unable to procure much participation of 'local' labour for work in the plantations despite a number of measures which negatively affected agricultural populations. The locals came to be stigmatised as 'lazy', 'opium-addicted' masses disinterested in 'economic advancement'. The British employed local Kachari and Naga labour, but they came to be considered 'rebellious' and difficult to retain due to proximity to their homeland or agricultural land. By the 1860s, frustrated in its efforts to procure local labour, the tea enterprise, in collusion with the colonial state, started a quest for immigrant labour that was cheap, consistent, 'docile', and easily 'disciplined'. Lured with promises of light work in 'beautiful', 'green' gardens, thousands of predominantly tribal migrants from across the labour catchment areas in India were transported in inhuman conditions to Assam beginning in the mid-19th century. This continued for almost a century by a network of 'legal', 'para-legal', and 'illegal' agents and actors engaged in various nefarious forms of coercion and outright violence (Behal 2014).

Migration by different communities such as the Nepalis and the different tea tribes in the recent past transformed Assam's socio-cultural terrain. According to Gogoi (1994), the tea garden community, composed of 100 sub-tribes, has added a new dimension

to the cultural landscape of the region. Thus, a prolonged period of close contact and togetherness among the variegated cultural groups and their socio-cultural relationship, whether inter-tribal or tribal and non-tribal, helped in developing an integrated culture in Assam. The culture and livelihood of tea plantation workers and tea tribes from whom jhumur folk songs come have a rich and dynamic existence in terms of religion, language, songs, dances, rituals, and numerous customs. In this context, the jhumur folk culture can be perceived as a composite culture, and so is the wonderful folk musical repertoire that has grown around it. Though the term Assamese folk music refers to a single, obviously identifiable phenomenon, it is marked by diversity contributed to by various groups and communities and different regions. The regional diversities in music traditions too have lent an exclusive dimension to Assamese folk music (Minakshi 2017).

Jhumur folk songs as a genre represent an astonishing variety, reflecting the multiplicity of expressions and heterogeneous elements which intermingle harmoniously. They reflect tribal and ethnic influences and also hint at affinities with their culture and music which might have been the result of socio-cultural, religious exchanges and social ties. As observed by Datta (1994), ‘tribal and non-tribal, the acculturated and the assimilated, the sanskritised and nonsanskritised, all coexisting in a remarkable state of juxtaposition.’

Jhumur is one of the most famous dance forms of Assam. Jhumur *nach* is mainly performed by the tea tribes during the autumn season to take a break from their daily schedules, and during special festivals. During celebrations and when communities come together are times when it is performed. Jhumur dances and songs have now found a very important and lively part in Assamese folk cultural tradition and they have even found their way into popular culture, with new jhumur songs and remixes being released every other year. Performing jhumur songs and dances has been a lively tradition in the identity of the tea tribes of Assam. The striking thing about the dance is its steps, which are synchronised with *madal*, a popular two-headed hand drum.

Accompanying the drum is a flute and pair of *taals* that make the music more harmonious. During the dance, the dancers clasp each other's waists while following the precision of their footwork.

There are over 800 tea estates in Assam, and in each one of them *jhumur nach* is performed on special occasions and festivals. *Jhumur nach* can be easily recognised by the costumes worn by the dancers as they are quite different from the regular traditional costumes of the different tribal and ethnic groups of Assam. The male members wear long traditional dresses and women wear white sarees with broad red borders which end right above their ankles. The dresses are simple yet colourful, the songs full of melody and electrifying joy and energy. The range of themes covered in *jhumur* songs has grown and expanded but the essence of love, life, and all that comes with it are what one finds in in them. Digging a little deeper into these songs and closely engaging with certain themes that these songs bring to life and unravelling the fissures in the lives of tea plantation workers tells us a lot about the life of tea plantation workers and how a history of migration and exploitative labour relations mar their lives.

Kali Dasgupta, a renowned cultural activist who started his political involvement in India's independence struggle, built and worked for highlighting and challenging socio-economic disparities in society and struggled against the feudal and political oppression of people during his years as an activist. The folk songs that Kali Dasgupta often performed and documented subtly yet resiliently bring questions of power and oppression to light with a tinge of softness as these songs dwell on the everyday experiences of those left at the margins of society. They also highlight people's love, life, desires, sufferings, and hardships. In the later part of his life Kali Dasgupta travelled through England and the United States and shared his worldview and songs from the Assam valley with different people as he continued teaching and performing with his *dotara* (a four-stringed plucked instrument) and his *ektara* (a one-stringed instrument made of gourd). Kali Dasgupta's work brought Assam's folk music, especially *jhumur*

music to the forefront and gave it a new life and recognition as resistance music.

Jhumur songs are often not remembered as songs of resistance, but the varied themes which encompass them carry the spirit of resistance in the questions they raise about labour and the relationality of exploitation and oppression which exist in the everyday lives of tea plantation workers. As Kali Dasgupta collected folk songs, especially *jhumur* songs, he documented and highlighted the themes and expressions of work, life, love, oppression, and resistance that we find in these songs (Gregory 2001).

These songs have a dynamic personality of their own, and many, including Kali Dasgupta, have come to see them in their dynamism. Ethnographic work and different narratives and stories about tea gardens narrate the tales of the women folk plucking tea in the tea gardens under the blue sky and singing jhumur songs as they lift their spirit, make them work hard and smile with a sense of togetherness. Work or labour forms an inseparable part of folk life, and the songs associated with the working process are considered work songs. The origin and development of folk songs has been attributed to the productive and labouring process. Eminent folklorists and social scientists opine that men in the ancient time depended on magical acts and chanting to succeed in their work, and these prayers and chants were performed along with magical dances and songs now turned into folk songs (Goswami 1983). Traditional work songs are an attempt to reduce the drudgery during hard work or to make the work process easier. They are created or sung by the workers with an intent of increasing their efficiency by timing the work, setting a steady work pace, or whiling away the tedium of the working hours (Brakeley 1984).

Records of work songs are roughly as old as historical records, and anthropological evidence suggests that all agrarian societies had work songs. According to Gioia (2006), work songs include both songs sung while working and songs about work since the two are seen as interconnected. Referring to the comprehensiveness of folk



songs, Biswas (2014) observes that folk music, in totality, is the music of a toiling life and the desire for labour, and when detached from labour and the fruits of labour, the music loses its character. He also observes that most of the love songs are indirectly associated with the cultivation process and magical imagination even today as they are deeply connected with the broader process of production, fertility, work, and love. Hence, to cluster the songs having direct reference to work or containing the rhythms of work as work songs is erroneous as well as unscientific.

The occupational pattern of the common folk songs of Assam, both tribal and non-tribal is mostly associated with agriculture and other different functions related to the field. Jhumur songs also find a place in such expression. The work songs of Assam are mostly associated with the process of cultivation and also with some works like fishing, boating, weaving, cow herding, rice pounding etc. Jhumur songs much like Bihu songs of Assam exhibit the inseparable aspects of love, labour and agricultural production, and they resonate with the rhythms of work, love and nature. The *Ban ghoxas* are the songs of the cowherds representing the wild expressions of young hearts in amorous language. The *Moishal* and *Maut* songs are associated with the occupations of buffalo herding and the elephant catching, reflecting the struggles of work life, and at the same time their agonizing experiences generated in the lovelorn hearts (Minakshi 2017).

Thus, there are numerous categories of folk songs, associated with particular occupations or work representing different aspects of common human life. Jhumur songs also find a place in such expressions along with holding an important place in history as an oral tradition which tells the story of a community which has been long forgotten and side lined. Listening closely to some of these songs gives us a chance to trace the immersions of memory, migration, and nature of work in the songs and music.

The story of Assam tea and Assam tea plantation labourers as remembered in jhumur songs keeps alive the memory of all that has

shaped history and continues to unfold for the workers. Assam tea tribes' *jhumur* songs often tell the story of tea garden workers, their history, their relation to the work that they do, and to the state of Assam. In a seamless manner, they tell the story of what this life means to the labourers and lay out the history of tea plantations in Assam, tracing their origins to a colonial administration and provide an opportunity to listen to and understand how these memories live on in the tea tribes of Assam. Lending a close ear to these songs opens up horizons for understanding the gendered dimension of this history and for analysing how female workers are placed in history and memory.

## AN ANALYSIS OF SOME JHUMUR SONGS

The popular *jhumur* song *Ranchi che bhejali kuli* is from the tea plantations in Assam, which was documented by cultural activist Kali Dasgupta in the 1960s. This song provides a piercing glimpse of the universe and experiences of coolies on plantations in Assam.

1.

### RANCHI CHE BHEJALI KULI

*Rachi che bhejal kuli*  
*Dedalai kalam churi Dale,*  
*Dale Babu Nazara bhaithaise*  
*laxe laxe laxe re Dale,*  
*Dale Babu Nazara bhathaise*  
*Kur mara chalak chuluk*

*Pata tula dogi dog*  
*Aina dekhi khupa bandhe Ure je Kapoor re*  
*Rachi che bhejal kuli*  
*Dedalai kalam churi*  
*Rode barxhane maya pata ke Tulane*  
*laxe laxe laxe re Dale*

Translation:

FROM RANCHI WAS SENT THE COOLIE

From Ranchi, was sent the coolie  
And handed *kalam* knives  
On every tree, on every branch  
The babu places a gaze.  
Slowly and slowly  
On every tree, on every branch  
The babu places a gaze.

Dig the earth in earnest haze  
Pluck the leaves in haste.  
Looking at the mirror  
She ties her bun and drapes her cloth.  
From Ranchi, was sent the coolie  
And handed *kalam* knives.  
Through the sunlight, through the rains  
We are made to pluck leaves.

The song *Ranchi che bhejali kuli* is a famous jhumur song which takes us on a journey through the life of a tea plantation labourer who is brought to Assam to work on the plantation and cannot rest. The song captures the pulse of migration under Colonial Raj and expresses the helplessness that the worker feels and is trapped in. This fear and helpless state finds articulation as lines in the song point out that if the coolie is not able to pick two leaves and a bud correctly he will be beaten. The coolie curses the contractor who brought him to Assam. The song captures the loss of and longing for an end to the abyss that has become his life. The history of migration and the bringing of indentured labour from the labour catchment areas of what is present day Bihar, Jharkhand, Bengal, and Odisha is now well documented, researched, and studied. But what remains interesting is that as the forces of oppression were tightening their grip and countless workers

were being made to travel to unknown land under false promises and hopes of a better life, it was through songs and music that the migrants' memories and experiences found expression and a voice which lives on to this day.

Not much has changed for the tea plantation workers today, the songs and their meaning still find resonance with the conditions of work and life of tea plantation workers. The *kalam* knives talked about in the song *Ranchi che bhejali kuli* are still very much a part of the lives of tea plantation workers as they are often used for pruning the tea bushes and giving them the shape the manager wants.

The *nazar* of the babu on every move that the workers make comes to highlight the surveillance and constant check kept on them. In the tea plantations of Assam, the managements negotiate and control workers' conduct. The very need and nature of controlling the workers becomes excessively important for a tea plantation unit for maintaining its exploitative relations. Here the conduct of the population and relations of servitude get established through an age old tried and tested system of regular checks on the lives of the workers – their movements, their livelihoods, and their relations. There is a constant check through the wandering eye of the manager who monitors their movements and the work undertaken by them through a system of reportage, punishment, and cuts in their wages. With such a stringent system in place, the workers find it difficult to live a life where their every move is not geared towards adding value to the production and producing surplus. The song captures the multiple layers of control exercised on the worker. As workers try to live their lives they are heavily scrutinised when they are seen walking near the plantation area grazing their cattle by the division in charge and have to hear an earful from the manager who also punishes repeat offenders by cutting their wages or at times even cutting their names from the list of permanent workers and shifting them to the temporary workers list. The looming eye or the babu's *nazar* remains a constant in the song *Ranchi che bhejali kuli*. The chowkidars and sardars who are guards and

are often appointed from amongst the workers, and they are carefully appointed to discipline the workers and to bring them in for plucking, pruning, pesticide spraying, and irrigation. An intricate system of surveillance raj has been established for servitude and this finds a voice in jhumur songs.

The *kuli* in the song laments and recites the hardships of work and the monotonous and continuous nature of work, which includes pruning of tea bushes, digging the earth, and plucking leaves all day under the hot sun and in the rain. The song paints a picture of a woman *kuli* who ties her hair in a bun and drapes her work cloth around her waist as she works in the tea garden for long hours. A sense of alienation comes across in the last few lines of the song as engaging in routine work over days and getting ready in work clothes are described in a lonesome and wearisome fashion reflecting a worker who isn't just alienated from work but also from oneself. The *kuli* sings and laments her fate. The memory of migration and the plight of tea plantation workers finds articulation and expression in this song. Jhumur songs sung, performed, and enshrined in memory tell the story of workers who are often forgotten, side lined, and marginalised.

The song *chol Mini Assam jabo* is a very popular folk song of Assam. Often remembered as a jhumur song it is also recognised as a Domkoich song which has gained massive popularity over the years finding a place in popular films, music videos, protest gatherings, and remix versions and has been sung through time. Kali Dasgupta also sang, documented, and performed the song and so have different artists, cultural activists, and scores of other people. Every time the song is sung it seems to gain a new life and the sweet melodies of *chol Mini Assam jabo* echo in a timeless fashion. A sense of sweetness remains attached to the tunes of the song as it explores themes of migrations, memories of loss and betrayal, and the hardships of working conditions in a tea garden which lies tucked away in the promised green land of Assam.

2.

*CHOL MINI ASSAM JABO*

*Chol Mini Assam jabo*

*Deshe boro dukh re*

*Assam deshe re Mini*

*Chaa bagan horiya*

*Hor mara jaimon taimon*

*Pata tola taan bo*

*Hai joduram*

*Phaki diye cholai di assam*

*Eek poisar potima*

*Gaya golai tail go*

*Minie papa mangee Jodi*

*Aare dibo jhol ko*

*Sardar bole kaame kaam*

*Babu bole dhori aan*

*Sahib bulelibo pither chaal*

*Hai joduram*

*Phaki diye cholai di assam*

Translation:

Come Mini, we'll go to Assam

Misery abounds in our Desh

In Assam, my dear Mini

The tea-gardens are green and beautiful

There lies our future

The heavy digging is done somehow

Plucking leaves is very difficult

Oh Joduram!

You lied to us  
And sent us to Assam  
You fooled us  
And lured us to Assam

It is difficult to earn one paisa  
Just fetch some oil from the Marwari trader's shop  
If Mini's father asks  
He will get some more fish curry

The children are crying here and there  
There is no water in the vessel  
The menfolk, o ranjha  
Are playing the murali

Sardar says "Work work!"  
Babu says "Catch them"  
Sahib says "Whip them hard"  
Oh Joduram! You fooled  
And brought us to Assam

The tea industry is highly labour-intensive and has a long history of colonialism and exploitative working conditions. A tea plantation does not require many skilled workers as a bulk of the work centres around plucking tea leaves. Tea pluckers constitute nine-tenth of the total workforce. Plucking is mostly done by women workers and the strength of women labourers in a tea garden is almost equal to, and even more than, that of men (Kaniampady 2003). Till today, tea estates function with various dynamics of relationality that the workers share with the management, each other, and the increasingly seamless yet many times invisible relations with the outside world. Various processes make and produce the labouring body and the workers make and unmake a lot around them. A tea estate works as a unit of production, and the socio-economic and cultural lives of the workers are tied and controlled by this unit. The socio-economic lives of those who live on the estates

are closely related to production. The wages that the workers receive, the housing and sanitation facilities for them, medical facilities in the tea estates, ration provisions, provision of electricity and firewood, and permission for entertainment and cultural programs all come under the surveillance and control of the estate's management. Accessibility of resources and the basic mobility of the workers are all controlled by the production process. The managements of the tea estates try to control all aspects of workers' lives. The structures and relations of production configure the workplace, and that in turn frames the workers' lives. Power and the process of production operate at the everyday level – directly on the body of the worker, not just as exploitation of labour and appropriation of labour power but also as a tool for managing social reproduction through the creation of chains of dependence and ensuring intergenerational servitude. The complex web of these relations, so often theorised and analysed in countless books and articles, finds expression in the popular jhumur song *chol Mini Assam jabo*. The song highlights the history of migration and the painful memory of that migration when workers were tricked, promised, and lured to the green fields of Assam and brought in through the *joduram* or the agent of the colonial administration. The promises of a hopeful future in green tea gardens turns out to be a lie as the workers work tirelessly in the fields and dig the soil and pluck the leaves all through the day when the sahib (the manager) emphasises that they need to work endlessly, the babu or the clerk takes on the responsibility of 'catching' them and making sure that they don't run away, and the sardar, who is the division in charge, punishes and keeps them in check. The carefully crafted system of surveillance and servitude is at work here to keep a complete check on the workers.

The everyday experiences of work, the journey to the wrenched green fields, and the everyday experiences of the workers find expression in the song. The experiences of the workers as they negotiate survival through attempts at procuring oil from the local marwari trader's shop or the hope that Mini's father might be able to come by some food and barter some fish for curry are all highlighted



in the song. These are narrations of life experiences as the worker tells a lot about the lives that the workers carve out and the relations that are forged between communities. The marwari's shop, which in the context of tea plantations in Assam has been looked at as a supplier of goods and services to the management as well as the labourers, seems to have long-standing ties with the tea estate community and is mentioned in the song for establishing material relationality. The song paints a picture of life in the tea gardens with the men folk playing the *murali* as water vessels lie empty. The song seamlessly brings out the different relations that a worker shares with the world, be it with the colonial administration and its agents who have trapped him into servitude, the marwari shopkeeper from whom he buys some oil and some food, and of course the other workers who share the uncertainties that have become a part of life in the tea gardens as they play the *murali* and sing *jhumur* songs together. Interestingly this song is massively popular in films, music, and cultural activism, and it is rooted in the tea gardens as till today women plucking tea leaves sing this song together as a symphony.

The complex history of migration and exploitation finds expression in *jhumur* songs. *Axom deshor bagisare sowali* (the girl from the tea gardens of Assam) is a song from the national award-winning, mid 1960s Assamese movie *Saameli Memsahab*. The song is essentially remembered as a *jhumur* song. In the song, a young girl Saameli points to the complexities of her history and location, where she has never known the land her ancestors came from, but does remember and experience the brutal surveillance and violence of 'Planter Raj'. The song beautifully captures the complex history of migration of tea plantation labourers through memory, music, songs, folktales, oral history, and narratives. The history and narrative of *bagisare sowali* (the girl from the tea gardens of Assam) trace the intense and complex history of migration through cultural narratives that remain alive till today. These cultural narratives help understand the memories of migration and labour relations that remain alive in *jhumur* songs, folk tales, and oral narratives.

3.

*AXOM BEKHOR BAAGISAARE SOWALI*

*Axom dekhor baagisaare sowali,  
Jhumur tumur nassi koru dhemali  
Hei Laxmi nohoi mure naam Saameli*

*Shiris paale dhorbi paahi  
Paata lamba paabi buli  
Naake pindhi naake phuli  
Juwaan bulaali  
Hei Sampaa nohoi mure naam Saameli*

*Choto choto chokori  
Boro boro tokori  
Morom abuj paatot tole dok dok  
Jowaan bazar raakhide kore lok lok  
Choto choto bowkhanaa kore dhok dhok  
Ki bhaabes ore aamak chaheli  
Mone raakh mur naam Saameli*

*Baap dada aasile kunuba mulukor  
Sei aami bihu gaabo jaanu  
Aaare paagli*

*Paagli nohoi mure naam Saameli  
Birbolor beti mur naam Saameli  
Axom dekhhot aami phuru umoli*

*Sardar bole kaam kaam  
Babu bole dhorii aan  
Sahib bulelibo pither chaal  
O bideshi shaam  
Phaaki diye aanilu Assam*

Translation:

I am a girl from the Gardens of Assam  
Dancing Jhumur  
in joyous glee,  
No, my name is not Laksmees  
I am Saameli.  
I have pretty eyes and  
Beautiful long legs that can run,  
Wearing a nose-ring  
I joyously dance in glee.  
As the young young girls  
Walk with their huge huge baskets,  
they pluck tea leaves  
The tender dry leaves  
Rustle under their feet.  
They are all my friends  
Remember, my name is Saameli!  
My forefathers came from  
Some *muluk*  
I don't know,  
However, I have learnt now  
To perform the Bihu dance.  
'Aaaaare Paagli'  
My name is not Paagli, I am Saameli  
Birbal's daughter I am Saameli  
I roam free and in glee though Assam  
Sardar says 'Work work'  
Babu says 'Catch them'

The Saheb says 'Whip them'  
Oh! You Bideshi,  
you tricked and brought us to Assam!

The film *Saameli Memsahib* won the national award in 1975. It revolves around the love story of a British tea plantation manager and a tea garden worker. The film brings to the fore the complex historical dynamics and forces that have come to characterise female labour in tea plantations. In the video of the very famous song *Axom deshor bagisare sowali*, Saameli, the protagonist of the film is seen with long black flowing hair dancing in joyous abandon, as she marks her difference as Saameli from the Hindu name Laksmee. When she does a jhumur dance, she asserts her Adivasi identity and culture, while also indicating her complicated relationship with her Assamese identity and nationalism when she confesses that she has also learnt to perform the Assamese folk dance *bihu*. She reiterates this in the last lines of the song, an excerpt taken from the popular jhumur folk song *chol Mini Assam jabo*.

However, even this apparently progressive film whose music was directed by the legendary Bhupen Hazarika comes to invisibilise Saameli's gendered labour and marks her as a sexualised subject, where desire is located in the construction of her 'wild', 'carefree', 'simple', and almost 'child-like' nature. Such a portrayal obscures the brutal history of exploitation of women plantation workers. Her jhumur dance is not as much located in a subaltern culture as it is marked by a racialised and sexualised gaze, the same gaze that has also historically characterised the imagery of her 'nimble' fingers on which depended the tremendous profit of one of history's most sought after imperial products. The song brings to light and at the same time invisibilises the context of indentured labour which characterised labour control in the colonial world including in the development of the tea industry in Assam. It erases the specific context of Assam tea plantations and the processes and mechanisms of surplus labour extraction of women tea plantation workers, even though it retains Saameli's assertive manner

where she time and again clarifies that her name is not Chameli or Laksmees or Pagali but Saameli. The song beautifully captures the history of migration as Saameli sings that she does not remember where she comes from but now finds herself in Assam and calls it her *desh*. She does not know or remember where her forefathers came from but she is now a part of Assam and performs bihu with glee.

Saameli's invisibilisation in terms of her labour provides glimpses of the nameless women workers, with bamboo baskets on their shoulders, looking up as they pluck the tea leaves to give a shy smile to the camera, and image which adorns all Assam and North-East India's tourism advertisements. Women pluckers never directly speak themselves, but they are present solely in their absence. Their voices, speaking selves resound only through the gaps and the silences, through the fissures and the omissions, from the margins of non-existence. This borrowed existence comes through even in the two songs *Ranchi che bhejali kuli* and *chol Mini Assam jabo* where women worker who make up a major part of the workforce in tea gardens do not find a voice but stay as silent entities as women who tie their hair in buns and drape work clothes to go to work in *Ranchi che bhejali kuli*, or they remain a distant someone who is called upon as the coolie's journey is recited in *chol Mini Assam jabo*. The existence of women workers is a tussle where they might not have a voice but are important characters when the story of tea and all that comes with it is told in jhumur songs. The woman is the eroticised gendered labour plucking the 'world's sweetest leaves'. She is one of those nameless people which colonial archives classify as 'Class 1 Junglies', sought-after labour which was cheap, docile, industrious, and easily reproducible and enough to sustain the 'Planter Raj'.

The song *bagisare sowali* and its relation to production brings forth important questions of the processes of racialisation and 'otherness' through Saameli's character. She is portrayed as someone who is a 'wild' Adivasi, jungle girl not quite suited for the British Sahib. The feminisation of the commodity and fetishisation of the female labourer which operates in various complex and enmeshed ways to

produce the feudal patronage system of the 'Planter Raj' comes out starkly in the song which is often sung and performed as a jhumur song.

In some ways, the categorisation of what actually makes jhumur songs does not remain a static well-defined category. It gets enmeshed in what comes through and gains recognition as jhumur songs, but is often something which tells a story of the tea gardens of Assam and is reborn in remixes and popular culture or in what is sung, performed, and lives in the workers' memories. What remains true is that these songs allow us to understand the past in a way that colonial archives often do not. Songs, poems, oral narratives, and stories have lived through all these years; they talk about the varied experiences of tea garden workers and keep alive the experiences of migration and its inherent links to exploitation.

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