



Impacts of British Colonialism on Northeast India's Landscapes and Ethnic Identity among Women Tea Labourers

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Abstract

Throughout the histories of Darjeeling and Assam, the development of tea plantations by British colonizers has coincided with ethnonationalist divisions. The concurrent yet divergent processes of 'taming' Darjeeling and Assam's landscapes into economically profitable plantations correlated with growing racist perceptions of local peasant populations and the sexualization of migrant women labourers. Darjeeling was established as a plantation capital because of favourable soil characteristics for agriculture, and its hill station was developed as a health getaway for British officials in India because of its cool climate. Comparatively, Assam's forests were not favoured by the British, but provided several necessities to the local tribal population before colonization, including food, medicine, and timber. Similarly, women labourers in each region were sexualized and stereotyped differently. According to postcolonial theorist Ania Loomba, "female bodies symbolize the conquered land' across the entire colonial period".¹ Expanding on the idea of the female body as the first "territory" to be colonized, this paper explores the biopolitical exploitation of the female migrant worker body within the political ecology of plantations. It examines how British agrarian development of Northeast hill and forest frontiers into tea plantations coincided with arbitrary ethnic classifications to subdue, exploit, and utilize the female tea worker body. Specifically, it explores how the British project of taming the Northeast Indian frontiers into tea plantations aligns with its attempts to appropriate and exploit female migrant tea labourers in Assam and Darjeeling. It also deconstructs the ways in which this historical biopolitical colonization project by the British Raj led to postcolonial appropriations of the female tea worker body.

Keywords: Northeast India, biopolitics, gendered labour, tea plantations, Assam, Darjeeling, political ecology

¹ Ballestrin, Luciana. 2022. "Postcolonial and Decolonial Subaltern Feminisms." *Postcolonial Studies* 25 (1): 110.