

Precarity of Place in the Global South: The Case of Tea Garden Workers in Assam

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Abstract

Tea plantations in South Asia were notorious for the slavery-like working conditions during the colonial period. Although factors like the colonial state and the closed economy, among others, that have enabled such slavery-like conditions to persist have changed, the “unfree” conditions of work still determine the social reproduction of the tea garden labourers. The unfree conditions of tea garden labour have been the subject of many research projects. However, attempts to examine the tea garden and its labouring people through the lens of precarity are limited. Drawing from in-depth interviews with tea garden workers this article uses the concept of “precarity of place” to examine the experience of precarity of tea garden workers in Assam.

Keywords

Assam; Global South; India; place and space precarity; precarity; tea gardens

1. Introduction

In his statement to the Secretary of the Assam Legislative Assembly, proposing the *Assam Tea Garden Labourers' Freedom of Movement Bill* in November 1937, Omeo Kumar Das, a Gandhian and future Labour Minister in the state of Assam, noted thus:

It is generally felt that freedom of movement of tea garden labourers is limited in a manner unheard of in any other industry. They are not allowed to go out of the estate whenever they want to do so. It is a

common practice to engage night chowkidars to keep watch over the lines and prevent labourers from leaving the estate. The impression has been created in the minds of labourers that they have no right to go out of the gardens of their own free will. This constant restraint on their right to free movement has reduced them to a state of slavery. (as cited in Behal, 2006)

The conditions of immobility, surveillance, and dependence still plague the lives of tea garden workers across Assam. According to the Tea Board of India, Assam shares 54.19% of the total land devoted to tea cultivation in India with a contribution of half of the tea production in India (Government of India, 2017). It accounted for 11% of the global production of tea in 2018 (SITA, 2020). The tea gardens in Assam employed 1.03 million workers in 2018 (SITA, 2020). The tea garden workers, their families, and ex-tea garden workers constitute 17.4% of the total population of the state of Assam (Government of India, 2011). The tea garden workers represent the bottom layer of Assamese society, registering the lowest human development indicators for any group in the country. The tea garden workers originally belonged to tribal communities in the states of West Bengal, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Orissa, and were brought as indentured labourers to work in the tea gardens of Assam during the colonial period.

“Tea tribe” or Adivasis is an umbrella term used by the government and mainstream Assamese society to refer to tea garden workers and ex-tea garden workers who have moved out of the tea gardens. They comprise diverse ethnicities from eastern and central India, united by their association with the tea garden. The dependence of a large share of the population on the tea industry, as well as the long history of the tea industry in Assam over two centuries, makes it an important case to investigate the precarity of the tea garden workers. Drawing on Banki’s (2013) concept of “precarity of place” we examine experiences of precarity for the tea garden workers resulting from the intersection of the physical place of the tea gardens, the structure and practices of tea garden management, and the liberal trade reforms. We argue that the colonial continuities reflected in the structure and the practices of surveillance and dependency hinged on the physical place of the tea garden along with a globalised market, state apathy, and indifference of the mainstream society shape the experiences of precarity for the tea garden workers.

2. Literature Review

Standing (2011) reckons the essential condition of precarious existence as a life “without an anchor of stability.” According to him, precarity is characterised by the lack of labour market security, employment security, job security, work security, skill reproduction security, income security, and representation security. Studies have explored a range of themes connecting work and life under the rubric of precarity. Some of these themes are precarious work and precarious migrant status (Goldring & Landolt, 2011), precarious employment, art and artist collectives (Bain & McLean, 2013), temporary migrant care workers and precariousness (Boese et al., 2013), the impact of precarious work on key life decisions (Chan & Tweedie, 2015), work–family conflict and precariousness (Saritas, 2020), and the place precarity of male manual labourers (Simpson et al., 2021). The notion of precarity and precariat in the West has found expression in the literature as a representation of workers and migrants unsettled by neoliberal conditions, globalisation, and the waning welfare state. In this sense, it represents the workers experiencing insecure employment and the migrant labourers caught in the complexities of VISA regimes. To what extent does the idea of the precariat represent the other forms of labour exploitation and exploited populations such as the tea tribe and tea garden workers?

Tea garden workers are categorised into permanent and temporary workers. In principle, the permanent worker is entitled to employment until retirement age and benefits such as a provident fund, gratuity, housing, medical facilities, education for children, bonuses, and ration under the state statute. However, in practice, ethnicity, history of migration, the colonial origins of the tea industry, the globalised market for tea, state apathy, and indifference of the mainstream society inflict insecurity and vulnerability on the tea garden workers and tea tribes. Despite being in a permanent job contract, the tea garden worker endures the different layers of precarity outlined by Standing (2011).

Lee and Kofman's (2012) observations about precarity outside the United States are particularly pertinent to the case of tea garden workers discussed here. They observe that the national and regional contexts such as colonial history, nature of state, timing, and pace of industrialisation, the advent of neoliberal and structural adjustment policies and the resultant changes in class relationships, labour movements, and the capacity of the state to address the changes shape the experience of precarity. Their observations suggest that the adoption of the concept of the precariat in the Global South calls for attention to these factors. A growing literature on precarity has responded to this call in the context of South and Southeast Asia. Banki (2013) has examined the precarity of Burmese migrants in Thailand. Green and Estes (2018) have examined the precarity of labourers from microfinance-driven debt in rural Cambodia. Natarajan et al. (2019) examine the "climate precarity" of farmers forced into brick kiln work in Cambodia. Hamid and Tutt (2019) have examined the precarity of Tamil migrant construction workers in Singapore. Punathil (2022) has examined the consequences of precarious citizenship for Bengali-speaking Muslim detainees in India. The present article contributes to this literature.

Locating the idea of precarity in the development literature, Natarajan et al. (2019) alert us to an emerging body of work that supports the possibility of nuanced approaches in the application of precarity, particularly in the context of the Global South. According to them the first dimension of this development is the transcendence of the concept of precarity from one exclusively applied to link market and labour conditions to one that incorporates the multiple dimensions of life under late capitalism. The focus of this approach is to look beyond precarity as a condition emerging exclusively from work but as one that emerges from the intersection of various aspects of life. The second dimension of this development is the dispelling of the assumption that post-Fordism marks the temporal origins of precarious work. Munck's (2013) suggestion that precarious work has been a norm for labour in the Global South is important to the analysis of labour in the Global South in general and working conditions such as plantation labour in particular. If precarity has been a general condition of labour in the Global South; if the precarious conditions of work have given the possibility for looking at work under particular conditions in a new light in the Global North, then the scholarship on labour so far has failed to understand work in its totality in the Global South. In this vein, Natarajan et al. (2019) call for further perspectives on precarity from the Global South. They suggest that there is a need for research on precarity from the Global South, which is key to the "dismantling of the very underpinnings of precarity as something that is necessarily worsening or exceptional" (Natarajan et al., 2019, p. 905). We draw on Natarajan and colleagues' notion of precarity as reflecting the conditions generated by trade reforms and the subjective ontological experience of life in the vestigial colonial structure of the tea garden in exploring the precarious life of tea garden workers.

Further expanding the scope of the concept, Banki (2013, p. 450) notes that "precarity suggests the potential for exploitation and abuse, but not its certain presence." Susan Banki introduced the sub-concept of "precarity of place" to account for the precarious conditions of the non-citizen population in the Global South.

She suggests that the usefulness of the concept is in describing “the roots of precarity in global systems and its outcomes in creating differentiated types of sufferers” (p. 452). According to Banki, the precarity of place is the lack of permission for an individual or group to enjoy the benefits and privileges that constitute a place, made possible by “vulnerability to removal or deportation from one’s physical location” (p. 453). While Banki’s immediate concern here is related to the threat of displacement, the emphasis on the inability to live a life free from control and exploitation made possible by social, economic, and political structures and practices that are determined by spatial aspects that amplify historical, local and global imbalances makes it a potential candidate to capture the experiences of the tea garden workers. We use the idea of place both in its spatial dimension as well as the social relations embedded in it to trace the roots and mechanisms that engender precarity in the lives of tea garden labourers. Precarity of place enables us to unpack how the construct of the tea garden—with its history, practices, and controls—is loaded with uncertainty, vulnerability, and insecurity for the worker. The residence inside the tea gardens—sprawling over vast swathes of land, mostly isolated from the mainstream society and devoid of opportunities for mobility, constitutes a paradox for the tea garden workers. Expulsion from the tea garden poses the threat of destitution, homelessness, and unemployment for the worker and family. The threat of removal of the labourer from the tea garden is a major source of insecurity for the tea garden worker, which forces the worker to endure different exploitations. The power relations embedded in the tea garden constitute it as a precarious place for the workers and their families. The article traces the mechanisms in which this vulnerability and insecurity engender precarity for the tea garden workers of Assam in the post-reform period.

Tea garden labour in India has received constant attention from scholars in the last six decades. Bhowmik’s (1980) analysis of the tea garden as a unique social system and its implications for capital-labour relations is a pioneering work in this area. Bhowmik and colleagues, focusing on the tea gardens of West Bengal have highlighted various aspects of the tea gardens such as the absence of women workers in the tea garden unions (Sarkar & Bhowmik, 1998) and labour unrest in the tea plantations and its causes (Bhowmik, 2015). Other authors have highlighted the problems plaguing the tea sector in Assam, such as labour unrest and the exploitation of labour (Misra, 2003), declining growth rate of yield, the declining growth rate of employment, and decreasing employment elasticity (Mishra et al., 2008), inter-generational mobility in the backdrop of crisis in the tea sector (Mishra et al., 2011), the impact of trade reforms on the plantation sector in India (Viswanathan & Shah, 2013), and changes in work participation and forms of employment among women in the tea sector (Rasaily, 2014). This strand of literature provides a critical analysis of labour-capital relations and the socio-economic backwardness of the tea garden population in the post-reform period. The second strand of scholarship has been advanced predominantly by historians, who look at the colonial mechanisms of capital accumulation through indentured labour and unfree labour conditions. The works of Behal (2006), Behal and Mohapatra (1992), and J. Sharma (2006, 2009, 2011) show how the colonial ideology and structure created and maintained an army of labour in an impoverished state for the exploitation of planters in colonial Assam.

An exhaustive survey of the literature on the tea garden is not possible here due to paucity of space, the preceding summary reflects the broad trends in the literature on tea gardens in India in general and Assam in particular. The works discussed above have shown us the structures of power during the colonial, post-colonial, and post-reform periods that rendered the tea garden labourers vulnerable to extreme exploitation and impoverishment. They highlight the objective capital-labour relations that adversely incorporate the tea garden labourers into the circuits of capital accumulation. However, there is a glaring gap, particularly in the literature pertaining to the post-reform period, on the subjective experiences of

social reproduction in the tea garden. Notable exceptions to the trends discussed above have been emerging on the subjective experience generated by the socio-political process and the structures outside and inside the tea gardens on the lives of the tea garden labourers. They are the works on the social reproduction of tea garden workers under precarious conditions in the tea gardens (Raj, 2013), the role of kinship in locking the tea garden workers and their families to the plantation system and perpetuating precarious conditions (Raj, 2023), and identity assertion among the tea tribe living outside the tea gardens (Kikon, 2017). The present article contributes to this emerging literature by examining place precarity in the social reproduction of tea garden labourers.

3. Data and Methods

The data for this article is drawn from our fieldwork carried out between January and October 2023 in two tea gardens in the Sonitpur District and Nagaon District of Assam. Access to tea garden workers and their families inside the tea gardens is difficult due to the surveillance practices of employers. We met our respondents outside the tea gardens. We did in-depth interviews with seven respondents from Sonitpur District. The duration of in-depth interviews with respondents from the Sonitpur District was from 45 minutes to one hour. We had long informal conversations with two respondents from Nagaon District over three visits. Our respondents consisted of two permanent tea garden workers, two temporary workers, three dependents of tea garden workers, and two ex-tea garden workers. One in-depth interview was conducted with a mid-level male manager from the Sonitpur District. Our respondents were in the age group of 40 to 65 years. Six of our respondents were males and three were females. The tea garden with which our respondents are associated in Sonitpur District employs 583 workers, which include 383 permanent workers and 200 temporary workers. Out of the 383 permanent workers 171 workers are male and 212 workers are female. The factory of the tea garden employs a total of 187 workers. Out of the 187 workers, 104 are temporary workers and 83 are permanent workers. Only 15 women are employed in the factory and all of them are temporary workers. The tea garden in Nagaon District with which our respondents are associated employs 530 workers. Out of the 530 workers, 300 are permanent workers and 230 are temporary workers. Out of the 300 permanent workers, 95 are male workers and 205 are female workers. The factory of the tea garden employs 92 temporary workers and 56 permanent workers. To protect the identity of the respondents we have not revealed the names of tea gardens where we undertook our field work. Further, we also use pseudonyms for our respondents. The article is divided into six sections. Following the introduction, we have discussed the concepts of precarity and precarity of place and explored our methods. In the fourth section, we discuss the crisis that followed the liberalisation period in the tea sector and its implication for labour. In the fifth section, we present our data and show the pathways of precarity in the tea gardens of Assam. In the last section, we conclude the article with a discussion.

4. Liberalisation and Crisis in the Tea Sector

The post-reform period in India, starting in the 1990s, ushered in a crisis for the tea sector. Following its membership in the WTO, the Government of India implemented economic reforms in the plantation sector and opened its markets to global competition (Viswanathan & Shah, 2013). The tea sector crisis was characterised by developments that were detrimental to the welfare of tea garden labourers in the following decades. India's position dropped from largest exporter of tea in the global market to fourth between 1990 and 2000 (Viswanathan & Shah, 2013). Authors who have analyzed the crisis in the tea sector have argued

that a combination of structural changes in the tea sector resulting from liberal trade policies and the prevailing exploitative labour–capital relations in tea gardens accentuated the precarious condition of the tea garden labourers in Assam (Mishra et al., 2008; Viswanathan & Shah, 2013). The production and labour use changes following the trade reforms period in the tea gardens in Assam are key to understanding the precarity of tea garden labourers and their families. Mishra et al. (2008) highlight three major changes in the 1990s and the early 2000s in the tea sector in Assam. They are (a) the decline in the growth rate of yield per hectare of tea cultivation, (b) a substantial decline in the rate of employment growth in the tea sector, and (c) a severe decline in the employment elasticity in the tea sector.

The decades of the 1990s and 2000s witnessed a slump in productivity in the tea gardens of Assam. The growth rate of yield per hectare for tea declined from 1.48% during the period 1981–1990 to –1.95% during the period 1998–2004. The slump in productivity is primarily attributed to the ageing of tea bushes in the tea plantations. Ageing of tea bushes reduces their productivity, therefore the plants need to be replanted periodically—ideally after they are fifty years old. This may seem like an intrinsic problem to the crop. However, this aspect of the plantation has implications for the productivity and welfare of the labourers. A large proportion of ageing tea bushes is the result of a lack of investment by firms in replanting and maintenance of tea gardens and the shifting of capital from the tea sector to other lucrative investment avenues. Considering that the structure of the tea sector is skewed towards large capital, where over 80% of the total area under tea cultivation is managed by corporate planters, the management of tea gardens is critical for the welfare of the labour (Viswanathan & Shah, 2013). The lack of investment in tea gardens by firms had a cascading effect on labour in the wake of declining exports and a drop in tea prices. The decades following the trade reform witnessed a substantial decline in the growth rate of employment in all the major districts of Assam. The growth rate of employment in Assam fell from 2.06% from 1981 to 1990 to 1.06% during the period 1991 to 2004. The third change in the post-reform period critical for the tea garden workers is the severe decline in the employment elasticity in the tea sector in Assam. The employment elasticity fell from 0.66% during the period 1980–1990 to 0.53% during 1991–2000. During the period 1998–2005, the employment elasticity declined drastically to –0.37%. Poor rate of employment growth and decline in employment elasticity means that fewer people are absorbed into jobs in the tea gardens of Assam. The disappearance of jobs in the tea sector creates a crisis for the households of tea garden workers as there are negligible opportunities for employment outside the tea garden. In parallel, the trend towards the casualisation of labour in the tea garden grew during this period, which has a profound influence on the experience of precarity for tea garden workers as casualisation takes away the job security and social security provisions attached to the permanent labour in the tea garden. As Mishra et al. (2008) have argued the costs of the structural adjustment in the tea sector following the trade reforms were entirely shifted to the tea garden labourers.

5. Pathways of Precarity

5.1. Casualisation of Labour and Precarity

Plucking tea leaves, spraying pesticides, and processing the tea leaves constitute the lion's share of operations in a tea garden. These activities are classified as “unskilled” and semi-skilled work and the majority of the labour force is deployed in these three activities in the tea garden. There is a gendered division of labour within these three activities. Plucking of tea leaves, which constitutes the primary activity

in the tea garden is exclusively carried out by women. Spraying pesticides and processing of tea leaves is predominantly carried out by men. However, a small share of experienced women labourers is allocated to the spraying and processing of tea leaves. The labourers engaged in these activities fall into two categories: permanent workers and temporary workers. Temporary workers are employed from March to December each year. The employment of temporary workers is not constant throughout the period between March to December as the yield varies, exhibiting peaks and falls within the period. For instance, the period between May to October is the peak season for plucking the tea leaves and requires a huge labour force. The engagement of temporary labour is at its maximum during this period. Similarly, men are engaged both permanently and temporarily in the processing of tea leaves in the tea factories and field activities such as spraying, pruning, and construction of drains in the field. The recruitment of temporary workers depends on the availability of work. The nature of temporary worker recruitment in the tea garden is seasonal and the lay-off period for the temporary workers, whose strength is more or less equal to the strength of the permanent workers, can extend from six to eight months during a year. A huge labour force within the tea garden languishes for a major part of the year without jobs and a livelihood. Thus, casualisation of labour is an important determinant of precarity for the tea garden labourers. Now we turn to the entitlements of permanent and temporary workers to see how the trade reforms have added a layer to the already existing layers of precarity.

Both permanent and temporary workers receive equal wages for their work. However, there is a wide gap in their entitlements that come as part of the work. The entitlements of a permanent worker include 14 days of paid sick leave in a year, paid annual leave, food grains for the worker and their dependent children, maternity benefits, housing facility within the garden, creche facility for the worker's children, firewood for cooking, drinking water supply, health facility, bonus, gratuity, provident fund, and pension. The temporary workers are entitled to food grains, a creche facility for children, a provident fund, a bonus, paid annual leave, maternity benefits, and paid sick leave. However, the majority of the temporary workers lose out on the benefits as they will not fulfill the minimum requirement to remain on the payroll for 80 days continuously in a year due to infrequent engagement in work. As one of our respondents—a mid-level manager—put it:

For temporary [workers], the number of people availing this [the benefits] is very low because sometimes they do not even fulfil the eighty working days criteria in the last twelve months, which might be due to the irregularity in their deployment timings. [It is] also because they are not deployed on a full scale from the beginning of the season, like, they usually start on a small-scale deployment and when the quantity of the work increases, [the tea garden management] calls for more people [appoints temporary workers].

Employment casualisation through the policies of recruitment in the garden is only one layer of precarisation experienced by tea garden workers. On preliminary examination, it might seem to affect only the temporary labourers. However, the casualisation of employment in the tea sector has a direct link to the global tea markets. The global trade structures perpetuate precarity for both permanent and temporary workers. We asked our respondent—a mid-level manager—to explain the factors influencing the rate of hiring of temporary workers in the tea garden. He explained:

If the crop yield is more and our permanent workforce [is] not sufficient to get the entire crop harvested [in the] proper time—if the crop is not harvested on time, the crop will grow longer and, again, [lose

in] quality. So based on those kinds of parameters the deployment of temporary workers is decided. With companies now focusing more on quality, it has become more of a trend to, like, ensure the crop is harvested in a timely [manner]. The permanent workers have to be engaged in other work as well. As already mentioned, some fixed work is going on around the year. Those kinds of work have to be done by the permanent workers only. So from that perspective, in a way depending on the market demand for quality, the company [intends] to harvest the crop on time to maintain quality and they have started increasing the intake of temporary workers.

Our respondent in other words explains that the global demand for the quality of tea is a major factor that controls the recruitment of temporary labourers in the tea garden. The quality demand in the global market drives a “race to the bottom” for the workers in the tea garden. Tea production is a seasonal enterprise. The scale of the workforce required during a particular period of the year varies across seasons. However, a large number of workers is required during peak season to produce the best quality of tea that will fetch high prices in the global market. The easiest way to make this possible is to maintain a large number of expendable workers in the tea garden and its vicinity. The maintenance of a large army of expendable workers is made possible through a set of practices that operate among permanent and temporary workers, which drives precarity among the tea garden workers.

5.2. Housing Insecurity and Precarity

While immobilisation characterised by coercion and physical violence constituted the tea garden space in the colonial period, immobilisation characterised by insecurity and dependency constitutes the tea garden space for workers in contemporary times. Housing and ownership of land are major factors in the insecurity that immobilises and constrains the workers of the tea garden. A set of practices around housing insecurity has been built on older ones that shape the precarity of the worker. Housing insecurity not only forces workers to stick to precarious work but also traps succeeding generations in tea gardens. Our respondent, Pradeep, who is a permanent worker in the factory of a tea garden in the Nagoan District, told us that the house provided by the tea garden is the main reason why he continues to work there. His father was a permanent worker in the tea garden and the job was transferred to Pradeep when his father retired from his job. The transfer of a job from parents to another member of the family is informally called the *badli* (change). The *badli* practice serves as a security against losing housing facilities, unemployment of family members, and expulsion from the tea garden. Management uses the *badli* practice not only to control the existing labourers but also to cut costs and reproduce casual labour from within the tea garden. Our respondent Daniel, who is an ex-worker of a tea garden in Sonitpur District, pointed out the recent trend in the *badli* practice that shapes precarity for the workers and their families. Previously the permanent worker had a choice to select the successor from among the family members at the time of retirement. However, in the past few years, workers have lost their control over job transference to relatives. Management influences decisions on the transference of jobs in such a way as to serve their interests and deprive the family of full benefits. Daniel explained:

If both the parents are permanent employees, at the time of retirement of the father his job goes to the eldest son; at the time of retirement of the mother, even if the family wishes to transfer the job to the daughter or youngest son, the management will transfer the job to the wife of the eldest son who is already employed. Other dependents of the worker will be engaged as temporary workers and stay with the brother’s family.

By ensuring the transference of jobs to the eldest son and daughter-in-law and not another dependent of the worker, management evades the obligation to provide additional housing facilities, firewood, and medical facilities. Further, management also ensures a reserve of casual labour residing in the tea garden without any additional obligation and depriving the workers of their benefits. In addition to all this, by holding control over the housing and income security of the family, in the future, management commands the subservience of the worker. Extremely poor education facilities within the gardens and lack of transport facilities to the nearest urban centers deprive the young people of the tea gardens of attaining better educational qualifications and skills, forcing them to settle for the precarious work available in the tea gardens. In conjunction with the eligibility for housing, the physical location of housing inside the plantation is a second factor that contributes to the precarity of labourers. The physical location of the tea garden, by being isolated from mainstream society, is cut off from a developed labour market and other educational facilities. Hence there are negligible opportunities for skill development and upward social mobility for the family members of the tea garden labourers. For instance, our respondents highlighted the poor condition of the tea garden school, which is the responsibility of the tea garden under the Plantations Labour Act 1951. An extremely limited number of teachers are appointed by management (the state government provides infrastructure) in garden schools. They are paid less and are compelled to supplement their income by engaging in other tasks in the factory or garden during the working hours of the school.

5.3. Wage Structure and the Precarity Trap

The structure of the wages in tea gardens is another important element that shapes precarity for tea garden labourers. The payment of wages in cash and kind as noted by Behal (2006) continues to be the basic structure of remuneration even today. Saha et al. (2019) have observed that around 50% of the wage is paid in cash and 50% in non-cash benefits. The non-cash benefits include water, electricity, medical bills, firewood, and a fixed quantity of wheat and rice. They further observed a wide discrepancy in the deductions marked on the pay slips across estates. The non-cash benefits such as firewood, water, and medical facilities, which are part of their remuneration are supposed to be benefits in addition to their actual wage, and the justification for low wages in the tea gardens. In practice, the value of the non-cash benefits is deducted from the wages of the tea garden worker. As a result, Saha et al. (2019) observed that the workers received cash payments much lower than mentioned on their pay slips. Despite the workers contributing a share of their earnings towards the non-cash benefits such as housing, ration, and medical services, the poor quality and quantity of these services force workers to part with a significant portion of their earnings to procure these services from the open market. Our respondent Daniel likened the distribution of medicines in the tea garden hospital to the distribution of roasted peanuts by *chanawala* (peanut seller) on the streets. The tablets are unwrapped, stored in containers, and distributed to the patients. The practice makes it impossible to identify the medicine and its quality. The poor quality, quantity, and irregularity of non-cash services provided by the tea gardens drain the workers' earnings but also leave them reliant on the same services in the event of any contingencies, creating a dependency on the tea gardens. The most severe consequence of the current wage structure is a negative income-expenditure gap for many workers. Saha et al. (2019) note that 38 percent of households that participated in their study had higher consumption expenditures than their income. The wage structure, poor quality and quantity of services, and the struggles to sustain life deprive the workers of creating assets or savings to invest in land or housing in a booming real estate market in rural Assam. Highlighting the exorbitant land prices, our respondent Charku, a tea garden worker from Sonitpur District informed us that a plot of one *Kattha* (2880 square feet), which is the minimum area required for building a house near his tea garden costs

2 lakh rupees (around \$2,400). Anecdotal evidence suggests that migration in search of work to cities in North and South India has been taken up as a strategy by the family members in tea gardens to earn the savings needed to own a house (Hoque, 2021). However, such moves often result in human trafficking or exploitation in the destination, eventually forcing people to return to the tea gardens (Hoque, 2021).

5.4. Surveillance and Control as Precarity Drivers

Surveillance and control are major drivers of precarity that are amplified by the place precarity of the tea garden. Managers use a range of practices to increase the dependency of workers in tea gardens. The workers are dependent on the gardens for hard cash to meet contingencies such as death in the family, medical treatment, educational needs of their children, and marriage of their family members. The only source for workers is to avail themselves of a loan from their provident fund. However, accessing the facility entirely depends on the mercy of the manager. Our respondent Charku informed us that loan applications for the education of the children are mostly rejected by the manager. He cited his experience of applying for a provident fund loan to enroll his daughter in a general nursing course, which was rejected by the manager. The lack of any other source of available loans generates dependency for workers on the tea gardens.

Surveillance practices and punishments that once existed in the colonial tea gardens continue to make the tea garden worker vulnerable. Line chowkidars are still part of the tea garden administrative system and report to the manager or assistant manager twice a day. Line chowkidars are the intermediaries through which the power structure of the tea garden is imposed on the tea garden workers. The place precarity of the tea garden is amplified and to a great extent maintained through the line chowkidars. Line chowkidars are effectively used to curtail the efforts of tea garden workers to negotiate place precarity through establishing contacts with the outside world or organising among themselves. Our respondents informed us that line chowkidars report on absenteeism of workers and the reasons for that, disputes and fights among workers, the presence of outsiders in the workers' quarters, their identity and purpose of visit, information on any assemblies and meetings of workers in the line, and report on visitors during marriages and deaths in the workers' family and the duration of their stay. Workers are summoned in case of unfavourable reports and an enquiry is conducted by the manager. Workers engaging in "deviant" behaviour are punished by barring them and their family members from work. When workers are barred from work, they lose the day's wage. The looming threat of discontinuation of work is the major threat to the garden workers and prevents them from engaging in any activity that may antagonize the tea garden management. Contact with outsiders and receiving them in the worker's quarters are taken seriously by the tea garden management. The surveillance and penal practices induce insecurity in the workers and make them vulnerable to economic loss. The surveillance practices have severe implications for social mobility and their liberation from the tea garden system. By restricting any interactions and contacts with the outside world the workers are deprived of opportunities, resources, and the necessary social capital to improve their living conditions. The tea gardens as a physical place and the working hours in the tea garden also contribute to the deprivation of social capital for the tea garden workers. Shahadat and Uddin (2022) note that the starting time in the tea garden is "half an hour to an hour after sunrise" and work ends by sunset. The six days of work from sunrise to sunset and the seclusion of tea gardens from urban centers confine the workers mostly to the tea gardens.

5.5. Ethnicity, Identity, and Precarity

The colonial practices of managing the tea garden workers had severe implications for their social status in the larger Assamese society. Prominent among them was the ordering of the groups within the tea garden, which not only subscribed to the racial aspects of the people inside the garden but also the caste divisions outside the tea garden (Baruah, 2021; J. Sharma, 2011). J. Sharma (2011, p. 76) notes:

Considerable distance and antagonism separated coolie labourers and the caste gentry who disciplined them on behalf of the white 'sahibs.' Many *mohurirs* possessed a full share of racial prejudices and class antagonisms to vent upon these migrant labourers scorning the tribal coolies as alien, ritually low intruders.

Ritually low status meant that the tea garden workers would occupy the lowest social status in the caste society comprising the tea gardens in its territorial ambit. Furthermore, the regressive aspects of tea garden life such as appalling housing conditions, existence as captive labour, subsistence wages, the regular physical violence endured in the form of flogging, sexual exploitation of female tea garden workers, and settlement in remote forested terrain contributed to the erosion of the social status of tea garden workers in Assamese society (J. Sharma, 2011). Existing notions of superiority and inferiority in the Assamese society, as noted by Mahanta (1997, p. 144)—“materially and intellectually relatively advanced non-tribal Assamese people of the valley...being precursors and torch bearers of sophisticated advanced life-ways in Assam, are obsessed with a notion of superiority in relation to the followers of the ‘lowly’ ways of life that is the tribal ways”—were quickly projected on to the tea garden workers. The practices that erode the social status of the tea garden tribe continue under the managerial system comprising employees from Assam and other states of India (Kikon, 2017). Systematic exclusion and othering of the tea tribe in Assamese society are intertwined with the place precarity of the tea tribe.

Scholars have argued that while the post-colonial state's welfare measures have failed to make any changes in the living conditions of the tea tribe, the mainstream society through its indifference to the struggles of the tea tribe has “othered” them (Gohain, 2007; Sumesh & Gogoi, 2021).

Kikon (2017) notes that neither are the tea tribes accommodated in the coalitions formed to demand indigenous tribal status and constitutional protection in the Northeastern states of India, nor are their ethnic status and cultural ways of life acknowledged in the numerous ethnic festivals organised in Assam. The deep resentment of this othering surfaced in our respondent Nelson's protest over the representation of the tea tribe women in the promotional videos of Assam tourism circulated in the media. Nelson, whose brother is a permanent worker and his wife a temporary worker in the tea garden in Sonitpur District, wondered why the tea tribe women are always shown as engaged in plucking tea leaves on the television or in advertisements while women from other tribal groups are shown as engaged in singing and dancing. Nelson's reflection on the portrayal of the tea garden women reveals a pathological reduction of the tea garden tribe as a source of labour only. Kikon (2017) observes a conspicuous silence on the experiences of the tea tribe in the literature on politics emerging from Northeast India. Dehumanizing practices in the tea gardens, political exclusion in the mainstream society, and the consequent erosion of social status for the tea garden workers and tea tribe in Assam, according to Kikon (2017), meant “the production of a racial and moral order that legitimised a culture of impunity and the denial of civic and political rights.” Prominent among the reasons for the

disenfranchisement of the tea garden workers and tea tribe is the denial of their demand for tribal status, a form of protection enjoyed by their brethren in other states of the country who did not move into Assam to work in the colonial gardens. The lack of constitutional protection status plays out in multiple ways for the tea tribe, including the absence of protection from exploitation and violence within the tea gardens and social mobility. Lack of any such protection while they share a more vulnerable status compared to their peers in other states profoundly determines their experience of precarity.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Drawing on Banki's (2013) idea of place this work explored the production of precarity among tea garden workers in Assam. We explored how physical place intersects with the construction of a space such as the tea garden, through the structural practices in the tea garden, increased casualisation of labour through liberal trade policies, and the ethnicity of the tea garden workers, to define the experience of the precarity of one of the most vulnerable communities in Assam. While there is a long history of studies that have highlighted the poor living and working conditions of tea garden workers in India (Bhowmik, 1980; Xaxa, 1985) from the perspective of capital-labour relations, and migration and tribal studies, our study pioneers the examination of the experiences of tea garden workers through the lens of precarity. Our study is one of the first attempts from India to respond to the call to examine the role of geography and physical place in precarity. By focusing on the experience of precarity associated with immobilisation we address a different dimension of place precarity (Simpson et al., 2021). We add to the growing literature on place precarity by highlighting the implications of a constructed space such as the tea garden and the way it intersects with the physical place to shape experiences of precarity.

We have illustrated the practices and structures that reproduce insecurity and vulnerability for the tea garden workers. The physical location of the tea garden by its seclusion from urban centers and its rural locale deprives the tea workers and their families of using the services and availing themselves of the resources that have grown exponentially outside the tea garden (Banki, 2013). The intersection of the physical place of the tea garden, its management structure and practices hinging on neoliberal trade policies, and an indifferent mainstream society had a profound influence on the experience of precarity by the tea garden workers.

There is a dearth of literature from the Global South in general and India in particular that apply the precarity lens to study experiences of work and life of the poorest and vulnerable. This has been largely due to the understanding and application of precarity as a necessary condition attached to insecure work in post-Fordist economies, and the assumption that precarious work is a recent phenomenon that can be traced to the post-Fordist labour regime (Natarajan et al., 2019). However, rich work from scholars has emerged in recent times that unsettle the notion of precarity as a characteristic of work in the post-Fordist economies of the Global North and expands its application to the Global South context. For instance, Strauss (2018) argues that precarity is a function of social and economic structures and hence resists compartmentalisation to work alone, underscoring the pervasiveness of precarity in other spheres of life irrespective of the stages of national economic development. Similarly, Millar (2017) contests the perceived novelty in the application of precarity to the experience of workers in the Global North, suggesting that precarity has always been the characteristic of capitalism in the Global South. Our case of tea garden workers and the tea tribe, with their ontological experience of precarity determined by social, and economic

structures having their roots in colonial capitalism, justifies Strauss's (2018) and Millar's (2017) observations on the ontological experience of precarity and its application to the context of the Global South. The tea garden workers who are immobilised in the tea gardens by economic, social, and physical structures illustrate how precarity blurs the distinction between labour and life (Natarajan et al., 2019). The experiences of our respondents regarding the risk of losing work, increasing casualisation, retrenchment, suppression of welfare provisions, and insecurity hinge on both the place precarity of the tea garden as a space and its unfavourable inclusion in the broader circuits of capital accumulation.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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