

## INTRODUCTION

# Life in the Remains

As dawn breaks over Darjeeling's cinchona plantations, a young man ambles across the lawn of a dilapidated colonial bungalow—a wooden mallet in one hand, a smartphone in the other. Bundled up against the Himalayan chill, he saunters to a bell hanging at the terrace's edge, waiting to ring in a new day. Below, the rooftops of villages tucked into stands of cinchona trees poke up from the mist. He stares into his phone, an incandescent beacon amid the morning gray. The pixels flash 6:00 a.m., and he strikes the bell in one confident swing, allowing it several seconds to reverberate before striking again. This is the wake-up bell. The ritual will repeat at 6:30 a.m., with the call to the morning *muster*, and again at 7:00 a.m., with the commencement of the day's *ganti* (counting). The routine has stirred many generations on these cinchona plantations. By 7:00 a.m., laborers are wending their way down footpaths from their homes to the *maidan* (field), where the day's *ganti* is under way. They arrive quietly in dribs and drabs—two here, three there—many still rubbing the sleep from their eyes. On arrival, they duck into a concrete hut to check in with their *gangman*, who records their presence in the plantation's ledgers.

Most of the workers fail to notice the new vinyl banner hanging on the hut's side. Those who do, stare, perplexed by the message: *Mero Bagan, Mero Garwa* (My Plantation, My Pride), it reads, extolling the virtues of the land and work at hand. It is something of a head-scratcher: these plantations established by the British Empire in the nineteenth century have been in decline for decades. The quinine extracted from cinchona's bark is no longer the first-line treatment for malaria that it once was. With the pharmaceutical market for their product virtually gone, these government cinchona plantations no longer produce the lifesaving



FIGURE 1. The morning *muster*, with banner on hut, 2017. Credit: Photo by author.

medicine for which they were founded. The industry's demise is everywhere apparent: in the cinchona trees growing unkempt on the surrounding hillsides; in the once-pioneering, now-shuttered government quinine factory; and in the work culture of laborers playing out the string of an industry whose time has seemingly come and gone. So it is understandable that most pay the banner little mind as they await the day's orders.

At 7:15, the *gangman* begins barking orders. Their assignment called, the laborers file silently back up the footpaths to their homes, where they will eat breakfast with their families, put on their work clothes, and steel themselves for another day of working the remains of a once-vital industry.

This book tells the story of Indian quinine and the people who made it—then and now. It asks two fundamental questions. First, how have chemicals like quinine and plants like cinchona shaped history, empire, and life itself? Second, what happens *after* these game changers run their course? For those who dwell among quinine's remains, the day starts like it always has. But these days are not like those of the past. Not on the plantations. Not in the world. The great scourge, malaria, is fought with new medicines. Colonialism has, ostensibly, come and gone. The grounds of health and power have shifted. And yet anachronistic and “out of time” though they may be, Darjeeling's cinchona plantations and their community still exist. This book explores how these places and lives came into being—and how, against all odds, they remain. It is an anthropology of those for whom the bell tolls.<sup>1</sup>

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Today quinine is commonly known as an ingredient in tonic water. The alkaloid gives tonic water a hint of bitterness to counter its sweetness. Historically, quinine was more than a flavoring agent, however. For centuries, it was the primary remedy for malaria. Extracted from the bark of cinchona, the “fever tree” of highland South America, quinine became integral to the colonial project throughout much of the world.<sup>2</sup> European empires invested heavily in the antimalarial, clandestinely appropriating cinchona varieties from the indigenous Andes; establishing transcontinental networks of plantations, laboratories, and factories; and orchestrating a global quinine trade in which private capital and cartels ruled the day. Thus, before tonic water became a staple of current-day cocktails, quinine, the drug, was a staple of colonial life.<sup>3</sup> As the alkaloid made its way into the bodies of troops fighting wars and colonial officials sipping gin and tonics across the globe, quinine coursed through empire’s bloodstream. Vital to colonial health and power, it became a world-historical substance—a material that profoundly altered the course of history.<sup>4</sup>

Quinine was indispensable to British rule in India, where malaria was endemic.<sup>5</sup> The mosquito-borne disease killed, on average, more than one million people annually on the subcontinent. This is to say nothing of the nonfatal cases. Colonial malariologists believed that in the worst-hit areas over half of the population fell ill with the disease every year.<sup>6</sup> The morbidity was devastating to local communities and the efficient functioning of the British imperial apparatus. Enter quinine. The drug miraculously “cured” malaria’s debilitating fevers, thereby significantly reducing its death and morbidity.

In the mid-nineteenth century, British botanists appropriated cinchona from the cloud forests of indigenous South America and brought it to India. The British Indian government established massive cinchona plantations in the Darjeeling and Nilgiri Hills in a desperate attempt to secure the medicine that the empire needed to fight malaria. In Darjeeling, thousands of workers, mostly Nepali-speaking Gorkhas from the surrounding hills, came to cultivate and strip the fever tree of its precious bark. The colonial government erected factories where quinologists developed complex chemical reactions to extract the alkaloid from dried cinchona bark and transform it into lifesaving quinine doses.<sup>7</sup> The drug was then distributed through elaborate dispensary systems that promised humanitarian relief for the masses, yet consistently prioritized British interests. The quinine made in Darjeeling saved countless lives during its colonial career.

But for the communities who made it, quinine has left grave uncertainty in its wake. In the shifting chemical and political landscapes of the twentieth century, Indian quinine became increasingly obsolete. Today’s global pharmaceutical market is dominated by synthetic antimalarials and expensive artemisinin-based combination therapies (ACTs). Quinine is still sometimes used as an antimalarial in low-income countries without access to these costly medicines.<sup>8</sup> And it remains a key ingredient in tonic water. There is therefore still some global demand for quinine. But this is not the robust marketplace of the colonial period. And it is *not*

Indian quinine supplying its stock. Generations of overproduction and neglect have rendered Darjeeling's bark too weak and costly to compete with the high-alkaloid, low-cost barks cultivated in Africa. And while artisan beverage companies like Fever-Tree peddle Premium Indian Tonic Water, their quinine, too, comes from Congo.

This has all proven a bitter pill to swallow for the people who made Indian quinine in the Darjeeling Hills. The demand for their product has all but vanished. Yet, despite not having produced a dose of quinine in decades, the government cinchona plantations still exist—albeit in a dilapidated state. Where the hills were once covered in orderly plots of cinchona saplings and a state-of-the-art factory pumped out the quinine that thrust this remote corner of the Himalayas to the fore of humankind's fight against malaria, the cinchona fields are now overgrown. The factory is closed. The plantations' infrastructure is crumbling. The government has labeled the industry "sick" and targeted it for privatization, but local communities, led by strident unions, have successfully resisted. So far. What is to become of the industry—and the roughly fifty thousand people who inhabit its remains—is unclear. Shuttered quinine factories and unkempt cinchona trees may conjure images of ruination, but these remains are anything but dead. The cinchona plantations have instead become the site of urgent efforts—and a periodically charged politics—to redefine land and life for the twenty-first century. For those who call the plantations home, quinine's remains constitute the grounds on which any viable future must be forged. More immediately, they are the grounds on which the present must be lived and defended.

From the anthropologist Sidney Mintz's pioneering work on sugar to recent studies of coffee, tea, spices, oil, plastics, and beyond, we have learned more and more about how particular plants and chemicals have shaped the world.<sup>9</sup> The aftermaths of these world-historical substances remain less examined.<sup>10</sup> *Quinine's Remains* explores these aftermaths. Set amid quinine's *living* remains, it is a history of how life got made with quinine. And it is an ethnography of life *after*: after the rise, after the fall, after the key substances of one era give way to those of the next. What do people do when the products that centered their lives lose their place in the world? How does life come back together (or not) once the market collapses, the factory closes, and the fields go fallow? What prospects of a life and future stir in these remains of our pasts—imperial, material, and otherwise?

At first glance, India's cinchona plantations appear forlorn and worn out. It is tempting to read these places as vestiges of a bygone colonial era. Critical theory offers guidance. From Walter Benjamin's and Georg Simmel's fascination with *ruins* and *decay* to Ann Stoler's work on *imperial debris*, scholars have looked to ruins (things) and ruination (processes) to rethink the past's relationship to the present. Writing in idioms of rot and decay, commentators of the postcolony have examined how communities "live with and in ruins" and how they reanimate the debris that empire deposits in its wake.<sup>11</sup> Similar threads run through the research on deindustrialization and postindustrial life, in which scholars explore



FIGURE 2. Quinine's industrial remains at the Mungpoo plantation, 2017. Credit: Photo by author.

how communities negotiate the “blasted landscapes,” hollowed-out infrastructures, and toxic residues of previous eras.<sup>12</sup> Plantations certainly conjure these tropes with their mutual exhaustions of land and life.<sup>13</sup> And the rot is real. Over a million pounds of bark sit deteriorating in sheds across the plantations. Far more than that is neglected on the overgrown hillsides, slowly losing its chemical potency. Sacks of bark powder lay rotting on the factory floor, waiting for manufacture, waiting for a market that does not exist.

Yet ruin isn't necessarily the leitmotif of life after quinine. Cinchona plantation residents often speak of the deteriorating conditions in which they live. Ultimately, though, they do not see these landscapes as “blasted” or “in ruins.” In fact, they steadfastly refuse the deadening connotations of *ruins* and *ruination*. Neither will they concede the obsolescence of these places and their community. For them (and for me), any such rendering forecloses the vitality, possibilities, and politics of quinine's remains.<sup>14</sup>

This is why I do not write much of *ruins* in the pages that follow. I instead develop the concept of *remains* in an effort to move beyond the analytic foreclosures of obsolescence and ruination and therein venture a more open-ended engagement with the cinchona plantations. *Remains* works here in multiple capacities. It carries innuendoes of death (bodily remains). More importantly, it signals the de/generative connections between things then and things now. *Remains* names the aftermaths of pasts whose “time” has come and gone but that nevertheless remain.



FIGURE 3. Sacks of bark rotting at the closed factory, 2017. Credit: Photo by author.

*Remain* is also a verb. “To remain” is an active practice of maintaining one’s presence in the present. This cannot be taken for granted on the cinchona plantations. In these places under perpetual threat of being swept into the dustbin of history,<sup>15</sup> remaining is an everyday challenge. It is a practice—and politics—carried out through mundane acts like heeding the day’s bell and showing up for work and through more spectacular acts like violently defending the plantations against the threat of privatization. In India, other government industries producing staples like milk and textiles have succumbed to the neoliberal fate of privatization, restructuring, and liquidation.<sup>16</sup> Other colonial plantations such as those that grew indigo have been killed off by synthetic alternatives (in indigo’s case, synthetic blue dyes) and the market volatility associated with imperial “boom crops.” Still others like India’s tea plantations in Darjeeling and Assam have managed to achieve economic viability in the postcolonial era. Not cinchona. Yet somehow the government cinchona plantations remain. As I show, this is no accident. These places’ continued existence owes to an array of factors—none more vital than the cinchona community itself. Indian quinine’s time may be done. But the cinchona community’s perseverance and politics make it plain: these places and their people are *not* afterthoughts of colonial medical history. Bucking the logics of obsolescence, they are alive, present, and fighting for a better life thereafter.



That there is life in the remains is this book's opening premise. This is not, however, to minimize the difficulties of life on the cinchona plantations. The hardships and precarities are palpable. But so are the efforts—and the need—to find ways to live amid these colonial aftermaths. In the years I worked on this book (2015–23), the quandaries of remains—what to make of them; how to live with them—have pressed upon the cinchona plantations with growing urgency. The cinchona community's responses are specific to their circumstances, but the quandaries are hardly unique. These questions of remains refract across the postcolonial and postindustrial world, from the coal countries and rust belts of the Global North to the archaic plantations and exhausted landscapes of the Global South. These spaces may appear worn out, anachronistic, and left behind by the putative march of history, but in them stir some of the most critical questions of our times, none more perplexing than how to make something new, or at least viable, with the remains of old. As humankind's pasts accumulate in the present, reshaping and often foreclosing the prospects of life in the Anthropocene, the challenge of living in remains stands as not only a quandary of postcolonial or postindustrial circumstance. It is a signature challenge of our anthropogenically affected times.

#### A BIOGRAPHY OF QUININE

The story of empire and quinine begins in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, when Spanish Jesuits first “discovered” the fever-reducing powers of cinchona bark from indigenous Peruvians.<sup>17</sup> For two centuries, Peruvian Bark and Jesuit's Powder were traded on the European market as a vaguely defined febrifuge. Little was known of how the bark worked or what it cured. The cause of malaria (from the Italian *mal aria*, meaning “bad air”) was then unknown. Quinine's medicinal properties were also poorly understood. First chemically isolated in 1820, quinine came to be known for curing fevers and for its general health benefits. It was the latter reputation that prompted Europeans looking for ways to imbibe the bitter “tonic” to invent tonic water.<sup>18</sup> Quinine's relationship to malaria wasn't clearly understood until the end of the nineteenth century, when a volley of scientific breakthroughs revealed quinine's capacity to short-circuit the malaria plasmodium's breeding cycle in the human body, thus heading off the recurrent proliferation and cellular bursting that causes malarial fevers.<sup>19</sup> Until then, cinchona bark and quinine remained something of a medical mystery, seeming to cure some fevers but not others.

All the while, malaria's fevers burned at empire. In the mid-nineteenth century, over half the earth's population was at risk from malaria. The disease killed roughly 10 percent of those who contracted it.<sup>20</sup> Transmitted by the bite of the female *Anopheles* mosquito, malaria ranged from the swamps of the US South and the wetlands of Europe to the plains of Africa and South Asia and into the jungles of South America and Southeast Asia. For the European empires, the losses of life

and profit were particularly immense in the colonies of Africa, the Americas, and Asia. The disease wreaked havoc on European and native populations, undercutting the health, profit, and stability of the imperial enterprise. In certain regions, malaria made imperial rule exceedingly dangerous if not impossible. Quinine changed the equation.

Cinchona soon found itself swept up in the colonial botanical transfers that forever reshaped earth's ecologies. In the 1850s and 1860s, the British and Dutch deputized seed collectors to gather the best cinchona strains from South America. Smuggled out of the Andean jungles, seeds and saplings were transshipped through Europe's botanical gardens en route to South and Southeast Asia, where experimental plantings grew into full-fledged plantations: for the Dutch in Java and for the British in the Nilgiri and Darjeeling Hills of India. Proven to grow at scale and meeting a dire medical need, cinchona cultivation spread to Ceylon, the Caribbean, and beyond. Cinchona became imperialism's latest boom crop—a generator of wealth and health, which underwrote empire's nineteenth-century expansion. Historians have identified cinchona production as one of the most significant botanical endeavors of the colonial era—and quinine, a “tool of empire.”<sup>21</sup>

Quinine may have grown on trees, but to become a modern pharmaceutical it required exacting assemblages of human and nonhuman forces. On the cinchona plantations, the imperial pursuit of quinine thrust plants, land, communities, chemistry, capital, and power into new relations that, in turn, drove evolving regimes of accumulation.<sup>22</sup> On the colonial front lines, quinine engendered novel configurations of bodies, insects, microbes, and rule, which enabled the European empires to extend their reach and maximize their profits. Reconfiguring life at microscopic and planetary scales, quinine's biography reads like a case study of how humanity has *become-with* its nonhuman counterparts.<sup>23</sup> Plants, insects, parasites, lands, and chemicals all move through this story.<sup>24</sup> But make no mistake: it was human beings—plantation workers, botanists, merchants, chemists, colonial administrators, and untold others—that made quinine a world-historical substance. In this cocktail of forces, they were the straw that stirred the drink. Any attempt to understand life with—and after—quinine must therefore grapple with the materiality of its nonhuman elements *and* the perniciously human stuff of capital, exploitation, inequality, and power.

Where quinine's rise (and fall) unfolded at the global scale of empire, the survival of Darjeeling's cinchona plantations has proven a more national and local affair—a story necessarily told amid the shifting moral and political economies of postcolonial India. Since India's independence from British rule in 1947, the government quinine industry has endured a raft of changes. India's participation in the World Health Organization's chemically fueled war on malaria; the Nehru regime's “soft socialist” commitments to the public sector; the coming and going of Left Front communist rule in West Bengal (1977–2011); and, more recently, India's embrace of neoliberal reform following its economic liberalization in the



1990s—all have borne directly on the cinchona plantations. More locally, the Gorkhas' agitations for a separate state of Gorkhaland have likewise left their mark. The government cinchona plantations have come through these storms battered, depleted, and not what they once were.<sup>25</sup> They continue to pose a problem with few easy solutions. Under West Bengal's Directorate of Cinchona and Other Medicinal Plants, the plantations are running at an estimated annual loss of 26 crore (more than three million US dollars). Saddled with this financial burden, the West Bengal government continues to search for viable options, but it has been reluctant to invest in cinchona and quinine itself. For now, the "sick" cinchona plantations have been allowed to live—but for how long, nobody knows.

What to make of these places has become a contentious question. In one imaginary, the plantations are to remain government holdings and to be diversified and revitalized under the auspices of West Bengal. In another, they are to become ethnically autonomous territory, part of a future state of Gorkhaland. And in still another, these "waste lands" represent an untapped frontier for capitalist transformation, the designs of which spell certain peril for lifeways generations in the making. As capital prowls twenty-first-century India with fresh license, the future is uncertain. The specter of ruination looms. Still, workers wake from their slumber, make their way to their morning *muster*, and begin the work at hand.

#### AFTER-ANTHROPOLOGY

When I first started research, I could hardly pick out the fever trees growing on the plantations' thickly forested hillsides. I struggled to grasp the complex hierarchies that structured life in these remote corners of the Darjeeling-Kalimpong Hills. The plantation's forms of botanical, chemical, and human extraction were opaque. But as my relationships with these places and people deepened, these things became impossible to unsee. The backbreaking labor, abandoned fever trees, failing facilities, and undying coloniality of the plantation were central features of the life thereafter.<sup>26</sup> Yet beyond the drudgery and deterioration, there were other things stirring in the remains. The same workers shuffling bleary-eyed to work every morning were also raising families, starting businesses, and experimenting with new ways to live—and become—amid the remains. Workers were transforming their plantation homesteads into tourist homestays, bringing their families much-needed jobs, capital, and purpose. They were appropriating the plantation's land and repurposing its resources to new ends. The directorate and individuals were trying out new crops. Trade unions were organizing to defend the plantations against the perils of privatization and governmental abandonment. People were joining growing movements for land rights and reforms. On their most spirited days, they were agitating for Gorkhaland—actively transforming the cinchona plantations into a battleground for ethnic autonomy. Through it all, the plantation's toil remained. But as I found my bearings, there was a vitality to the cinchona

community that could not—and would not—be denied. That vitality helped guide me through the confounding world of the remains. I have tried to keep it at the fore of the anthropology that follows.

After carrying out exploratory inquiries from 2006 to 2014, I began researching this book in earnest in 2015. Over the next eight years, I consulted archives in Kolkata, New Delhi, Chicago, Darjeeling, and London<sup>27</sup> and completed five stints of ethnographic fieldwork in the Darjeeling-Kalimpong Hills.<sup>28</sup> I had the great fortune over these years to work with Vikash Pradhan, a self-identifying “son of the cinchona soil,” who served as my research assistant. Vikash grew up on the cinchona plantations, and though he has since moved away, his roots and commitment to the cinchona community run deep. He is also a skilled ethnographer and a dear friend. Vikash often accompanied me in the field. There, and throughout this project, he was instrumental to how I navigated, understood, and wrote the remains. It is only natural, then, that Vikash figures frequently in the stories that follow.

Piecing together the complicated histories that brought the cinchona plantations and their community into being was one thing. Making sense of all that remains was quite another. Quinine’s untold history in Darjeeling may have been what lured me to the cinchona plantations, but it was the dynamics of the life thereafter—the community’s struggles to remain, its agitations for justice, its quests for a better life—that kept me coming back. Since 2015, I have returned again and again to the plantations and archives around the world seeking understanding of life with—and ultimately after—quinine. I’ve come to think of my approach as an after-anthropology.<sup>29</sup>

Similar to the *post-* in Stuart Hall’s post-colonial, the *after-* signals neither a clean nor an epochal break with the colonial past but rather a contemporary wrestling with its remains. “It is what it is,” Hall noted with his signature clarity, “because something else has happened before, but it is also something new.”<sup>30</sup> For the community that animates this book, the After is a time-space of both constraint and possibility. It is a *condition* or set of conditions to live with and work through, a *project* to work on and work at,<sup>31</sup> and a *horizon* to work and orient toward.<sup>32</sup>

Now that empire’s medicine has seemingly run its course, the question is no longer simply how to live or *become-with* cinchona and quinine. It how, who, and what to *become-after*. In quinine’s after, materiality matters, though not always in the ways it once did. Rusting factories cannot be rebuilt so easily. Exhausted soils do not rejuvenate overnight. Aging infrastructure and laboring bodies cannot simply be made young again. For those who dwell in quinine’s wake, the colonial past drags at the present in decidedly material ways.<sup>33</sup> Nothing, however, tethers the present to the past like the institution of the plantation itself. The rule—known as *badli kam* (replacement work)—has always been that one member of each household must work for the government plantations. Workers receive from the government, in turn, wages (294 INR/day, roughly US\$3.57 in 2023), houses, fields for growing crops and rearing livestock, and a range of other benefits known as

“facilities” on which they have come to depend.<sup>34</sup> *Badli kam* posts are typically handed down within families on an inheritance basis. This replacement system has thereby allowed workers and their families to live and work on the plantations across the generations. People often spoke fondly of their family’s *badli kam* post. It was their “family business,” their “heritage,” they told me. Still, no one was denying the hardships at hand. *Badli kam* may be the glue that binds cinchona families to their homes, land, and community, but it also binds them to the unrelenting institution of the plantation itself. To live in these places, someone from the family must labor. Whether there is meaningful work to be done, whether the plantations are making quinine, or whether the bark will go to rot doesn’t matter. The rule remains.

The plantation’s intransigence and flagging materiality severely limit what these places and people can become. Yet the horizons of life in the remains are bereft of neither hope nor possibility. Today, the directorate is piloting new crops. Individuals are experimenting with new livelihoods. Scientists are testing whether advanced biological technologies might allow the plantations’ cinchona trees to be revitalized, such that their barks will contain a high enough alkaloid content to compete in the global marketplace for beverage and pharmaceutical quinine. Social movements are laying fresh claims to these lands, imbuing quinine’s remains with fresh vitality (and periodic volatility). None of these experiments has, as yet, shown a definitive way through the impasses of the present. They remain works in progress—projects, as it were, of becoming something viable, something dignified *after* quinine.

When one scans the horizons of our planetary present, small places like the cinchona plantations might be easily missed, cast aside, or forgotten. Until one realizes that these ostensibly worn out and left-behind spaces of the After constitute an unconscionable—and growing—swath of the human experience. As the pace of techno-material churn quickens and humanity careens into uncertain futures, places like the cinchona plantations conjure their own kinds of provocation. What if the problem of remains isn’t confined only to the distant crannies of the postindustrial, postcolonial world? What if the challenge of forging life in the remains is fundamental to human experience going forward? To put it another way: What if remains are not only a matter of what empire and capitalism have left “behind”? What if they are also what lies ahead?

We hear considerable talk these days of the end times and what comes after the world as we know it comes to a close. Given our planetary trajectory, these ruminations are understandable. They range from genuine concerns about the prospects of life amid the toxic legacies of capitalist industries to cinematic fantasies of the postapocalypse, where “the last of us” vie for survival amid the zombie-ridden aftermaths of a world gone awry. Amid these phantasmic imaginings, we would do well to spend some time in the real corners of the After: on the boarded-up main streets of towns that have seen better days; in the shadows of mines and factories that no longer have a purpose; and on the steep, overgrown hillsides of

cinchona plantations where workers still work much like they did during the colonial heyday. In these allegedly “desolate” places, we might pause to consider how actual communities inhabit actual aftermaths. We might endeavor to understand how they hope, how they struggle, and how they occasionally triumph in making something good of what remains—not least, lives worth living.

If the cinchona plantations prompt some big picture thinking of our world—and future—in remains, they also bring our attention back to the quandaries and quotidian realities of the present. Consider again the banner from that misty morning when this book began. The “My Plantation, My Pride” campaign formed part of a broader effort by the cinchona directorate to revitalize the plantations. This included renewed diversification efforts through the experimental planting of ginger, coffee, kiwi, citrus, rubber, and even new cinchona. The directorate also turned attention to worker culture and heritage to pump life into the plantations. The top-down campaign began with semiannual meetings of plantation *gangmen* at the directorate’s headquarters, where motivational PowerPoint presentations sought to instill purpose in the plantations’ leadership. The campaign likewise reached down to workers with banners and other reminders extolling the heritage and pride of the work at hand. *Mero Bagan, Mero Garwa*, as it went in Nepali.

These efforts have largely fallen flat, not because workers lack a sense of heritage or pride, but because the industry itself—and the world around it—has become something different. Many residents see no future in the field and factory. The afternoon after watching sleepy-eyed workers scratch their heads at the banner’s perplexing message, I asked the *gangman* who had barked out orders that morning about the challenges of leading his crew—many of whom are his friends and neighbors—into such dismal horizons. “It’s tough,” he told me as we bounced along in the back of a jeep on rocky plantation roads made for the British many lives ago. “People come and try to cut out of work early. They try to work as little as possible,” he subsequently elaborated. “Or they come to work in the fields, and all they talk about is their education degrees. But I tell them: you are here to work in the fields. What are you going to do? You can’t dig a hole and clear the fields with a ballpoint pen!” As conversation turned to how his workers might interpret the banner, he responded with a wry grin, “Who knows? They might read it and feel like it is theirs. Or [chuckling] they might just rip it off and take it home and use it for something else!”

Playing on the quotidian realities of life after quinine, the *gangman*’s wit captured something the banner elided: the ambivalences of inhabiting remains. Plantation workers speak nostalgically of the days when the fields flourished and the factory churned out lifesaving medicine. They maintain a deep attachment to cinchona, the plant around which their lives were built, and a strong sense of belonging within the plantations. But whether the banner’s message of pride and heritage “feels like theirs,” as the *gangman* put it, is a question that throws into high relief the peculiar alienations of postindustrial labor. To think beyond Marx’s

theories of alienation, there is perhaps only one thing more estranging than selling one's labor to an industry that makes a product sold far from those who made it: namely, selling one's labor to an industry that makes no product at all.<sup>35</sup>

And yet that is precisely what these communities must do if they wish to remain among quinine's remains. This requires, they'll tell you, a daily dose of paradox, precarity, and sacrifice. For communities living on plantations producing little in the way of products or prospects, these are days that cannot be gotten back. And yet staying with the present—no matter how troubled—may be the best option for those searching for a future amid the remains of old. For the time being, it may be the only option.

### LABORS OF THE MEANTIME

*Dak. Dak. Dak.* High in the Munsong cinchona plantation, picks and shovels are striking the earth. Twenty-six laborers are strewn among the cinchona working on the stagger, one foot above the other, their backs bent. Their primitive tools hit a stone here, softer ground there. *Dak. Dak. Dak.* Last night's rains have left the plants wet and the ground slippery. Mist and fog swirl down through the trees, muting the sounds, making the morning air humid and heavy. Already, shirts are drenched in sweat, and pants are caking with mud. But the workers are accustomed to these conditions. As they've done for generations, they keep a steady pace digging at the steamy hillside. *Dak. Dak. Dak.*

It is 2022, and a *chaprasi* (overseer) and I are standing in a cinchona field cleared and replanted three years before. Chest-high cinchona saplings surround us, accompanied by stakes that jut up from the steep ground to support the tender trees against the harsh Himalayan weather. These are *Cinchona calisaya* saplings, the *chaprasi* tells me, the coveted yellow barks that made the Munsong plantation the crown jewel of the British quinine project. But there are pockets of death on this hillside. Thousands of saplings have died due to drought in recent years, leaving patches of brown amid the otherwise verdant green. These dead spots are called "vacancies," and they need to be remedied as soon as possible. The monsoon rains are coming any day, and it will be planting season. The directorate has accordingly ordered the workers to dig out the dead trees and prepare the ground for new cinchona plants, soon to be transferred from the nearby nursery where another set of workers has grown cinchona from seed to sprout throughout the year. Now in their second year, the young cinchona plants stand two feet tall, lush and green—ready to leave the relative safety of the nursery's bamboo huts and take their place on the exposed slopes beyond, where the field laborers are preparing the ground for their arrival. This is the way it has always been. And so it remains.

"Hey, you missed something!" the *chaprasi* shouts. "Look! There are rocks in this hole." Two nearby laborers immediately stop what they are doing and,





FIGURE 4. Laborers extracting rocks from the hole, 2022. Credit: Photo by author.

without saying a word, descend on the hole—the man brandishing a digging rod, the woman a hoe—to begin digging out the rocks.

The rest of their crew is scattered among the cinchona. They mostly labor in silence, save for the sound of their tools and their *dafadar* (field supervisor), who paces among them barking orders. He too is a Gorkha and member of the



cinchona community. Until his recent promotion, he was also a field laborer, so he knows this toil well. Nevertheless, the *dafadar* walks his lines and shouts his commands with a colonial air issuing deep from quinine's past. And the workers abide. Backs bend. Sweat drips. Picks and shovels hit the earth. *Dak. Dak. Dak.*

It's only 8:00 a.m. There's a long day ahead.

. . .

This is what life and labor look like after quinine. The narrow path the workers walked that day from their morning *muster* to the cinchona fields was worn and slippery. Etched by those who came before and sodden with the nights' rains, it was a path connecting the orders of the colonial past to those of the present. As I walked that same treacherous path, the links between the toils of then and the toils of now were plain to see. Yet, as I had elsewhere learned, there was also more to life after quinine. Unfolding well into the twenty-first century, scenes of cinchona workers laboring in the fields left behind by the colonial British serve as a powerful reminder of empire's uneven inheritances. The cinchona community's quests for justice, dignity, and something beyond the plantation's toil alert us to something else: most vitally, the lives, politics, and possibilities that inhere in the remains of our day.

The people who feature in the stories that follow and who I have had the honor to work with in my years of fieldwork, do not have answers to the biggest questions of our times. Nor are they clear about what the future may hold. With existential threats looming on the horizon, theirs isn't so much a politics of the future as a politics—and labor—of the meantime. And it is here, in the gritty realities of the here and now, that the cinchona community offers lessons for living in the remains. With the clock ticking on humanity and the planet to find a way forward, the cinchona community reminds us how difficult it is, for some, to simply remain in the world as it is. Beyond that, they show us the perseverance it takes to become—and rebecome—something better.

Even as grave questions hang over their lands and lives, my friends on the cinchona plantations insist there is life in quinine's remains. In keeping with *their* politics and ethics, I take this as a starting point. At the end of the day, though, recognizing the life in remains may not be enough. The real ethical and political question as we go forward is: What kind of life?

This is the question that the cinchona community so poignantly raises. In what follows, I try to tell some of their stories—*then*, when quinine stood at the fore of human history, and *now* that its time has seemingly come and gone. The lives and politics of the cinchona community may not herald a way out of the conundrums of our present world. Neither do they clear a definitive path forward. Read with the right eye, they may, however, afford some bearings for reengaging the present—and perhaps finding our way through the remains.



FIGURE 5. *Cinchona* sapling in colonial Darjeeling, 1867. Credit: Photo by Benjamin Simpson, British Library, Photo 1000(40)/1855-1880s/Print 4204.