

After Quinine

A Politics of Remaining

The ground is scarred and steep. One can barely stand, let alone work, on the overgrown hillside. The plantation's laborers are nevertheless there, working amid the cinchona. After generations tending to the fever tree, they've grown accustomed to working on these slopes: one foot up, knee bent; another down, leg straight; rubber shoes digging into the earth. Beyond this denuded patch of forest, the hillside dives sharply into the valley. The Himalayas ripple into the horizon. The view, the angles, it can be hard to get one's bearings. Best to focus on where one stands. Even that is no easy task. Stumps, roots, and rocks jut from the upturned earth in every which way, making for treacherous footing. It wasn't always like this. Cinchona saplings used to line these hills in 4-by-4-foot plots, carefully calculated to maximize quinine production. That colonial order is long gone. The scourge is now fought with other drugs. The history of empire and medicine has marched on. Yet the fever tree remains—neglected, overgrown, and dug in.

Today Sunil and his crew are digging it out. It is brutal work, but the plantation's orders are the plantation's orders. So every day for weeks now, Sunil and his coworkers—a ragtag group of roughly a dozen men and women—have come to this patch of forest to cut down the cinchona, wrest its roots from the ground, and clear the space for something new. As his colleagues work below, Sunil takes a breather to fish out a rock and debris from his flimsy rubber shoe.

I had seen patches like this appearing across the plantations—an acre here, another there—where the directorate was experimenting with alternative crops that might make the plantations viable. So when I came across Sunil and his crew one morning while biking through the plantations and asked him what they would be planting once the clearing was done, his answer surprised me.

“Cinchona.”



FIGURE 19. Sunil and his shoe, with coworkers laboring below, 2019. Credit: Photo by author.

I rescanned the scarred ground in front of us. Sure enough, amid the debris were bundles of the stakes (*khutti*) the plantations had long used for “sticking” new cinchona plantings. Once Sunil’s crew finished clearing the ground and digging the plots, other workers would bring cinchona saplings from the nursery to grow on this hillside once again. They call these clearings *naya kaman* (new plantation).

Most cinchona workers whom I’ve come to know have only faint knowledge of the global histories that precipitated quinine’s fall from the world stage: the collapse of empires, the advent of synthetics, the ever-evolving war on malaria. They are largely unaware that barks grown in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are twice as strong as those grown here. They are largely unaware that cocktails bubbling with “Indian Tonic Water” (made with DRC quinine) sell in London for prices amounting to several days’ wages on these plantations. But they know that Indian quinine is not what it once was. They see the decay. They hear the rumors. The plantations’ time is up. This industry is on life support. It could be any day that the government “signs the death certificate,” as people often say, and ends these places once and for all.

And yet, despite the foreboding, Sunil and his crew are here, working one foot above the other, trying to make something of these remains. Given how much the world has changed since quinine coursed through empire’s blood, some might see

the hard labor they are putting into this hillside as futile—a Sisyphean task. For Sunil and cinchona’s laborers, it is just a Thursday morning. And so, with that pesky rock and debris removed and his shoe readjusted, Sunil gets back to the project at hand.

. . .

What happens *after* a world-historical substance runs its course? Cinchona and quinine count among the many plants and chemicals that have “changed the world.”¹ But like so many of these earlier world-historical substances, today their time has seemingly passed. How is it then that the cinchona plantations remain?

Seen from the twenty-first century, the historical existence of India’s cinchona plantations is not surprising. Malaria killed and cost millions throughout the colonial period. That the British Raj brought cinchona from South America and pressed the plant and the land and people of the Darjeeling Hills into imperial service to protect the empire from the disease is no revelation. What is remarkable, anthropologically, is that India’s cinchona plantations *still* exist. This chapter asks the deceptively simple question: How do these places and people remain?

As a practice, remaining may seem the most basic of acts. When one’s place in the world is in jeopardy, it is indeed a bare minimum. Remaining for the cinchona community, however, does not reduce to mere biological survival. As a project and politics, it is not then a “minimal biopolitics” meant only to preserve life in its barest sense.² Cinchona workers’ efforts to remain on the plantations emanate instead from their deep attachments to the lifeways these places have afforded—most notably, their connections to their homes and lands, the cinchona, and, beyond all else, the community that has taken shape on these plantations. Workers like Sunil will be the first to tell you: life after quinine is far from easy. The conditions can be rough. The horizons, bleak. Yet run-down though they may be, the cinchona plantations are nevertheless places of belonging, solidarity, and life in all its ups and downs.³ Places worth fighting for.

Later chapters examine the projects through which people are looking to make something better of these otherwise forlorn plantations: how, that is, they are trying to become-after quinine. For now, I want to focus on something more fundamental: remaining.

The challenge of remaining (and becoming) after quinine cannot be understood outside of the global histories of empire, malaria, medicine, and chemicals that thrust this alkaloid to the world stage and later led to its fall. That broad historical perspective is indispensable. Yet the experiences of people like Sunil also beckon a different mode of inquiry, one that moves down from the epochal framings of the world-historical and into the quotidian matters of the remains: roots, rocks, and all the rest. As in most places, life typically happens small on the cinchona plantations. It involves “little” things like seeds, clearings, and the everyday challenges of repairing homes, finding jobs, getting kids to school, and putting food on the table. It is

mundane. And it is gritty—physically, emotionally, and politically. Entailing the hard work of plantation labor and the even harder work of maintaining one's place in a rapidly changing world, the lives and politics of quinine's remains do not operate at the grand scale of the world-historical.⁴ They are more humble and immediate than that. They are principally concerned with the here and now.

In many ways, this is how it has always been. Even as the British summoned the power of empire to fight malaria, life for cinchona workers was always about clearing jungles, planting seeds, nurturing trees, stripping bark, managing chemicals, running machinery. These were the small things that made quinine a global phenomenon. The difference between then and now is that there is no longer the same demand for this drug. The assemblage of forces that thrust quinine to the world stage has fallen apart, or at least become something else. Empire and medicine have moved on. But the remains remain. *Their* story continues to be written.

For workers like Sunil, life after quinine is addled with paradox—none more glaring than laboring for an industry that history has rendered obsolete, none more material than cultivating cinchona bark only to watch it rot. But dealing with these conditions today feels necessary to finding a dignified life *after* quinine, tomorrow. To those who dwell among the cinchona, the plantations are not relics of a previous era. They are home—places of life, work, community, and maybe the becomings of something better. These are the grounds on which the cinchona community has chosen to work and defend its place in the present. With the future uncertain, Sunil and his community are doing what *today* demands: they are clearing the ground, planting cinchona, and seeing what comes of it. To the epochally minded outsider, their labor may seem futile. But it is the precondition for remaining—and becoming—amid the remains. For the time-being, it is what is required.

These are the circumstances in which we find Sunil and his crew struggling for traction on Munsong's overgrown hillside. Like others who find themselves on the steep slopes empire has left behind, they do not necessarily do so under conditions of their own choosing.⁵ Still, they are doing their level best to forge a life in the remains. Long after the British brought the fever tree to India, they are there, working one foot above the other, wrestling with cinchona, preparing the ground for something new.

And so, on a Thursday morning in 2019, there is a clearing.⁶

PERSISTING CAPITAL

Before the clearing, there was a politics. The trouble began decades ago when foreigners in suits began showing up on the cinchona plantations—seldom a good sign in far-flung places like these. Worse still when they come back.

In 1991, India's finance minister and future prime minister, Manmohan Singh, announced the liberalization of India's economy. Marking a turn away from

the Nehruvian socialism that defined India's economy since independence, the embrace of free market capitalism opened the door to the privatization of many of India's public sector utilities and government-run industries. It did not take long before investors came calling on West Bengal's "sick" quinine industry. By 1992–93, representatives of Hindustan Lever, a subsidiary of the multinational Unilever, and their international consultants from PricewaterhouseCoopers were prowling the cinchona plantations, surveying the resources on offer. These included 26,000 acres of topographically diverse land, the labor potential of tens of thousands of residents, and significant industrial infrastructure, not all of which was beyond repair.

The ensuing events—reconstructed here through oral histories and ethnographic engagement with many of the key players—have become legendary on the plantations. In workers' trade union activists' and community leaders' tellings, local hackles went up as soon as the suits were spotted surveying the plantations. Suspicions were confirmed when Hindustan Lever subsequently unveiled its proposal to convert the entirety of the cinchona plantations to tea. The public-private partnership (PPP) proposed significant labor retrenchment, land expropriations, and infrastructural overhauls. The proposal met immediate backlash. Foreseeing the end of lifeways generations in the making, the cinchona trade unions launched strikes and *gherao-ed* (publicly harassed) officials. This was a force that PricewaterhouseCoopers had missed in their scrupulous reports on the downtrodden plantations. Confronted with the unexpected political escalations, Hindustan Lever quickly recognized its oversight and walked back the plan. The company returned with another proposal to retain some cinchona while converting much of the plantations to tea—a compromise they hoped would assuage the openly defensive cinchona community.

In 1996, the West Bengal government convened a meeting of stakeholders in the nearby city of Siliguri to discuss and move the plan forward. The cinchona trade unions had other ideas.⁷ The meeting began in staid fashion with representatives of Hindustan Lever, PricewaterhouseCoopers, and government agencies seated around a boardroom table. It soon erupted into chaos. Spurred on by trade union leader and then-Kalimpong MLA, Renulina Subba (aka the "Iron Lady of Cinchona"),⁸ union members stood up and began shouting at the officials, lambasting them for selling out the cinchona community. In dramatic fashion, the union members then walked out. Having upended the meeting, the unions flexed their muscle by calling regionwide strikes (*bandhs*) to oppose privatization.

With the situation escalating, politicians worked behind the scenes to salvage the deal. I met with the trade union secretary, L. M. Sharma, in 2017 to revisit those tumultuous days when life with cinchona teetered on the brink.⁹ The revered labor leader, now getting on in age but still with fire in his eyes, recalled the government's attempts to persuade the unions. "The local MLA took us to Writer's

Building [the state capitol in Kolkata] and arranged for a meeting with the minister of commerce. . . . We had quite a heated discussion with him. He insisted that cinchona is a losing concern,” Sharma recounted. Sharma and his cadres countered the government’s dismal logic by insisting that the plantations were rich with untapped potential. Showing a good-faith willingness to think outside the cinchona box, they explained how cinchona cultivation could be combined with timber and other initiatives to create a portfolio that would allow the plantations to carry on without undue burden to the state.

Their pleas seemed to strike a chord with the Left Front government official, Sharma remembered. Since 1977, West Bengal had been ruled by an alliance of communist Left Front parties, spearheaded by the Community Party of India (Marxist), or CPI(M). The Left Front’s ideological commitments to workers, along with its belief in state enterprises and general skepticism of private capital,¹⁰ provided a buffer of sorts for the troubled cinchona plantations. The CPI(M) maintained an active party and trade union presence on the plantations.¹¹ And throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Left Front officials often reiterated their concern for workers—particularly when union leaders like Sharma came calling. As A. K. Jain, special secretary of West Bengal’s Commerce and Industries Department (which then presided over the cinchona plantations), framed it in 1992, “The Directorate having its location in the hills of the Darjeeling district had some *social obligations*” to the cinchona plantations and their workers. But then the official in Kolkata hedged. “Simultaneously,” he went on, “the economic viability [of the plantations] would also be explored.”¹² Ultimately, the Left Front’s affinity for workers could only forestall a reckoning for so long. By 1992, the “time had come to think whether it would be desirable to go with cinchona or not,” Jain opined.¹³ Officials in Kolkata promised there would be no retrenchment of laborers. They likewise welcomed proposals such as those put forth by Sharma and the unions to save the “sick” industry. But the bottom line was the bottom line: the plantations were hemorrhaging state funds. Hoping to stop the bleeding, the Left Front government continued to court the handover to Hindustan Lever.

Back on the plantations, field officers, nearly all of them Gorkhas with deep connections to the cinchona community, found themselves at the fulcrum of the controversies. On the one hand, their job was to issue the orders of the cinchona directorate (itself part of the West Bengal government). On the other hand, they needed to manage the concerns of laborers and their volatile unions. Of the latter, there were many. For decades, the cinchona plantations had been contested territory for a revolving door of trade unions—some affiliated with local political parties, some representing national parties, and others specific to the plantations themselves.¹⁴ All of these unions had their own ideas about what should and should not happen to—and on—the cinchona plantations. Field officers, by dint of their position, often bore the brunt of these demands. They were the ones issuing

West Bengal's orders, after all. A Gorkha officer I came to know well during field-work recounted the difficulty of balancing these contending forces in the face of privatization. West Bengal and the directorate could say what they wanted about protecting workers, but from his vantage point it was clear: "The government was trying to give as much of it [the plantation system] away as possible. They were just trying to get rid of it."

Laborers, meanwhile, were growing increasingly leery of the men in suits. With rumors swirling that a secret deal was imminent, the situation came to a head in 1997, when Hindustan Lever and PricewaterhouseCoopers representatives convened at the plantation headquarters in Mungpoo. The trade unions summoned their members to crash the meeting. Some made their way inside and began hurling furniture through the windows before seizing the proposal and ceremoniously burning it. Spooked by the escalations, Hindustan Lever, at the advice of the government, walked away. This time they did not come back.

The turning away of Hindustan Lever marked an important victory in the fight against privatization, but it was not long before other investors came calling. In the late 1990s, they came from Dabur India Ltd., a manufacturer of ayurvedic medicine. It was not cinchona and quinine that brought them. It was the land. Specifically, they eyed the fertile hills for the cultivation of *Taxus buccata*, a natural cancer treatment known to grow well on the plantations.¹⁵ But because their proposal neglected to address either cinchona or local livelihoods, the unions vehemently opposed it, again mounting a successful opposition that drove Dabur away.

The government found itself in a bind. By its own ideology, West Bengal's communist Left Front government could not ignore the well-being and political will of tens of thousands of cinchona residents. Then again, what was to be done with an industry for which there was no market? In 2002, West Bengal hired the international consultancy McKinsey & Company to help answer that question. Hoping to head off resistance, the local district magistrate (DM) called trade union and political leaders to his office to explain the government's logics. One of those leaders, the late R. B. Chhetri, a preeminent local intellectual,¹⁶ remembered the DM framing the situation in terms of darkness and light. "The cinchona plantations are now going through a tunnel of darkness," Chhetri recalled the DM proclaiming. "For survival, you see a light there. And that light is privatization. Else you will remain inside the tunnel."

Dark metaphors aside, McKinsey consultants were enlightened about a different view when they began their assessment. Word spread quickly that the McKinsey reps were touring the plantations. By the time the team arrived at Mungpoo, the unions were waiting. A crowd of plantation residents and union members stopped the team, demanding that the consultants reveal their true intentions. The confrontation turned violent, and someone snatched files from a consultant's hand. As one witness I interviewed recounted, "When the mob saw the McKinsey

files, they burned them. That’s when they [the McKinsey reps] ran away.” This was the third time in a decade that the unions chased away threats to the cinchona plantations’ existence.

That numerous private investors have eyed the “sick” quinine industry following liberalization is hardly surprising. Laborers’ opposition—especially given the industry’s dire condition—warrants a closer look, however. How are we to understand the persistence and vitriol with which the unions chased away private capital? Are there lessons in the ashes of those proposals snatched and burned?

Cinchona laborers’ resistance to privatization has centered on safeguarding the “facilities” guaranteed by their work on the government plantations—none more important than land. As described in chapter 1, the plantations’ “noncommercial” design, coupled with cinchona’s finicky materiality that only allowed it to cover a select portion of the plantations, ensured ample land for laborers. Unlike on Darjeeling’s private tea plantations, where laborers received only paltry garden plots, cinchona laborers were, during the colonial period, allotted sizable fields—often between one and five acres—to accompany their government-provided houses.¹⁷ Workers have never owned these homesteads. (Legally, they are government property.) Yet they have shaped life in distinct ways.



FIGURE 20. Plantation homestead with home, field, cowshed, and family grave, 2017. Credit: Photo by author.

Passed down through the generations, homesteads have allowed workers and their families to maintain a relatively comfortable peasant existence alongside their wage labor. Plantation residents continue to use these lands to grow fresh vegetables and raise livestock, mostly for domestic use. These subsistence practices were particularly important in earlier times, when the plantations were not as connected to regional food markets as they are today. As more roads and merchants link the remote plantations to the thriving markets of Kalimpong, Darjeeling, and the bustling city of Siliguri in the plains below, the value of workers' homesteads is changing. Workers are perhaps less dependent on the land, yet most families still rely on their fields for gardening, animal husbandry, and other subsistence farming endeavors—crucial supplements to the wages that their *badli kam* posts provide. Many are using their homesteads to run small businesses like food shops and homestays (see chapter 4). Meanwhile, *badli kam* posts and the homes, wages, and “facilities” that go along with these government jobs provide stability for Gorkhas as they encounter new and long-standing forms of marginalization from the national mainstream. From the start, these homesteads have provided Gorkha workers a place in the world. They are defining features of life with cinchona.

Privatization threatened these lifeways. Cinchona residents note how the plantations' distinctive *historical* character introduces a range of present-day conundrums. “The government is asking us to make a profit, but they do not understand,” a *gangman* explained to me one morning after the muster at Mungpoo. “The cinchonas were not made for that purpose. They were not made for profit. We are making a lifesaving drug. When the world was in crisis with malaria, we were providing the lifesaving drug that the world needed. We are not made to produce profit. And it is not fair. You don't ask the health department to turn a profit. So how can you ask us?”

Others elsewhere connected the cinchona plantations' distinctive character to the resistance to privatization. “Cinchona has its own ways of functioning. It is not a private enterprise,” an officer who grew up on the plantations told me over tea in 2019. “The people who are here have lived [here] for generations, and if Hindustan Lever tells a worker that it is not able to take him in, then what will happen to the family that is dependent on the worker? The land that has been allotted to the family will now belong to Hindustan Lever. So that is a huge thing.”

These entanglements of land, labor, and family history ran through many of the testimonies I gathered during fieldwork. When I interviewed R. B. Chhetri from his plantation home in 2017, he elaborated on these attachments and why they are worth defending. “The land is precious,” he explained in English, looking back on his years of opposing privatization. “We have emotions, sentiments, belongingness, attachment, culture, and society attached to our homes. I would never give

up this home of mine. . . . They [Hindustan Lever] understood they had stirred a hornet's nest. And that's when they left."

These aren't the only sentiments of home that have made the cinchona plantations a hornet's nest. The plantations have also become a front line of the Gorkhaland movement. From its inception in the 1980s through the most recent agitations of 2017, the movement's goal has been to free the region from the neo-colonial clutches of West Bengal and thereby establish for Gorkhas an autonomous state of Gorkhaland. Because the cinchona plantations were (and remain) the property of the government of West Bengal, they have periodically morphed into a battleground of this subnationalist struggle for ethnic autonomy, territory, and belonging.

The Gorkhaland agitations put cinchona workers' resistance to privatization in ethnopolitical context. The same sentiments of "belongingness, attachment, culture, and society" that fueled the fight against Hindustan Lever fuel the fight for Gorkhaland. Both the plantations and Gorkhaland are home—one nested in the other. The Gorkhaland movement has accordingly reframed the cinchona plantations as a distinctively ethnic space: a markedly different kind of claim on quinine's remains from those of the West Bengal government or private investors. Imbuing these spaces with communal passion and violence, the Gorkhaland movement has further made the cinchona plantations a difficult, dangerous place for outsiders to do business: a hornet's nest.

And yet, despite the volatilities, capital keeps coming back. Recent years have seen numerous piecemeal attempts to develop the plantations. Proposals for ecotourism resorts, ashrams, and other corporate ventures have largely gone nowhere, owing to local resistance and the legal-political complexities of privatizing government lands. However, the plantations have ceded ground to other governmental uses: 91 acres were allocated to the National Hydro-Electric Power Corporation (NHPC) for the damming of the Teesta River in 2003, and smaller parcels went to an industrial training institute (ITI) in 2016 (5 acres) and a government tourist complex in 2017 (6 acres). Although small in comparison to the wholesale overhauls pitched by Hindustan Lever, for those defending the plantations such land grabs portend a future of loss.¹⁸

Most residents believe it is only a matter of time before additional private investors come calling. In the official logics of the state and capital, after all, India's cinchona plantations have lost their *raison d'être*. With cinchona growing wild, its bark rotting, and the quinine factory beyond repair, the plantations would seem to be decomposing into ruins, unused spaces, and "waste lands." These tropes, however, should sound an alarm for students of British imperialism in India, where the "waste lands" designation functioned as a legal mechanism to expropriate massive tracts of ostensibly "uninhabited" land.¹⁹ Unlike the native cultivators (*ryots*) of these lands who were conveniently ignored, displaced, and written out of colonial

histories of primitive accumulation, the people of cinchona today are refusing to become subalterns. Only their struggles do not concern being written out of history so much as maintaining their presence in the present. In short, these struggles are a practice and politics of remaining.

THE MEANTIME AND ITS POLITICS

The cinchona community's fight against privatization attests that quinine's remains are not dead. The political battles over the future of the cinchona plantations hinge precisely on the fact that there is (and can be) life in these remains—human, material, and otherwise. For a people struggling to maintain their place in the present, admitting to the deadening terms of ruins and obsolescence could be devastating. Many plantation residents and leaders I have come to know through fieldwork cling to the possibility that India's quinine industry will be rejuvenated. Experts familiar with the science and economics of quinine (botanists, chemists, and others) doubt that possibility, however. The plantations' bark can no longer compete with Congo's, they told me. Any talk of quinine's rebirth is a "political drama," as one plantation chemist called it, meant only to keep hope—and the status quo—alive.

Are the hopes of a future in cinchona, then, an instance of what Lauren Berlant calls "cruel optimism," that "condition of *maintaining* an attachment to a problematic object in advance of its loss"?²⁰ Yes and no. More interesting, I suggest, is the temporality of their optimism—that "*maintaining*." When unions dig in against the threat of privatization and insist that the cinchona plantations can be revitalized, they strategically pry open the present in the name of the life in the remains. In doing so, they parry the advance of unwanted futures and buy themselves time to find a better alternative.²¹ Lacking clear answers as to what comes next, their practices of remaining are not geared so much to the future as to the present. They are a politics of the meantime.²²

Temporality is vital to these politics. Trade unions passionately refuse the logics of anachrony that would relegate the cinchona plantations to the past. Maura Finkelstein observes similar dynamics in her ethnography of workers in Mumbai's seemingly antiquated mills. Finkelstein warns against the analytic dangers of reading such spaces as anachronistic or allochronistic. "The mill is not a relic from the past," she notes. "While [it] may invoke a sense of pastness, this orientation toward ruin forecloses our ability to engage it as a lively and vital space of modernity. This is a crisis of temporality."²³ Indeed, for Darjeeling's cinchona workers and other postindustrial communities on history's brink, coevalness is precisely what is at stake.²⁴

Part of this temporality work is making sure the plantations remain *government cinchona* plantations, as their name indicates. Never mind that they are not producing quinine; so long as the plantations are *government* entities growing

cinchona, then by the state's own charge, these places can less easily be done away with. There are also material rationales. Malaria still kills and sickens millions globally. Bugs continue to develop resistance to the latest drugs. Quinine meanwhile has proven less susceptible to the malaria plasmodium's evolving defenses than have synthetic drugs.²⁵ The natural alkaloid retains its remarkable ability to suppress malaria's intermittent fevers. Moreover, there could still be *undiscovered* usages for this once-"miraculous" medicine (see chapter 4). More certainly, quinine continues to be a signature ingredient in tonic water—itsself a booming global market. The fever tree's materiality carries then a spectrum of possibilities (medical, commercial, etc). So long as the plant is biologically alive and plantation workers retain the knowledge of how to grow it, cinchona cultivation remains a strategic tactic—and matter—of the meantime.

Understood accordingly, the backbreaking work of clearing abandoned cinchona forests to plant cinchona does not necessarily enact a blind or cruel optimism. Rather, it ensures that the plantations and their people retain their identity and purpose while also holding open the space for cinchona and quinine to find renewed value in the world. Sticking to the old ways and planting cinchona offers its own kind of bulwark against those forces threatening to relegate these lands and lives to the past. More immediately, it guarantees things like government-provided jobs for workers, homes for families, and a range of other facilities that afford marginalized Gorkhas much-needed security in an India undergoing massive socioeconomic transformations. That these plantations and their communities would keep on with the plant that has defined—and defines—them is not just understandable. It is strategic.

Few believe that cinchona is the only answer. Today new crops are being piloted across the plantations. Land is being cleared and seeds are being planted for experimental cultivations of citronella (25 acres), kiwi (3 acres), coffee (132 acres), medicinal chirata (39 acres), and ginger. These projects, which I return to in chapter 4, build on previous diversification efforts that have included cardamom (124 acres), rubber (397 acres), mandarin oranges (246 acres), and medicinal ipecac (92 acres) and dioscorea (6 acres).²⁶ To date, not one of these crops has *individually* shown a clear path out of the present impasse, but unions and many plantation officers believe a viable *combination* can be found. But this will take time, work, and investment. In the meantime, plantation leaders and workers have elected to continue planting cinchona in the hope that it too may show a way forward, or at the very least hold open the time and space for something else to rise out of quinine's remains.

The symbolism of development proposals snatched and burned are hard to miss but easy to misinterpret. Destroying the bids of Hindustan Lever, PricewaterhouseCoopers, and McKinsey & Company does not represent an obstinate clinging to the status quo. Neither does it enact a cruel optimism extending the agony of an inevitable loss to come. Cinchona trade unions and the people they represent



FIGURE 21. Workers caring for cinchona sprouts at the plantation nursery, 2022. Credit: Photo by author.

are not unwilling to change. Their contention concerns *what* change will entail. When cinchona workers look across to their neighbors on Darjeeling's private tea estates they see precisely the kind of ruination one would expect on the postcolonial plantation: extreme poverty, workers devoid of facilities and basic rights, plants and soils devastated by relentless monocropping, gardens that open and close on the whims of the market, and so on.²⁷ That cinchona workers have vehemently rejected tea as an option is therefore unsurprising. This is a community built around a very different colonial plant and a very different colonial project. Cinchona plantation residents do not lack a sense of futurity. They may lack definitive answers to what the future may hold, but they are centrally concerned with the question of what comes next. Most recognize that things cannot go on as they are and that this may mean parting with the objects—cinchona, quinine—that have defined their livelihoods for generations. But until an acceptable future comes into view, they have chosen to remain and, where necessary, fight.

These defenses of the twenty-first-century plantation may seem odd. Many scholars view plantations as the modal complex of capitalist devastation.²⁸ What does it say then about the prospects of present-day life when communities *choose* the plantation and defend its existence? Is this not an indictment of the dismal horizons offered by India's liberalization, particularly as glimpsed from the margins? If these defenses of the plantation cast the vicissitudes of neoliberalism in stark relief, they also beg a more ethnographic questioning of why *these* communities defend *these* plantations. The answer, their politics of remaining suggest, lies in the ways a people *became-with* cinchona, quinine, the land, and all the rest.

Through time, the plantations became the grounds not only of livelihood but also of community and belonging. These latter elements of life amid the cinchona have proven to have greater staying power than quinine itself.

None of this is to suggest that things are as they were or should be. Cinchona workers are quick to explain how the plantations' aging infrastructure, diminishing biochemical energies, and stubborn institutional logics constrain them. Yet despite the constraints and precariousness of living in these remains, the cinchona plantations nevertheless afford vital forms of stability and belonging amid the *other* forms of extraction loosed upon the world. That cinchona workers would defend these plantations as their home thus comes as little surprise.²⁹

The meantime may not be ideal, but it is better than succumbing to the depredations of privatization. With the plantations deteriorating and capital on the prowl, cinchona's trade unions and communities know that time is not necessarily on their side. But time is also precisely what they need, before all else, to find a way forward. Maintaining the status quo (despite its problems) thus buys these communities time to seek alternatives. The paradox of maintaining a troubled present to find a better future is undeniable. But bereft of acceptable alternatives, the cinchona communities has chosen to defend these dilapidated plantations and the lifeways they afford. Their future is murky, but their politics are clear: there is life—and lives—in quinine's remains that must be accounted for.

AN OCCLUDED PRESENT

On a rainy summer afternoon in 2019, Vikash and I convened a group of workers to discuss cinchona's present circumstance. There, on a hillock with experimental crops surrounding us, the workers—all men, ranging in age from twenty-one to fifty—talked us through their frustrations and hopes. Their testimonies, spoken over lashing rains and hot tea, told of a present troublingly bound by quinine's colonial past.

Pemba, a plantation *chowkidar* (guard) in his early twenties, was coming off an all-nighter patrolling the dilapidated quinine factory. Zimba and Suraj, also in their twenties, were field laborers who had only recently inherited their positions from family members. They worked in the cinchona stands, clearing fields, planting saplings, and tending trees. What would happen to today's cinchona was unclear. While the plantations were still harvesting and drying bark, the prospects of this bark becoming medicine were slim. A viable market for Indian quinine no longer exists. And even if it did, Mungpoo's shuttered quinine factory was not up to the task. The planting of new cinchona was therefore somewhat misleading. As Zimba explained, "When we look at things, all seems well. But this is not the time to make quinine."

Youth like Zimba, Pemba, and Suraj are now a generation removed from the days when the plantations produced quinine. They accordingly have no memory



FIGURE 22. Workers gathering for the focus group at Mungpoo, 2019. Credit: Photo by author.

of transforming cinchona bark into medicine. Still, they defended the plantations as cinchona plantations. When I asked about growing up in these spaces, they emphasized what was unique about them. Suraj explained, “The environment here is much better than that of Darjeeling and Kalimpong Town. We have a lot of facilities. We have more schools that are better than other places. We have sufficient water.” Zimba, Pemba, and Suraj were open to the diversification efforts unfolding around them, but they all held firm to the belief that there could be a future in cinchona. That is why they preferred to keep planting the crop that got them this far.

Yet as we got further into it, their outlook appeared less optimistic. Jobs for educated youth, they told me, simply “weren’t happening.” There was only so much the plantations could offer aspiring youth. Many of their friends were seeking work and lives outside the plantations, with mixed results. Zimba, Pemba, and Suraj at least had jobs. Their *badli kam* posts gave them a government paycheck and their families the right to live in their homesteads. But these inheritances came with constraints. *Badli kam* bound them to the plantation. From there, life’s horizons often appeared boring and bleak. “If we continue to spend our lives here in the plantation,” Zimba surmised, “there will be nothing much happening.” Not exactly an inspiring outlook for young men looking to do something with their lives.

Pemba, still bleary-eyed from his night shift, piped up. As he saw it, there was hardly any social mobility within the plantation system, especially now that the government was refusing to promote candidates upward through the plantation

hierarchy. So long as the plantations' higher rungs remained vacant, "the people down the rung can do nothing," Pemba lamented. "If promotions take place in the upper strata, then the promotions will open for people working below. We do not have that. Therefore, we have no hope."³⁰

At this point, the older generation commandeered the conversation. It was as though the older men, all with a decade or two more experience than Zimba, Pemba, and Suraj, could stay mum no longer. "What they mean to say," Dilip, the eldest, interjected, "is that the system that existed earlier has collapsed. The system should change, but that is not happening. So this has affected the unemployed youth. Apart from cinchona and other medicinal plants, we have no other means of economic viability. Because of this, there are more unemployed people here than employed." Speaking over the youth and the rain, Dilip unleashed a torrent of grievances.

Our source of income from the cinchona plantation was very good during the British rule. The cinchona industry was the first industry to be established in the Darjeeling district, the factory was built between 1875 to 1880. And as of now, the government has not been doing its work properly on the administrative level. In the global market, our cinchona has not been able to fetch a good price. There is a lot of talk about the cost of labor in the plantation. Keeping this in mind, the government can shut down the plantation any time it wants. Thankfully, because of the local politics insisting the plantation must go on, it continues to survive.

All of us leaned in to hear Dilip over the rain pounding on the tin roof above. As he laid out the long odds against which the cinchona plantations remained, he translated the difficulties into little things like rubber boots and blankets and bigger things like economics and rights.

You asked us what problems the youth are facing today . . . These are the problems we face. Our daily wages are not at all in proportion to inflation. It is difficult to survive. We get 200 rupees a day, whereas our minimum expenses to run a family is anywhere between 300 and 400 rupees a day. Even the work we get is not regular. The data says 130,000 rupees is the daily expenditure for wages for the plantations' current workers. Yet we are unable to generate proper revenue for the government. The economic graph has fallen sharply for cinchona. Our work culture too is not good. No new equipment is given to us. We do not get umbrellas, rubber boots, and blankets, which used to be our rights. Our rights have collapsed!

Now notably animated, Dilip broke off. Seeming to realize he was dominating the conversation, he ceded the floor to let others tell their stories. Similar to Zimba's and Pemba's laments of "nothing much happening" and having "no hope," the older generations' testimonies told of the dismal conditions at hand.³¹ Unlike the young people sitting with us, these older men had spent the better part of a lifetime grappling with the plantation's constraints—stuck, as it were, in the remains. The material and institutional lingerings of quinine's colonial past had profoundly limited who these men had become. Now headed into the backside of their lives, they

wanted something better for the coming generations—a horizon less bound and more open. Something beyond just remaining.

As we sat there on that hillock shrouded in mist and rain, the scene in many ways mirrored the occluded circumstances of which the workers spoke. Through the fog, one could make out an experimental stand of kiwi trees growing nearby but not much else. Somewhere out there in the clouds were stands of abandoned cinchona, interspersed by newer stands cared for by workers like Zimba, Suraj, and Sunil. Somewhere out there were alternative crops planted in hopes of saving the plantations. But, depending on how the clouds were draped over the rain-soaked mountains, it was hard to see. On these lands where quinine's imperial past, present, and future swirled into one another, what lay beyond the hillock where we were gathered—what lay beyond quinine—remained shrouded. And so with a cup of hot tea in hand, I did what anthropologists do: I leaned in, listened, and let these workers tell me of their lives thereafter. On a particularly dreary day in 2019, their stories told of a present tethered and tenuous—a horizon occluded but not without possibility.

THE PRECARIOUS AFTER

Across the valley, the Allays were finding their ways of living in the remains.³² Born to two cinchona plantation laborers in the distant reaches of Munsong, the Allays were a family of humble origins but accomplished ends. The two sons, Paresh and K. B., moved away from the plantation in their twenties to begin new lives in Sikkim—Paresh marrying and settling down in a rural village, K. B. pursuing his entrepreneurial ambitions in the city of Gangtok, where he founded a successful taxi business. One sister, Medhi, moved to Kathmandu, where she and her husband run a school. The youngest sister, Sylvia, gave her life to the church, becoming a Catholic nun at the age of nineteen. She now runs a home for trafficked children and others in need of care in Kalimpong Town, where she has emerged as a leading voice of civil society. The third sister, Sailee, has had a more challenging journey. From the time she was a little girl, Sailee faced developmental difficulties. Labeled a “slow learner,” she was unable to progress past Class 4 and has since struggled with things that many take for granted—dressing and bathing, meeting strangers, and so on. Somewhat independent but also reliant on her family for support, Sailee has remained on the plantation her entire life. One family, different lines of becoming.

So long as their parents were alive and working, the Allays were free to pursue their respective life projects. No matter where their journeys took them, they always had their plantation home—a quaint wooden cottage surrounded by several acres of terraced farmland. The parents' retirement and deaths threw it all into question, however. Who would take over the parents' plantation jobs? If they couldn't fill the two *badli kam* posts, what would happen to their home? Who

would care for Sailee? Paresh, K. B., Medhi, and Sylvia were off building their lives elsewhere. Sailee could perhaps manage the work of plantation labor, but she wasn't capable of running the household on her own. Someone needed to come back. Someone needed to work on the plantation.

Sailee took over her mother's post and did her part to get the family's name in the books daily. But this still left the father's post to be filled. Sister Sylvia was responsible for more than a hundred vulnerable children and was a key liaison between the region's nongovernmental organization (NGO) networks, government agencies, police, and political parties. Too much depended on Sister Sylvia for her to come back. Paresh was ensconced in Sikkim. Medhi was raising her family in Nepal. The onus thus fell to K. B.

To fulfill his family duty, K. B. moved back to Munsong, bringing with him his taxi, a new wife, and an impulse to carve out his own kind of life in the remains—one free from the drudgery of plantation labor. His first move was to pass the *badli kam* position to his first wife, from whom he had earlier separated. When she left the plantation to marry another man, K. B. farmed out the position to a cousin who agreed to work in the Allays' name. But the family had reservations. "We didn't want to let the position go," Sister Sylvia explained to me. "It's a meager salary, but it includes a lot. It involves land, and we didn't want to lose the land. It was our parents' job, part of our heritage. Yes, it's a government job, but it's also, in certain ways, our family business. That attachment is always there."

The family's concerns were validated when the cousin substituting on their behalf began angling to take over both the job and the land that went along with it. Unwilling to lose either, the Allays reclaimed the post and passed it to K. B.'s second wife, Rita—not ideal in the family's estimation, but necessary. With both *badli kam* posts filled, K. B. set to work building his business again, running his taxi from the village and reviving the small store his parents had run out of the back of their house. The arrangement was tenuous, but K. B. could still be a businessman. The Allays' homestead would remain theirs. Sailee would have the support she needed.

But despite the care of her doting big brother, Sailee continued to struggle. The field labor didn't suit her. The long commutes by foot across the forested plantations frightened her. She wasn't taking care of herself as her family had hoped. If only they could find a better arrangement. Then, in 2020, Sailee and the Allays caught a break. A *paniwalla* position opened up at Munsong. During the colonial days, *paniwallas* brought the water to keep field laborers hydrated and working. Considered relatively easy by plantation standards, *paniwalla* posts were coveted and typically reserved for elderly workers. K. B. saw another possibility. He pulled some strings and got Sailee the job. On hearing the good news, the brothers and sisters congratulated Sailee, even poking fun with her that she would need to start bathing and dressing better if people were to accept water from her. Sailee took the job (and ribbing) and became a *paniwalla*. It wasn't hard. With fewer

workers putting in long hours in the cinchona stands, there weren't nearly as many thirsts to slake as in the old days. All Sailee needed to do every morning was serve two cups of water to the staff at the *muster* that met just a few steps from her house. Two cups. Total.

Later her superiors added two cups of tea to her responsibilities. Still, it was almost too good to be true. With a job that suited her, Sailee underwent a remarkable self-transformation. She began caring for herself and engaging the world in new ways. As Sister Sylvia told it, "We were completely surprised! She's a completely different person now. She interacts with people. She keeps herself clean. Even within the house, the changes have been very visible."

The Allays were moving forward. With their homestead secure and Sailee enjoying new purpose, they had emerged from the family crisis posed by their parents' death. Sister Sylvia would carry on with her important work in Kalimpong; Sailee would get the Allay name in the books and deliver those precious cups of water and tea; K. B. would pursue his entrepreneurial ambitions on the plantation; Paresh and Medhi could live their lives elsewhere. As I visited the Allay homestead over the years, the transformations were palpable. The house was abuzz with activity and growing. Sailee was smiling and laughing about how her workday was typically finished by 7:00 a.m. The taxi parked outside was delivering steady income, as was the shop. In 2021, K. B. tore down the aging plantation cottage, replacing the traditional wooden home with a much larger concrete house—a *pukka* house. The family still had their issues: a land dispute with the plantation regarding a road the directorate cut through their fields; siblings bickering over who owned this, who was responsible for that; typical family stuff. But the Allays were finding a way to live with quinine's remains. As a family, they had their place—their home. As individuals, they were pursuing life projects big and small. Generations after their ancestors toiled in the colonial cinchona fields, the Allays were not simply remaining. They were becoming something beyond, something after, quinine.

But it all hung—and still hangs—on two cups of water and two cups of tea. The family readily acknowledge the incongruity of the situation. The sarcasm with which they explained that the job was "perfect" wasn't quite gallows humor. No one was set to die here; not yet. But it was a statement of the precarities of life after quinine. Everyone knows the "the government could shut the plantations down any time it wants," as Dilip earlier put it. Everyone knows the plantations are running at a loss. As the specter of privatization lurks, people openly wonder how long it will be before West Bengal succumbs to neoliberal temptation and sells off the plantations to the highest bidder, effectively "signing the plantations' death certificate" once and for all. These fears translate acutely into the Allays' lives. Particularly for a government looking to mitigate its losses, Sailee's job as *paniwalla* would seem particularly vulnerable. If labor curtailments were to befall the plantations, her job would likely be one of the first to go. That possibility isn't lost on a family

for whom so much rides on those two cups of water and two cups of tea: their family heritage, their home, their careers, their life projects. No one is sure how long it will last. For now, the job is “perfect.”

PARJA PATTA

On a blustery January morning in 2021, a cinchona legend returned. The trade union leader L. M. Sharma had been laying low in recent years, but now he was back, standing before Rongo’s *muster*, microphone in hand. Bundled up in a puffy black coat, the elderly Sharma stood stiffly but spoke with confident determination to the workers gathered on the field, awaiting their day’s orders. He had done this before. This was the same L. M. Sharma who spearheaded the battle against privatization; the same L. M. Sharma who led hunger strikes and gained *permanent* government employee status for workers; the same L. M. Sharma who management feared and laborers revered. Fresh off a near-fatal illness, the aging leader was back with an urgent message.

Sharma began by reminding workers of their precarious circumstance and the credentials with which he stood before them. “In this plantation, there is the MPS, the Medicinal Plants Scheme. So, for example, the government is now cultivating coffee, mushroom, etc. But if these things don’t work, they [the government] will quit on it. ‘Scheme’ means it is temporary. Temporary!” Sharma went on, “The youth of today, I’m not too sure will know this, but your parents were there. I was with them. We sat for a hunger strike. . . . And through everyone’s effort, this plantation’s workers were made permanent, so there is no scope to lay off workers. That made it impossible for this plantation to shut down.”

Those earlier achievements were tenuous, Sharma warned. “But now, there is one fear,” he told the workers. “The central government, Modi’s government, is handing over all the industries that are running at a loss. Even something like the railways, the Modi government has privatized. Now our plantation is bringing in no income: What if the government pushes for privatization? What will happen tomorrow? Today this is a dire, scary situation.”

The perils of privatization were merely the context for what really brought Sharma. “I almost had to depart from this world,” he confided to the workers. “I was recently seriously ill, but I’ve survived. . . . I’d still say that my time is up, but, after I survived, I thought: I must do something before I go. I need to get the *parja patta* (land titles) issue resolved. Today, at this age, I have just this one last *dhoko* (life’s desire)—that workers should not lose their land and homes.”

Sharma was referring to a burgeoning movement to secure land titles for Gorkhas across the region. An estimated 60 to 70 percent of the hills’ population lacks proper legal titles for their properties—this, despite having lived and worked in these hills for generations. To understand this lack, one needs to locate Darjeeling and the Gorkhas within India’s political economy. Recall from chapter 1 that

the British colonial government lured Gorkhas to the cinchona and tea plantations with wages, fields, and homes but patently refused to provide documents to establish their presence in India in perpetuity. Today these strategically unwritten histories of labor reappear in the marked absence of titles and with it, the Gorkhas' frequent lack of *documented* belongings.

That lack, however, also has much to do with developments of the postcolonial era. At independence, India inherited a landscape of gross inequality. British imperialism had insidiously concentrated land in the hands of the few (zamindars, planters, rural elites, etc.) at the expense of the many. With much of its peasant population dispossessed of land and still working under semifeudal arrangements as sharecroppers, addressing the "land question" became imperative. The Nehru government's first Five Year Plan called for land reform as a key to the development of modern India.³³ West Bengal responded, passing in the 1950s two signature acts—the Estates Acquisition Act of 1953 and the West Bengal Land Reforms Act (WBLRA) of 1956—to chart a "blueprint for a new agrarian structure based on peasant proprietorship." The reforms implemented land ceilings to break up the estates of zamindars and rural elites in order to return land to the people who worked it: peasants.³⁴ As West Bengal progressed through the rule of the United Front (1967–69) and Left Front (1977–2011) governments, land reform remained a top priority of communist West Bengal. The radical measures made the state a much-celebrated model of postcolonial land reform.

Not that this mattered much for Gorkha plantation workers in Darjeeling and Kalimpong. From the start, plantations have been explicitly exempted from West Bengal's land ceiling limits. This has enabled Darjeeling's plantation-based economy to remain intact while keeping Gorkha workers legally landless. As Bengali planters and other individuals and corporate conglomerates from the plains took over Darjeeling's tea plantations and the state of West Bengal inherited the government cinchona plantations, there emerged a new "planter Raj," wherein the rulers had changed, but the form of domination remained much the same. Pegged to the lowest rungs of this pernicious political economy and denied land and rights, Gorkhas found themselves under the thumb of a newfangled colonialism—this time, perpetuated by West Bengal. This internal colonialism would become the grounds for the Gorkhaland movement (discussed in the next chapter).

Parja patta's emergence as a defining political issue in the wake of the 2017 Gorkhaland agitations, in this regard, is not coincidental. The same anxieties of belonging that animate the Gorkhaland movement animate the demands for *parja patta*. The quests for land titles are also inflected with new economic sensibilities. The establishment of real estate markets where land can be freely bought and sold is a common pillar of neoliberal reform. Postliberalization India is no exception. But such real estate markets require consistent land records—something India often lacks. Since liberalization in 1990s, the central government has therefore enacted a variety of measures to facilitate the commodification of land: for instance, the

massive e-governance campaign of the Digital India Land Records Modernization Programme to standardize land titles. These measures have effectively transformed the land question from one of land reform to one of land titling.³⁵ According to this neoliberal logic, progress is to be measured not so much in agricultural production and equity (the driving logic of earlier land reforms) but rather in stakeholders' ability to better their own circumstances by participating in the market. None of this is lost on cinchona workers (and Gorkhas more generally), who find themselves on the sidelines of a quickening national mainstream. Lacking the documents, political representation, and economic standing to compete, obtaining land titles figures as a key means to gain some purchase—or more specifically, capital—in India's postliberalization order.

Securing titles for homes and fields has proven difficult. Initiatives by the GTA government and political parties have run up against the unwritten histories of the hills, which have obviated paper trails for much of the region's land. The tea and cinchona plantations have proven especially problematic. Technically, Darjeeling's tea estates are leased long term by the government to private planters (these days, mostly corporate conglomerates). Land reform and titling on these private ("leased") estates have consequently involved a head-on collision with the logics of planter capital.³⁶ The cinchona plantations have presented different difficulties. Unlike the tea estates, these are unequivocally *government* properties. In theory, this might make land titling easier, but that would be to overlook the complexities of the industry and where it fits in the designs of the West Bengal government.³⁷

In October 2021, West Bengal's chief minister, Mamata Banerjee, was in the hills for an administrative review. At a public meeting broadcasted on local television, a Gorkha politician, Roshan Giri, asked Banerjee, point-blank, what her plans were for providing *parja patta* to tea and cinchona plantation workers. Before he could even finish his question, Banerjee cut him off. "If we give them land," she exclaimed, "how will we do business?"

The comment met an awkward silence. As Banerjee stared out over a suddenly hushed room, an aide rushed to whisper something in her ear (presumably in response to her gaffe). She took in the information and quickly changed the subject. But what was said was said. Her terse response to Giri's fair question circulated rapidly over the airwaves and social media, raising eyebrows—especially on the imperiled cinchona plantations. Just who was the "we" of which the Bengali chief minister spoke? And just what kind of "business" would they be doing?

Since coming to power in 2011, Banerjee and her Trinamool Congress government frequently championed the private industrialization of the hills, often by pointing to the large tracts of land available for development. Elsewhere, her administration was busy rolling the idle lands of "sick" industries into industrial parks and "land banks" meant to lure private industrialists to the state.³⁸ These deposits were generally small—191 acres at the Dhakeshwari Cotton Mills; another 193 acres at the Mining and Allied Machinery Corporation in Durgapur.³⁹

Nothing near the 26,000 acres of the cinchona plantations. So when Banerjee flat-out denied even the question of *parja patta* on the grounds of interfering with her “business,” alarms went off in the cinchona community. Maybe it was a Freudian slip. Maybe not.⁴⁰ Either way, for a community living in perpetual fear of privatization, Banerjee’s comment wasn’t going back in the bag.

Subsequent events did little to assuage the fear that something was imminent. Two months after delivering her callous remarks, West Bengal announced the formation of the Land Reforms Advisory Committee to investigate the prospects of land reform in the hills. The committee’s formation garnered applause. But, tellingly, the cinchona and tea plantations were omitted from its charge—thereby extending the history of exemption.⁴¹

For technically landless cinchona workers, the prospect that the plantations could be sold off any day only amplifies the stakes of getting *parja patta* now, before it is too late. Land titles would provide for cinchona workers rights and capital to navigate the uncertain horizons ahead. Titles would allow families to get loans from banks to start small businesses, access various governmental schemes, and/or sell their land outright. For plantation residents, obtaining *parja patta* represents one of the most important things they can do to ensure they have a place in the world—and an economic future—with or without cinchona.

L. M. Sharma brought it home for Rongo’s workers. “You should not lose the homes that you yourself made! That is why there needs to be the *parja patta*!” he told the *muster*. “I tell all those who are building their houses: Why are you spending so much to build your houses? The land is not yours. If the government builds a road and demolishes your house, if you had your *parja patta* you would be compensated per the existing market value. But we don’t have our *parja patta*s! How would you feel to see your house being demolished in front of your own eyes, where you have put in your sweat and blood?”

Obtaining *parja patta* isn’t only an economic and legal matter. There are other belongings at stake, notably those concerning the Gorkhas’ place in India. In 2019, the government of neighboring Assam completed a multiyear initiative known as the National Register of Citizens (NRC) to identify and remove foreign nationals from Assamese soil.⁴² The main target was “Bangladeshi migrants,” long a bogeyman of Hindu and Assamese nationalisms. Conducted by the xenophobic Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which led the government then in power in Assam, the NRC disproportionately targeted Muslims and other marginalized minorities. When the final list was published in 2019, 1.9 million residents of Assam, including more than 100,000 Gorkhas, found themselves suddenly facing the prospect of being stateless on account of their inability to produce legal documents like electoral rolls, citizenship certificates, and *land and tenancy records* to prove that they belonged—as genuine citizens—in India.⁴³

The NRC struck a nerve in nearby Kalimpong and Darjeeling. Gorkhas had already fallen victim to ethnic cleansings in the Northeast during the 1970s and

1980s.⁴⁴ In the 1990s, neighboring Bhutan forcibly expelled hundreds of thousands of Gorkhas, who were subsequently sent (via India) to refugee camps in Nepal, where they have languished for decades. These ethnic cleansings punctuated Gorkhas' long-standing experiences of racial discrimination and exclusion in India. For a people who have wrongly been called "foreigners" and "outsiders" in their own land, the NRC appeared an imminent threat.⁴⁵ So when Modi's BJP government began speaking of an all-India NRC and rumors started circulating of it coming to West Bengal, obtaining *parja patta* assumed added urgency. It was, after all, precisely those kinds of documents that Gorkhas would need to prove their citizenship, were the NRC to come their way.

The threat touched down on the cinchona plantations with extra gravity. Sharma laid it out with unnerving simplicity: "The NRC is a campaign of the central government to identify its citizens. Although it looks good, it will uproot and throw us out. The NRC policy requires you to prove that you are a citizen of this country. I know that you all have been voting, but that will not suffice. Where were our ancestors from? They had their own land. But did they have land with *parja patta*? This is the proof that all of you will have to furnish."

Sharma invoked earlier precedents to underscore the danger: "In Assam, the Nepalis [Gorkhas] who settled there many years ago . . . have not been able to prove their citizenship. And those who cannot prove their citizenship will end up like the Nepalis chased out of Bhutan." With the Bhutanese hills visible from the muster grounds, Sharma went on, "The Bhutanese Nepalis went over to Nepal. But in our case, we can't even do that because the NRC will establish a huge enclosure and put us there [a reference to the reported detention camps established in the Northeast to contain those the NRC deemed noncitizens]. Those who cannot prove their citizenship will be told, 'You are not a citizen of this country, so get out of this country!' Now where will you go?"

The *muster* was quiet. Since this was during the COVID-19 pandemic, I was not there in person. But the video my contact sent me showed the familiar scene of workers standing in clusters—men here, women there—clutching themselves to ward off the morning cold. From the shaky footage, it was hard to tell how intently they listened to Sharma's impassioned warning. Many, no doubt, had heard it before. Many, no doubt, just wanted to get on with their workday. Few, however, could deny the NRC's resonance. For years, cinchona workers had been told that the plantations' days were numbered, that they were relics of another era, that they were matter out of time. Now, with the NRC on the horizon and no *parja patta* in hand, they stood to become matter out of place.⁴⁶ Never mind that they had made these places with their "own sweat and blood." Never mind that they had been here for generations, loyal citizens of India. In Modi's India, that may not be enough. For a captive audience already worried about the cinchona plantations' end, the NRC added yet another layer of precarity to life after quinine—another threat to their place in the present.

This was unacceptable for L. M. Sharma. Back from death's door, the legendary union leader thus recommitted himself to the struggle for his people. Traveling the plantations with his standard accompaniment of union activists, Sharma conveyed similar messages to the musters at Mungpoo, Munsong, Sittong, and so on. He may not have been the spritely activist he once was, but the old-timer toured the plantations with unmistakable urgency. After a lifetime on the political front lines, *parja patta* would be his final project—his *dhoko*, as he put it—in what remained of his days.

. . .

The world is not what it was in the time of quinine. Malaria is now fought with other drugs. The empires of the European colonial era have morphed into other leviathans. Framed against this backdrop of historic transformation, one might argue that remarkably little has changed on the cinchona plantations. But *that*, I'll argue, is precisely where it gets interesting. When so much else is changing, making sure “nothing” happens can require tremendous work, resolve, and struggle. It can also involve considerable precarity, hardship, and paradox. For plantation workers like Sunil digging out abandoned cinchona only to replant cinchona that may end up going to rot, the work of remaining on the cinchona plantation is compulsive and shot through with contradiction—none more un/timely than keeping alive an industry that the world has seemingly left for dead.

How then are we to understand these practices of remaining? If remaining involves maintaining one's place in the present, it is not a practice blind to the future. Workers' prospects of remaining on the cinchona plantations hinge directly on the question of what the future might hold. Crucially, this not a question that lacks answers. Governmental regimes attempting to privatize this “sick” industry, corporations looking to capitalize on its material resources, trade unions insisting on the plantations' revitalization, and individuals making do with the limited resources on offer suggest a surfeit of options. Just not necessarily mutually viable or *good* options. And so the search for an acceptable future goes on and the cinchona community continues to work—and where necessary fight—to defend their place in the present.

But are these practices of remaining a politics? Trade unions chasing away private investors and their well-heeled consultants, mobs snatching and burning proposals of an undesirable future, and communities mobilizing for land rights are easily recognizable as a politics. But what of workers heeding the plantation's bell and toiling in the cinchona fields? What of the Allays' clever negotiation of the plantation's rules in order to keep their home while becoming something else? What of nursery workers sprouting cinchona and people like Zimba and Suraj ensuring it takes root like it always has? Are these also a politics? These acts of remaining may not figure as perfect examples of “resistance” or “weapons of the weak,” but they are compulsory and tactical because they are the precondition of

any subsequent politics and life in these spaces.⁴⁷ Particularly when transformative forces loom on the horizon and no viable future is in sight, remaining may itself be an act of political consequence. As L. M. Sharma reminded Rongo's workers on that blustery morning in 2021, remaining's triumphs can be tenuous, its failures catastrophic, its work ongoing. If not a politics proper, there is an ethics here—a call to the present and the tireless struggle of remaining when so much else has changed.⁴⁸

At the end of the day, planting cinchona when there is no market for its bark may appear confounding—even Sisyphian. But this is what the inheritors of quinine's remains must do if they are to remain. For the time-being, there is no better option. We might count these perplexing conditions among the tragedies empire leaves in its wake. But for a community searching for a future amid the remains of old, to remain today is also to seed another possibility tomorrow.

These are the circumstances in which we find Sunil working on the steep slopes of Munsong. The long view of world history might frame this as a scene of what empire and quinine have left behind. On a Thursday morning, however, Sunil and his coworkers don't have the luxury of ruminating on the world-historical. They are more down in it—wrestling with the roots, rocks, and all the rest—trying to clear the way for something new. This is what comes *after* quinine's rise and fall, *after* the proverbial medicine runs its course. These conditions of the here and now may not be ideal. But in the world of remains, they are the stuff with which life today must be forged. And so Sunil gets back to it—the rocks in his shoes be damned!

Importantly, answering the day's bell and clearing hillsides of abandoned cinchona aren't the only means of inhabiting quinine's after. There are other projects, other struggles, stirring in the remains—some of a more insurgent kind. It is to these that I now turn.