
WHY TEA PLANTATION LABORERS DO (NOT) REBEL

I was up by five o'clock one morning in December 2015 to join two of my tea laborer acquaintances for pruning work. There are four annual seasons (or “flushes”) for Assam tea between March and November, while the three months from December to February constitute the offseason when tea bushes are pruned. Pruning is hard manual work. I met Asha and Rajni at a crossing close to the factory, and Rajni took me on the back of her bicycle to the area allocated for pruning for that day.

As we reached the lower garden section where we were supposed to prune, the sardar of Asha and Rajni's group instructed each worker where to start working. Rajni was told to prune the first two bush arrays bordering the road, while Asha and other workers were instructed to prune the bushes deeper inside the gardens. Rajni was given a special task because the overseer thought that she pruned better than the others. Thus, if the manager came along to check the quality of the pruning work, he would get a better impression of the work on the face of it and be less likely to complain too harshly. Rajni walked toward the first bush in her array. She closed her eyes, lifted her pruning knife, which she held tight between her hands, in front of her face, and mumbled a prayer. Rajni was from a Gwala caste Hindu family of comparatively high status on the plantation. Her best friend Asha was from a lower caste, and Rajni sometimes made jokes that if they lived in other parts of India, she would never enter Asha's house or eat at the same table with her. In Dolani Tea Estate, they became close friends across caste hierarchies. Maybe they felt connected because of their difficult family fates.

Asha was married, but her husband had died from an alcohol overdose and left her as a childless widow in her early twenties. Rajni's father had died early and since her elder brother refused to work and her mother was sick, Rajni became the family's breadwinner even before she turned twenty. It took Rajni about two minutes to prune the first bush. During the early morning hours, pruning was comparatively easy because the bushes' branches are still covered in moisture from the morning dew and are therefore softer.

Rajni complained that the manager came every single day to check their work and usually found something or other to nag about. She said that the previous manager had never done this. "The former manager was all right compared to the present one," Rajni concluded. Two sardars, one mohara, and the jamadar babu were present that day to supervise the work. The sardars instructed the women to improve their pruning and helped them when they fell behind. The mohara and the jamadar babu ran through the arrays shouting, "Work hard!" and "Do good work!" or "Cut the bushes exactly to one level!" Suddenly a man drove by on his motorbike. The women whispered "Sahab . . . sahab came . . ." to one another. I later got to know that this "sahab" (i.e., Sir) was the newly appointed assistant manager who had started to work on Dolani Tea Estate just a few days earlier. The sahab got down from his bike and inspected a few bushes in the front arrays. The jamadar babu talked to him nervously at the roadside before he got on his bike again and drove away.

The workers had finished pruning around a hundred big bushes in the meantime, which was one third of their daily task. The highest-ranking overseer turned toward the workers and shouted, "You did not do a good job today! You did not prune the bushes to the same level! You have to come back and prune all the bushes again!" A loud murmur went through the crowd and the workers started to talk across one another. Rajni, Asha, and a few other workers walked out of the field toward the road. Slowly but surely, all workers followed them one after the other. There were about a hundred workers altogether. They sat down on the road. The overseers ran across the street furiously, screaming, "Get up immediately! Quickly, start working again!" None of the workers moved an inch. The overseers became rough, slapping the workers lightly on their shoulders or the backs of their heads while constantly repeating, "Get up! Work!" The workers, unimpressed by the overseers' vigorousness, remained seated and shrieked back, "We will not go back to work!" This confrontation went on for quite some time before the workers finally went back to work.

Injustice, James Scott (1976, 158) argued, can only be perceived if people have a norm of justice in mind from which it has departed. Based on this premise, this chapter analyzes instances during my fieldwork in which tea plantation labor-

ers decided to protest—in more or less visible ways—because they felt treated unjustly. Following Scott, I examine these instances in order to understand underlying norms of justice. I argue that laborers claimed appropriate remuneration for their efforts in mainly nonmonetary terms, such as acknowledgment, and often did not aim toward radical transformations; instead, they aimed toward maintaining proper relations within the “old-style” tea plantation welfare economy. Therefore, while their protests “are intended to mitigate or deny claims made by superordinate classes” (Scott 1985, 32), the hegemonic order itself is not being challenged as such but is being used to criticize elites that do not act according to the rules of their hegemonic order (Scott 1990). The aim of maintaining instead of subverting the hegemonic order can further be seen in the fact that laborers’ protests constituted the exception rather than a rule. Protest studies’ popular question of “why [wo]men rebel” (Gurr 1970) is therefore turned upside down.

The chapter is divided into three sections. First, I introduce the history of labor protest based on historical accounts of Assam tea plantations. Second, I analyze three instances of (everyday) protest among tea plantation workers in order to illustrate my argument that laborers’ underlying justice regimes are informed by the old-style plantation economy. Instead of dismissing laborers’ desire to maintain proper work relations in the old-style political economy of tea production as reactionary, I state in the third section that adhering to this labor law regime during its gradual replacement by a new labor law regime transforms working modes of justice. When norms of justice are placed in a different context—here, a changing political economy of tea production—their function also changes. Under the old plantation economy, the justice regime shaped by the Plantations Labour Act operated in a system-preserving and rectifying manner. However, in the emerging political economy, the same justice regime functions in a structure-undermining way. In other words, while the fundamental objects of justice remain unchanged, their operation is context-dependent.

Earlier studies on labor resistance on tea plantations (e.g., Banerjee 2017) and beyond (Scott 1990) have shown that resistance is often not against hegemonic structures but operates within it. Building on these theories from the perspective of *justice at work*, I argue that both critique and maintenance of structures can be understood as forms of agency. Laborers did not “misrecognize” their *actually* exploitative labor relations on the plantation as beneficial due to “false consciousness” (76), nor were they *actually* expressing a desire for a better future for their children by romanticizing the bygone *industri* model of plantations (Besky 2014). Rather, many laborers, like Rajni and Asha, recognized that maintaining the old-style plantation economy was the better option at a time of radical transformations in the political economy of tea production, when their labor was on the line.

Histories of Tea Labor Resistance

Tea plantation laborers' protest in pre-independence Assam has gained attention in a few historical studies (see, e.g., Behal 2014 and Varma 2011). The Indian historian Rana Behal distinguishes different phases of labor protest on plantations in Assam while taking changing historical settings into account. In the absence of laborers' own recorded testimonies, Behal mainly relied on planters' written accounts as well as documents of colonial administrative correspondence.

During what Behal categorizes as the first phase of resistance in the mid-nineteenth century, the tea industry was not yet financially stable and there were not enough laborers available, especially to increase the acreage for tea planting and open new tea estates. Companies delayed payments to laborers and tried to reduce their wages and increase their workload to maximize the profits needed to establish the industry. The first strike, according to Behal, was reported in 1848 when tea laborers stopped working and gathered outside a company's office to protest delayed wage payments and increased workload. In what followed, laborers continued to protest tea planters' exploitative profit-maximizing strategies—for example, by deserting before their contracts had ended. This was possible because laborers had more attractive alternatives at that time, such as infrastructural work, which was better paid (Behal 2014, 268–289).

Behal (2014) dates the second phase of labor resistance to the 1860s, after the enforcement of the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act in 1859 and Act VI of the Bengal Council of 1865, which introduced the indentured labor system (see chap. 2). During the 1860s, Assam tea planters started to recruit "tribal," lower-caste, and caste Hindu laborers from the Chotanagpur Plateau. Protest during that time was articulated mainly in the form of desertion, which "symbolized [the] rejection of the relationship of servitude that the emigrants were coerced into under the indentured regime. . . . It was both an individual and, sometimes, a collective act of resistance" (270). Desertion, however, had a high price for laborers when they were caught, since it was treated as a breach of contract and therefore a criminal offense punished either with fines of between Rs. 20 and 100, which was equal to five to twenty-five months' wages, or imprisonment of one to six months (270–271).

Besides desertion, other forms of resistance included shirking and cheating (e.g., plucking bad leaves in addition to good ones, hiding bricks in tea leaf baskets during weighing to fulfill their daily workload, or feigning illness to escape hard work). Another way in which laborers' resistance was articulated was through acts of violence against managers. The most violent incidents appeared as expressions of anger against physical coercion, indignities (insults, beating,

etc.), or sexual exploitation of women laborers by British managers (279). Laborers killed managers in only a few cases, but many laborers were punished and imprisoned for a long time after attacking managers or threatening them with violence (280–281).

The right to impose private arrests on plantations was gradually repealed and led to a dismantling of the penal contracts in Assam in 1908. Yet, the indentured labor system continued until a spate of severe labor riots with an emphasis on economic issues happened between 1920 and 1922, on a larger scale and scope than any other labor unrest before, which Behal describes as a third phase of labor protests (287). These attacks were made against managers, on the one hand, and Indian plantation staff who had, for example, illegally deducted money from laborers' wages when paying them or taken bribes to grant them sick leave. Action was also directed toward vendors who sold their products on local markets for exorbitant prices and who were looted by laborers in revenge (287–288). Planters explained the increase in these riots by saying that the tea laborers had been influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and his noncooperation movement during the movement for independence in India, thereby denying the possibility that low wages could have caused the protests. Behal quotes tea planters, stating that "earnings of the laborers, including concessions in the form of subsidised ration, housing, medical facilities, garden land, etc., are more than enough to maintain them in health and reasonable comfort" (290). An inquiry committee examining the riots later, on the other hand, found it unreasonable to consider a direct link between the noncooperation movement and the riots, concluding that low wages and rising prices, together with exploitation by plantation staff and shopkeepers, were the more obvious reasons behind the protests (291). Nonetheless, the noncooperation movement and other external factors, including a successful strike by railway workers in Assam in 1920 that served tea laborers as a source of inspiration, may have had indirect influence on the labor unrest (293).

Regarding the effects of the labor revolts, Behal concludes that they were somewhat limited because laborers' demands for higher wages remained largely unfulfilled—maybe due to a lack of linkage and unity between the various incidents of protest. In comparison, the planters were united and had good connections to the government. The Workmen's Breach of Contract Act of 1859 was abolished in 1926 in line with the tea planters' protest, which Behal interprets as a successful outcome of the spate of riots in the early 1920s (294).

Since desertions were no longer illegal in the postindentured period, a new form of protest arose in what Behal calls the fourth phase of labor protest. This new form was denoted as "exodus" and meant that a mass of laborers left work and walked away. Exoduses were seen as a rejection of the "imposed rhythm of plantation life" and "extra-economic methods of exploitation," such as increased

workload and delay or deductions of payments (295–296). When planters reacted to the recession in the Assam tea industry, which was caused by the Great Depression of the 1930s that had led to a decline in exports and internal consumption, by cutting wages and controlling production, laborers again reacted with protests in the form of strikes and exoduses (297).

As a kind of last phase of pre-independence protest by tea plantation laborers in Assam, Behal describes the emergence of more organized labor protest in the form of the first emerging “embryonic” labor unions between 1939 and 1947. Labor unions are discussed in detail in chapter 4.

To sum up, pre-independence labor protests on Assam tea plantations, according to Behal, were articulated as work stoppages, street protests, riots, desertions, threat and use of violence against managers, staff and vendors, exodus, and more organized labor protest when the first labor unions emerged. Behal sees the reasons for these labor protests as delayed wage payments, exploitation, increased workload, rejection of the relationship of servitude, physical coercion, indignities, and sexual exploitation of women laborers. He concludes that laborers often suffered from their engagement in protests.

Labor Protests at Work

In this section, I discuss three instances of labor protest to draw more general conclusions about laborers’ underlying justice imaginaries. The first labor protest I am going to discuss falls under the category of what James Scott (1985) has called “everyday resistance.” This means that an act of protest is so subtle that it could easily be overlooked as an instance of protest.¹ The incident took place in December 2016 during the pruning season. When I reached the tea plantation section where a group of laborers was supposed to be pruning that day, I heard some laborers discussing loudly with the sardar. The jamadar babu had told some laborers to work in garden number twelve that day, asking one sardar to take thirty laborers into another section at the edge of the garden to prune there. The day before, the sardar had asked thirty laborers to join him to prune that distant section of the garden. In the morning, however, around forty laborers instead of thirty had appeared, against the jamadar babu’s and sardar’s instructions. The sardar was afraid of getting scolded by the jamadar babu for not fulfilling his instructions, so he asked ten women to go back to garden number twelve, where they were supposed to prune. The ten laborers who had come in addition to those who had been asked to come by the sardar had appeared against the instructions given to them because they thought that the bushes would be higher in that section and therefore easier to prune than in garden number twelve. They now

refused to go and started pruning the bushes against the sardar's harsh opposition. The sardar was unable to win out over the laborers' insistence to remain in this section of the garden.

This incident illustrates how laborers try to make the best out of a given situation by extending their scope of action beyond clear instructions or rules given to them by their supervisors and by challenging oppression in asymmetrical labor hierarchies. I experienced both articulations on several other occasions during my fieldwork. Other examples of the maximal extension of the scope of action can be seen in the following. Some families, for instance, made sure that one person from the household kept working on the plantation as a permanent laborer, while other family members worked elsewhere. Thereby, they could stay in the houses provided to them by the company and receive nonmonetary benefits for all the family members, while only one person provided labor to the company. Some laborers also worked for only three days a week, which was the least they needed to work in order to remain eligible for nonmonetary benefits, giving the least effort to receive the maximum return from the company. This principle could also be seen in smaller gestures, such as hiding between tea bushes during working hours to take an unnoticed small break.

The critique of labor hierarchies as expressed in the way the laborers disregarded their supervisors' instructions was also apparent on other occasions. During a picnic the management had organized for their laborers after the pruning season, for example, one laborer went to the manager, took his hand, and dragged him out to dance with the other laborers. Another incident was when a laborer working in the kitchen in the manager's bungalow laughed about the manager's wife. The wife had insulted the laborer of being careless when she felt that the temperature of her oven needed to be reduced while baking. However, the oven had only two settings: on or off. Therefore, the heat could not be reduced, and the laborer laughed at the manager's wife for not knowing the settings of her own oven that he could not have possibly changed. In all these small daily incidents, the laborers defended their position and did not accept being downgraded without criticizing labor hierarchies *per se*. The laborers' defense of their "dignity" was even more strongly articulated in spontaneous protests, which were more obviously seen as interruptions than the instances of "everyday resistance."

One day in December 2015 when I was chatting with Aron in his backyard, he told me about a huge fight that he had had with the plantation manager about ten years earlier. Aron had worked as a laborer on a government-owned plantation for about fifteen years when we first met in June 2015, when I incidentally ran into his wedding march. Aron's great-grandfather had come from Jharkhand to work on the plantation in the 1920s. His great-grandfather had occupied a small piece of land next to the plantation where Aron's family was still living. Aron had

seven siblings. He went to school until class ten but did not take the matriculation exam because his father had died at that time. After his father's death he needed to "inherit" his father's permanent position in order to feed his family. I had visited Aron's house a couple of times before he told me about the incident that day. Aron told me that he had been working on a night shift in the plantation factory, where he and three other laborers were responsible for controlling the tea processing machinery. All three others had fallen asleep, while Aron had worked hard to look after all the machines by himself. When the manager came over to inspect the situation, he rebuked Aron for not working properly. Aron told me that he had become angry because he was the only laborer who was actually working. He remarked, "Why didn't the manager scold the ones who slept instead of me?" and continued, "I am also a human being (*insān*). I also feel sleepy at night. I also need to rest. But still I worked—me alone. Why on earth did he abuse me?" Aron recalled he then struck the manager's face out of fury. After that, the manager suspended him from work and demanded that he should beg for his pardon before reapplying for his job. Aron emphasized that he had never apologized but reapplied nonetheless a year later and was given a permanent position again. I further probed Aron about what exactly had made him so angry that day. He pointed out that "laborers should not be talked to disorderly (*ulṭā-pulṭā*) when they work properly. I am also a man (*ādmī*), a human being (*insān*), but they look at us as if we were inferior. They do not consider us to be human. What does it matter if he is the manager? I do my work and he does his work. I could not tolerate that he abused me although I did not commit a mistake (*galṭī nahīn kiyā*)." Aron told me that the manager never abused him again after this incident.

Aron's spontaneous act of protest stemmed from a sense of being unjustly mistreated by the manager, as he explained. He justified his outbreak of violence by emphasizing his humanity. In doing so, he used two different Hindi terms for "human being"—*ādmī*, which can mean both "man" and "human" (or "person"), and *insān*, typically translated as "human." Another common term, *mānav*, is often used in compound phrases like "human rights" (*mānav adhikār*). Aron invoked the idea of "being human" in two distinct ways. First, he stated, "I am also a human being (*insān*). I also feel sleepy at night. I also need to rest." Here, he highlighted his physical limitations, contrasting himself with a machine that could operate continuously. Second, he used the phrase in a social and moral sense "I am also a man (*ādmī*), a human being (*insān*), but they look at us as if we were inferior. They do not consider us to be humans." His choice of words suggests that he rejected the notion of laborers being inferior to managers and instead held a belief in human equality. This is further evident in his rhetorical question: "What does it matter if he is the manager?"—implying that he did not see the manager's role as inherently superior to his own.

One may also read Aron's protest against the manager as a claim to "dignified work." Josh Fisher (2018) suggested the term *dignified work* as an alternative work ethic—a mechanism by which ethical positions are formed. Fisher had conducted research with a small sewing cooperative in Nicaragua that opted out of a free trade zone and gave up fair trade and other support to gain dignified work. For Fisher, dignity was a recurring issue for workers in capitalist workplaces (80). One of Fisher's interlocutors explained the meaning of dignified work as "being recognized as people, not used as machines" (84). This is what Aron seems to have pointed to when insisting on his shared humanity with the manager.

Moreover, Jan Philipp Reemtsma (1999) sees an idea of justice ("Gerechtigkeitsgefühl") expressed in feelings of revenge or the desire for retribution. According to Reemtsma, the idea of justice as revenge is based on the principle of the reciprocal infliction of suffering. When a person feels unjustly treated, they feel as if they have become the object of another person's intentions, and they desire revenge to equally objectify the other person to one's own desires and thereby regain their own subjectivity.² Aron objectified the manager by slapping him in order to regain his own subjectivity as a human being.

Both a violation of dignity and humiliation seemed to have also moved Rajni and the other workers to protest as described in the incident at the beginning of this chapter. When I walked back to the field with Rajni after the protest that day, she showed me the uncut bushes, explaining that they had been given two contradictory instructions by their supervisors. They were instructed to cut the bushes a hand's width above last year's pruning mark; and they were told to prune the bushes so that they were all at the same level. Since the laborers had not evenly leveled them the previous year, it was impossible for the laborers to follow both instructions. Rajni commented,

They ask for the moon. It is impossible. The assistant manager is newly appointed. He came to learn things since he has no experience so far. He knows nothing but dared to abuse us, saying that we did not do the work properly (*kām ṭhik nahīn kiyā*). If he does not know anything himself, how will he teach us? We work so hard (*mehanaṭ karte hain*) and all he does is abuse us. He did not even tell us how to make it better. This is why we protested (*haḍṭāl kiye*). I really do not like to be abused.

I only later came to understand the significance of the women's spontaneous protest when Rajni told me that this was the first time they had ever done this. When I asked her what had prompted them to protest in that way on this particular day, she kept insisting that my presence had given them courage, as the babu (overseer) would not have dared to misbehave in my presence. Since Rajni liked to make a lot of jokes, I was not sure if she was serious, until I mentioned it later

to the mohara, in whose house I was staying. He was astonished, saying nothing like this had ever happened to him in his section. He was even more surprised because the lower labor section was considered more “obedient” than his own.

The overseers remained silent for the rest of the day and no manager stopped by for a few days after the incident. Usually, pruning was over by twelve o’clock. That day, however, the women had only finished about two-thirds of their workload by then, due to the protest. The overseers wanted to send them home anyway, but the women insisted on finishing their workload and ended up working till half past two. When I had tea with Asha and Rajni later in the afternoon and we talked about the incident again, Asha became angry, saying,

They always abuse us. We know that our tea estate has developed well over the last few years and makes a good profit. The manager recently got a fancy new car because the quality of the tea increased, and all we get is insults. If we do our work well, they abuse us and if we do our work bad, they abuse us even more. Today, we could not stand it any longer. The manager had abused us continuously for days; this is why we protested today. We work hard like men (*mard*). The manager will not find other women who are able to work as hard as we do.

When I asked Asha a few days later whether she thought that anything had changed after the protest, she replied, with a beaming smile,

Yes, nobody has abused us, and we did not see the manager again. No one disturbs us anymore. See, we have to live here for all our life. We cannot go elsewhere. You will leave again in a few months. The managers stay here for a few years before they move on elsewhere. But we always have to live here, that is why the work needs to be all right for us. The managers talk too much, “this is not right, that is not right . . .” but they know nothing. The laborers on this plantation are very good but the managers still abuse us. This is not right (*thik nahin hain*). We are a lot of laborers together. We could do anything. On other plantations, laborers kill managers. But the laborers on our plantation are all right. They would never do something like that. Still, they abuse us. This is just not right (*thik nahin hain*).

Different conclusions can be drawn from this incident of spontaneous protest regarding laborers’ conceptions of justice. The laborers temporarily refused to work, staging a sit-down strike. For some time, they did not obey their supervisors’ verbal and physical instructions to get back to work, resisting their demands by deciding to remain seated and emphasizing verbally that they were not going back to work. Their bodies, which they usually utilized as a means of labor,

became a means of protest for them through their refusal to move and work. The laborers asserted that they had chosen this type of protest for the first time in their lives. They could have chosen different means of protest instead. For example, they could have decided to protest in a more radical way, such as using violence against the managers or overseers, as Aron had. They could also have decided to protest in a more subtle way, such as cutting the remaining bushes even worse, which could have gone unnoticed, as a way of “everyday protest.” However, they decided on a middle course by protesting noticeably but moderately.

Possibly the laborers did not opt for a more radical form of protest because they were afraid of the severe consequences such a radical protest might have had for them. The laborers on Dolani Tea Estate had once surrounded the manager’s office in the plantation factory and threatened to attack the manager if he did not pay them their annual bonus, which he had not fully done so far that year. The manager had somehow managed to flee from his office. I did not observe this incident, which happened some ten years before I conducted my fieldwork, but different laborers told me about it and its dramatic turn several times. The manager never returned to the plantation and was probably moved to manage another one of his company’s plantations. However, the factory and the plantation remained closed for about two weeks afterward. The laborers could not work and received no payment before the plantation was eventually reopened by a new manager. The older laborers who had participated in the protest remembered it as a traumatic event, since they had almost starved in the absence of pay and food rations when the company closed the plantation down. In the end, their protest had had more negative consequences for them than for the manager or the company. I assume that this kind of negative experience of more radical forms of protest, which was frequently recalled in conversations among laborers, held them back, on the day I described above, from taking more drastic measures. Being women may have also contributed to their hesitation to protest more violently as Aron had done, which points to the gendered differences in options for resistance.

The laborers did not opt for more subtle ways of everyday protest either but wanted to protest in a visible way. They said that they had decided to protest in a more obvious way because they had been unjustifiably abused by an inexperienced and incompetent manager, who did not know how to do things better. They evaluated his abuse as unjustified because their work outcome deficiency was not the result of their lack of effort or hard work but the result of instructions that were impossible to put into action. Later, Asha put forward two additional explanations for their protest action. The first was that, considering that the plantation was making a good profit, it was not fair for the manager to be rewarded with a new car while the laborers got insults although the company’s

profit resulted from their hard labor. Behind this argument is an idea of distributive justice that rewards the ones working hard. Asha did not specify what kind of reward she was thinking of, but from her utterance one can assume that she meant both material and nonmaterial rewards—material rewards because she mentioned the manager's new car, which he received as a reward, and nonmaterial rewards because she indirectly mentioned the opposite of being rewarded with insults, which is acknowledgment. The second argument that Asha provided was that laborers had to live on the plantations for the rest of their lives, unlike managers (or anthropologists), which is why she saw a need to engage in keeping labor relations and conditions bearable for them.

From the protesting laborers' reasoning for why they had protested that day, it is possible to draw more general conclusions about how they envisioned just labor conditions and relations, and about their work ethos (Eckert 2020, 11). The laborers' most obvious complaint was about being abused despite having worked as hard and as diligently as they could. This reasoning resembles Aron's work ethos described above. The laborers also found it unjustifiable to be abused when they had not done anything wrong. Eventually, the laborers won their case that day, which can be seen from the immediate effects of their protest. The overseers remained silent for the rest of the day, the manager did not show up for a couple of days, and the overseers wanted to send the women home although they had not fulfilled their daily target by twelve o'clock. These reactions may be interpreted either as an indirect admission of guilt on behalf of the overseers or as a sign that the overseers were afraid that this kind of protest may happen again or turn into something bigger.

Another striking aspect of that day's events was that the workers insisted on completing their daily workload, even when their supervisors wanted to send them home. Despite having to work two-and-a-half hours of overtime, they remained determined. I assume they wanted to assert that they were the ones working properly, upholding their work ethos even after being unjustly mistreated. By refusing to accept a favor from their supervisors, they reclaimed their dignity and corrected a perceived wrong.

Laborers on Dolani Tea Estate seldom participated in more organized protests. They explained to me that they sometimes wanted to participate in organized protests but could not afford to, since they would have to pay for public transport in order to reach the protest site, which amounted to about a week's income of a normal plantation laborer and meant incurring an additional loss of money through absence from work. Therefore, when I participated in public protests on behalf of tea plantation laborers, I found that most protesters were either representatives of activist groups (discussed in more detail in chap. 4) or better-educated children of tea plantation workers. Once, in March 2015, I participated

in a protest in front of the trade unions central office in Dibrugarh after the trade union had signed a wage agreement below the statutory minimum wage. About one thousand people had come to join the protest from various places in Assam. Directly in front of the gate of the trade union's office, people were delivering speeches in Sadri. In front of me, a group of women held up protest posters with Sadri inscriptions in Assamese script. I asked the women about what was written on their posters to start a conversation. One woman disclosed that they could not read or write, so they did not know exactly what was written on their poster. They told me that some activists who had organized the protest had given them the posters to hold up. One woman explained that they had come because they wanted more money. When I asked them how much money they were claiming, the women looked at each other querying for a while. Another male protestor who stood beside us said to both the women and I that they had come to claim the minimum wage of Rs. 169. I further asked the women why they were claiming more money. One answered, "We cannot make a living from what we earn (*is paisa se ghar nahin cālā sakte hain*). We have to eat, educate our children, buy clothes and other things, therefore we need a little more money." Another woman explained, "We work so hard, and we get so little money. That is not right." Another male laborer from a neighboring district told me, "I have come to protest (*dharnā*). We do (hard) manual labor (*mazdūr kā kām*) but earn so little money. The money is not sufficient (*santust*). We cannot make a living from it (*ghar nahin cālā sakte hain*). Besides, the government declared 169. Prices are also increasing. We need Rs. 330 to make a living (*jīvan bitāne ke lie*)."

This showed the protestors' different levels of engagement with the topic of the protest. Some protestors were uninformed about the details of the wage agreement and the protest organizers' official claims. They had simply come because they wanted "more money."

Some may not even have known what the protest was about before reaching the protest site, which I experienced on another occasion, when I was asked to join a group of women at a protest in a district capital. When I tried to find out what the protest would be about, I got vague and contradictory answers related to improving the tea plantation laborers' situation. I decided to join the protest. When we reached the district capital where the protest was to take place, we jumped out of the car that had been provided by the protest organizers. Protest posters were pressed into our hands, similar to the women protesting in front of the trade union office that other day, and we directly joined the protest march that had just started when we arrived without knowing what was written on the protest posters we were holding. Later, I came to know it was a demonstration about the rights of people with disabilities on World Disability Day. When I asked

the organizing NGO people why they had decided to call tea plantation laborers to join their protest, they explained that it was because many people with disabilities lived on tea plantations. For the women it turned out to be a nice outing paid for by the NGO, and for the NGO, the women laborers constituted a good crowd of people to demonstrate the importance of their protest's issues. This illustrates that people may join a protest for very different reasons, which do not necessarily agree with those of the organizer. However, during the protest, participants may become aware of the organizers' goals and leave with a new or broadened understanding of their objectives.

Moreover, even if protestors were participating in a demonstration for similar reasons to those intended by the organizers, they may have different interpretations of the protest's objectives. In the first case outlined above, while some protestors had come to claim an indefinite amount of "more money" because they believed they were not able to make a living from the wages they earned, others brought forward a more concrete claim for "just" wages in terms of the statutory minimum wage or a living wage. In the first case, the tea planters were addressed as responsible agents of justice to provide "more money." In the other case, the state is also addressed to implement minimum wages for tea plantation laborers. The most commonly articulated reason why the protestors were claiming higher wages was that prices were increasing, and their wages were no longer sufficient to live on—an argument that is as old as the tea industry itself, according to what the historian Rana Behal has written about early forms of labor protests during the colonial period. Behind that lies a subsistence ethic—a belief that wages need to be high enough to secure subsistence. Another argument was that wages were not "appropriate" for the hard manual work that laborers did for the tea companies.

Justice in Context

This chapter takes the argument by James Scott (1976, 158) that injustice can only be perceived if people have a norm of justice in mind from which it has departed as a starting point to understand tea plantation laborers' justice imaginaries through different forms of protest motivated by feelings of experienced injustice that reveal underlying norms of justice. In everyday forms of protest, laborers sought to rectify labor hierarchies and move immediate superiors to give them what they consider to be due to them. Aron's violent protest against his manager and the women laborers' sit-down strike both happened when they felt falsely accused of not working properly while actually upholding the work

ethos in a remarkable way. Protests occurred primarily when laborers sought respect and acknowledgment for their hard work in nonmonetary terms. This is supported by tea laborers' loyalty toward the tea companies described in the previous chapter and their holding on to nonmonetary benefits as illustrated in the anecdote at the beginning of the introduction to this book. When I started my fieldwork in December 2014, there were rumors that tea plantation laborers' food rations would be abandoned because companies were hesitant to provide them since laborers were also eligible for subsidized food rations under the Indian state's public distribution system. The rumors caused lively debates on plantations about the possibility of no longer receiving food rations. Laborers articulated that it would be the worst-case scenario for them if food rations or the dual-wage structure were to be abandoned.

Tea plantation laborers as both concerned agents of justice and subjects of justice considered provisions prescribed in the Plantations Labour Act and respect and acknowledgment for their hard work (as objects of justice) to be due to them by tea planters and sometimes the state as responsible agents of justice. In making this statement about what workers believed they were entitled to, I do not mean to suggest that they felt no dissatisfaction with the old-style plantation economy, nor that they lacked aspirations beyond it. Many workers, like Manoj (see chap. 1), dreamed of a life of freedom as subsistence farmers outside the plantations. Others, like Jiya's husband, hoped for better-paying jobs away from the plantations (see chap. 2). Many workers simply wanted their children to receive a good education and secure better jobs outside the plantations, as others have similarly expressed (e.g., Besky 2014; Jegathesan 2019). Some workers aspired to own items like motorcycles for prestige. When I last saw Rajni in 2023, she proudly showed me the scooter she had long desired and finally managed to buy for herself. I am not suggesting that workers were uncritical of the plantation economy or lacked dreams beyond it. They had a wide range of aspirations. However, since my primary concern here is with notions of justice—specifically how workers' ideas of justice relate to the visions of advocacy groups aiming to bring justice closer to laborers—my focus is on what laborers considered to be their due. This was not an expensive car or anything comparable, but rather recognition for their hard work and entitlements like food rations, as prescribed by the Plantations Labour Act. Asha, in her earlier statement, did not claim she was entitled to a luxury car like the manager's; rather, she believed she deserved to be appreciated for her labor.

I argue that this idea is far from naive or unrevolutionary. On the contrary, striving to rectify labor regulations and relations based on the old-style political economy of tea production can bring about transformations within the existing system, as long as it remains intact. However, in a historical moment when

these structures are being disrupted and possibly dismantled, as detailed in the introduction, adhering to an old-style political economy based on the Plantations Labour Act becomes more revolutionary than reformatory. Theoretically, this means that if the same justice framework is applied in a new context, it can shift from preserving existing structures to undermining them, or vice versa.