

## Beyond Ruin

### *The Arts of Becoming-After*

When it came to making a life after quinine, Anit had something to say. The well-dressed laborer had been sitting quietly throughout the conversation as his peers talked Vikash and me through the difficulties of their lives on the cinchona plantations. But now that they had said their piece, Anit needed to say his. He framed the matter in the terms of compulsion and sacrifice.

You asked right at the beginning what the situation of cinchona is right now and what can happen in the future. The situation at present shows a dark future. The young generation has a future that is gloomy, the reason being the system of cinchona is already collapsing. . . . But we have a compulsion. We have to sacrifice a family member, a son, to work on the cinchona plantation. This is our compulsion. . . . We have to save our homestead, our land. And it is for this very reason, one son has to stay back in the plantation to safeguard the shelter that the family has. We are sacrificing our educated sons for the safety of our homes. We are turning the educated young man into a laborer. He is going to be a laborer forever. So we are mindfully, purposefully, sacrificing the future of our son, even if he is educated, for the sake of this system.

Anit's eloquence caught my attention.<sup>1</sup> Where his coworkers had spent much of the focus group expressing their despair in increasingly desperate terms,<sup>2</sup> Anit's equanimity belied the frustrating circumstances of which he spoke. We were seated in the heart of Mungpoo. The weather was terrible. All around us the plantation were crumbling. The future looked grim. People were frustrated, Anit included. But there was something about him that made him different: a poise, a clarity, a resolve, something. I wanted to know more.

In the years that followed, Anit and I became friends and I learned more about the remarkable life that informed his testimony on that rainy day at Mungpoo in 2019. Anit, it turns out, spoke from experience. He was one of those educated

youths, and he had overcome considerable adversity to get to where he was today. Anit was born into a Dalit family of cinchona workers. He and his four older sisters grew up in a village on the Mungpoo plantation, where his father worked. Tragedy struck, however, when Anit's father died when Anit was only twelve. His sisters, by then, had married and moved away, leaving no one to fill his father's *badli kam* post. To retain his family's place on the plantation, Anit joined the plantation workforce at age twelve.

Even as he began his life in the fields, Anit managed to carry on with his studies. Soon, though, an uncle began angling for Anit's job. Still grieving, Anit and his mother found themselves in a legal battle to defend their *badli kam* post. Fortunately, they won the case and Anit continued working on the plantation. The legal victory would play an important role in determining his life course. As he explained to me many years later, visiting the court at such an impressionable age "inspired" him. It was arguably the first case for the lawyer he would one day become.

Two years after his father's death, Anit's mother also died. Anit was now fourteen, an orphan, and solely responsible for maintaining his family's homestead. "I lost my mother in Class 9. Then after, I left home," he explained. "All of my friends, my friends circle, they showed me great love. They requested me, as per my choice, to stay with them. So I stayed with my friend here in Mungpoo. So I was alone but with my friend. And from there I was able to finish my Class 10. Then, after, I joined my duty as *chowkidar* [a promotion from field laborer]."

It took a while, but four years later Anit passed his high school exam and earned his diploma. In his early twenties, Anit married and began organizing the plantation's Scheduled Caste (Dalit) community, eventually becoming general secretary of the local All India Nepali Scheduled Caste Association. He continued working on the plantation, but his mind was taking him other places. Anit approached the headmaster of a college in Darjeeling about enrolling but was told it was impossible because of the gap in his studies and his obligations to the plantation. Eventually, though, the persistent Anit convinced the headmaster to give him a chance. Anit enrolled, bought a motorbike, and began making the unlikely commute from field to college. Three years later, he earned his degree, only to return to work on the plantations. But the law kept calling, so Anit applied to law school in the bustling city of Siliguri in the plains below Darjeeling. The three-hour commute was more difficult, as were the studies. But his neighbors and coworkers covered for him so he could focus on his education. Anit's intellect and perseverance earned him a law degree in 2018. He passed the Indian bar exams in 2020, officially becoming a lawyer.

Anit wanted me to understand that he did none of this alone. It took a village. His friends and village neighbors were integral. "They helped me *a lot*," he explained. "They never told me, 'You are off going to college and getting the same wages as we are here.' They never complained. Instead of that, they always encouraged me. Had I not been in my home community, it would not have been

possible.” Anit’s gratitude ran deep. When his parents died, his community took him in, sheltered him, and gave him love, as he put it. When his dreams took him elsewhere, they supported him, covered for him, and kept his trajectory moving forward. Now a lawyer, Anit was determined to pay his people back for all they had done for him.

Anit continued his work on the plantation, but he was also keen to develop his law career. He joined the court in Darjeeling Town, found a position with a local firm, and began practicing when he could. Then the plantation intervened. When the director caught wind of Anit’s burgeoning law career, he issued a letter to the Darjeeling court explaining that as a scheduled government cinchona plantation worker, Anit was legally bound to another kind of labor. Not in the courts but in the plantations. And so it was there, at Mungpoo, where we first met in 2019. Such was the compulsion and sacrifice of Anit—a lawyer but in the archaic logic of the plantation, forever a laborer.

. . .

Who and what do people become amid the remains of empire and industry? When the world moves on to other things and times, how do people carry on building their lives amid the aftermaths? How do they become-after? Anit’s biography is remarkable for its tragedies and triumphs, but the challenges he has faced reverberate through the cinchona community. The difficulties of the cinchona plantations are inescapable. But there is more to these places than just postcolonial ruin. There is also perseverance—and a variously embodied determination to overcome the long odds that quinine’s colonial history has handed down through time. Beyond all else, there is a vitality that animates the life projects of those who remain. In this final chapter, I want to honor that vitality, see where it goes, and explore more deeply what people are making of life after quinine.

Scholars have used the concept of becoming to highlight the openness of human life-forms. We have accordingly learned more and more about how humanity is constantly becoming-with nonhuman things like plants, animals, and chemicals.<sup>3</sup> This perspective is essential to appreciating the makings of life on the colonial cinchona plantations. The remains of India’s quinine industry, however, have bequeathed different challenges. Decades after the factory manufactured its last dose of quinine, the question facing the cinchona community is no longer how to *become-with* cinchona, quinine, and all the rest. It is how to *become-after*. To frame it this way is to extend scholarly interests in becoming to another time and space: to the time *after* quinine.<sup>4</sup> The becomings that interest me in the After aren’t so much the life-forms discovered by the colonial botanist, malariologist, or chemist of the nineteenth century. They are the lives taking shape on the beleaguered plantations of the twenty-first century, in the rusting factories of times gone by, and in the spaces in-between where the unwitting inheritors of empire’s remains—people like Anit—dwell, struggle, and occasionally thrive.

Because these stories of becoming-after are always being written, they are best told with a spirit of optimism *and* with an abiding concern for what the remains will and will not allow. On the cinchona plantations, this means keeping one eye on the ruinous conditions quinine and the British Empire have left behind and one eye on the ongoing projects to forge *other*, more dignified forms of the life thereafter. These projects of becoming-after are, as we'll see, categorically multiple. They entail a suite of tactics and a notable embrace of experimentation, cunning, and risk. The search for viability has led the cinchona plantations and their community through a revolving door of Plan As and Plan Bs, which have thrust them into uncharted territory. Desperate to find a way forward, people are trying this, then that. They are playing their hand and hedging their bets. They are pushing the envelope of possibility—and the boundaries of right and wrong. No one is quite sure where this will all lead. But the plurality of approaches makes sense. Particularly when the end may be nigh, becoming-after is often best pursued through an all-of-the-above approach. This may entail, for the time-being, sticking to the ways of old while simultaneously experimenting with new kinds of livelihoods and life.

As cinchona workers illustrate every morning when they make their way to the plantations' fields, nurseries, and factories, the burdens of the colonial past are immense. In the worst instances, these inheritances can be ruinous. Yet, to keep with the openness of becoming, one might also notice other paths through the plantation, other kinds of lives being made, other kinds of projects under way.<sup>5</sup> The circumstances are, no doubt, bleak. But there is also more to the story, Anit's included.

Anit could have left the cinchona plantations. By becoming a lawyer, he *could* have made a livelihood—and life—elsewhere. But this would have required forsaking his home and community. So Anit chose to stay on the cinchona plantations. He chose to work and to serve. What the future holds for Anit and the cinchona plantations that are his home is uncertain. For now, he finds himself the reluctant inheritor of quinine's remains. Unable to pursue his otherwise bright career in law, Anit continues to show up, get his name in the books, and do what is required. For this lawyer-laborer and the community to which he owes so much, becoming-after is the challenge that the plantation's bell rings in daily. It is an individual and shared project. And so he rubs the sleep from his eyes and begins the work at hand.

#### THINGS AND TIMES

Becoming-after is materially and temporally complicated. Quinine has left in its wake a morass of remains—material, institutional, and otherwise. To the extent that these “things” shape the life thereafter, they must be dealt with, lived with, made something of.

The challenge is that these things are not necessarily what they once were. And neither is the world. Take, for example, cinchona. The fever tree's miraculous

bark saved countless lives across the British Empire. Its peculiar growing habits, furthermore, opened space for the lifeways that have defined the cinchona community. Today, however, the fever tree's world-making materiality works in different ways. Cinchona is most workable and its bark most potent when the plant is young and tender. Allowed to grow freely, the equation changes. Abandoned cinchona saplings have now grown into full-fledged trees, whose bark is too weak to compete in the global quinine market. The dry bark that sits rotting in the go-downs of Darjeeling's plantations now contains less than 2.5 percent quinine (down from colonial averages that hovered around 4 percent).<sup>6</sup> The flagging potency renders bark unable to compete with the East African bark whose quinine and alkaloid content roughly double that of Darjeeling.<sup>7</sup>

Mature cinchona's bark may be weak, but its trunks are thick. Its roots are gnarled. Clearing hillsides of long-neglected cinchona stands has become one of the most hated jobs on the plantations. Yet it is what is required to clear space for something new—whether ginger, coffee, or new cinchona stands, all of which are being piloted. These efforts to revitalize the plantations thus involve a head-on encounter with the fever tree's materiality, now of a different shape.

The chemical manufacturing side of the industry has suffered a parallel decline. Lacking the R&D to keep afloat in the synthetic-driven pharmaceutical market, the government quinine factory's extraction techniques grew dated from the 1950s on. The factory's aging machinery, by the 1970s, could no longer handle the volume of bark grown on the surrounding hills. Budgets ran short. Manufacturing inputs stopped showing up on time. There was nothing managers could do, they lamented to me years later, to keep the factory going. After a century of pumping out lifesaving quinine, the factory sputtered through the 1980s and 1990s—sometimes running at capacity, sometimes lying in wait for the required materials to produce its product. In 2000, when the factory produced its last dose of quinine, it did not so much formally close as simply stop working once and for all. Since then, bark has sat rotting in go-downs and on the factory's floor—a telling disarticulation of the field-to-factory nexus that thrust Darjeeling's quinine industry to the fore of the British Empire's battle against malaria.

Looking to breathe some life into this scene, the cinchona directorate revitalized the factory for a test run in 2014. With some tinkering and a fresh coat of paint, the sleeping industrial giant roared back to life, proving that it could still make quinine. The problem was that the entire facility now fell below the good manufacturing practice (GMP) standards required to sell on the national and global market.<sup>8</sup> Updating the factory to compliance would require massive capital investments—a nonstarter for an industry long in the red. And so, after the briefest of awakenings, the factory again sits dormant and deteriorating—a relic of another time.

These dynamics illustrate the decidedly material ways in which quinine's remains constrain what these places can become. Nothing, however, constrains

the plantations' *people* like its system of labor. The *badli kam* system may provide government jobs, homes, and facilities, but it also binds.

Consider again Anit. Like so many others, Anit has found his project of building a life after quinine bound by the plantation's unrelenting "system," as he put it. Stories like his add a sobering note to the scholarship on becoming, which has tended to look optimistically to becoming's open-endedness.<sup>9</sup> Anit and his community's efforts to forge lives beyond the plantation's toil certainly share in this Deleuzian embrace of the open and unknown, vested as they are with hope and possibility.<sup>10</sup> Yet these projects of becoming-after remain tenuous and encumbered by all that the British Empire and quinine have handed down through time.

These quandaries echo through the cinchona community, particularly among the young people. With the plantations offering little prospects for the future, more and more of them have sought education and employment in nearby cities like Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and Siliguri or farther afield in Kolkata, Bangalore, and New Delhi. Yet many aspiring youths know they may be called back and compelled to sacrifice their ambitions to support their families' basic means of existence. That these plantations are no longer making the lifesaving drug for which they were founded only underscores the paradox and perversity of these sacrifices.

Meanwhile, as India and West Bengal deepen their commitments to free-market capitalism, the specter of privatization looms. Privatizing this public sector industry, by nearly all accounts, would effectively end life as it has been known and lived for generations on the cinchona plantations. Workers are keenly aware that it could end any day. Anit and his peers, in this way, embody a distinctly postindustrial form of precarity, comprising equal parts *uncertainty* about what the future holds and the *intransigence* of an industry's material and institutional remains.<sup>11</sup> In such circumstances, the horizons of becoming-after are seldom open and free but rather tethered and troubled.

They are also imbued with urgency. Knowing that time may be running out to salvage the plantations, the directorate and the workers have launched an ever-evolving array of experiments to revitalize these spaces. Multiple by design, these experiments have seeded the present with hope and possibilities that stand in seemingly stark contrast to the otherwise forlorn conditions of the industry. Scenes of overgrown cinchona stands, exhausted soils, crumbling factories, and would-be attorneys laboring in the fields of an obsolete plantation epitomize the ruinous conditions one might expect to see in empire's wake. But remains can also cut other ways. Institutions are stubborn, but they can be changed. The plantations' plants and soils may be diminished, but they are not dead. Plants can find new purposes. Soils decompose and recompose.<sup>12</sup> New seeds sprout from the grounds of old. Materially and biologically, much of quinine's remains are alive and pregnant with potential. None more than the people who call these places home.

Sensing time may be running out, people are forging new relations to what remains. They are repurposing the stuff on hand, taking new risks, and engaging

in fresh struggles to forge a better future while they still can. Some of these projects are taking shape within the structures of the plantation. Others, as we'll see, are taking shape actively against and beyond its strictures. Many of these projects are pending. And it is precisely their open-endedness—and stakes—that makes them interesting and important to study. As the clock ticks, the question stands: How to grow something new from the detritus of old? How to become—and rebecome—with what remains?

## SPORES

In 2015, Dr. Samuel Rai invited me and Vikash to his bungalow for a workday lunch. At the time, I was just getting my research off the ground, so the lunch posed a great opportunity to get to know the new director and earn his approval (which I needed). I accepted.

On the day of, Vikash and I made our way to the directorate's headquarters at Mungpoo, where staff members escorted us past the long line outside the director's office and on to his bungalow located next door. His peon informed us that Dr. Rai was running late. This gave us a chance to take in our surrounds. The colonial-era Director's Bungalow was impressive. The cavernous rooms, high ceilings, and wide-planked hardwood floors told of colonial grandeur. The dusty furniture and flaking plaster, on the other hand, signaled that the bungalow had seen its better days.

Dr. Rai arrived an hour late, apologetic and flustered but also seemingly grateful to have a respite to sit, eat, and talk. We took our lunch in the bungalow's spacious dining room, then adjourned to the veranda for tea, where the staff had set up a table and umbrella to shield us from the sun. It all felt very colonial: the bungalow, the multicourse meal prepared for the occasion, the white man, the brown assistant, and the brown director enjoying the afternoon sun as plantation workers labored somewhere beyond the purview of our privilege. But Dr. Rai, like me, was also a scholar keenly interested in the history of cinchona, so the conversation was excellent. Sporting khaki shorts and his signature hiking boots, laced up tight, he exuded no shortage of enthusiasm. Dr. Rai was relatively new to the job, having become director only in 2013. Unlike his predecessor, G. C. Subba, he was not a son of the cinchona soil. He, in fact, had no real connection to the cinchona plantations. He was instead an agricultural scientist who had earned his PhD and scholarly reputation for his pioneering work in ginger cultivation. His appointment therefore came as a surprise to many on the cinchona plantation. As an outsider, the new director would have a lot to learn.

His charge was daunting. The plantations were running at a considerable financial loss and under duress from multiple angles. Only three years had passed since the Directorate of Cinchona and Other Medicinal Plants (but not the land) had come into the portfolio of the newly minted Gorkhaland Territorial

Administration. The plantations were consequently a tangle of bureaucratic confusion over who controlled and owned what. On assuming his post, Dr. Rai faced the unenviable task of answering to both the GTA and the West Bengal government. Cinchona workers and their trade unions, for their part, were wary of this outsider scientist who didn't understand the ways of the plantations. It was widely believed that Dr. Rai had been brought in to think outside the box, but outside-the-box thinking wasn't necessarily what everyone wanted.

The spirited Dr. Rai met these challenges head-on, with a broad smile, a booming voice, and boundless energy. He woke early to get in his exercise. And he worked late. Commuting weekly from Kalimpong and living alone at the Director's Bungalow from Monday through Friday, the new director put in long days, granting himself only a few hours' reprieve each week to indulge his love of American professional wrestling. But beyond that, he worked. This was the work ethic that had fueled his ascendent scientific career. He was determined to bring that spirit to the cinchona. Dr. Rai's gusto (and naïveté) raised eyebrows across the plantations. But people were at least willing to see what this ginger expert could do.

Dr. Rai commenced a series of experiments with various diversification crops, such as coffee, kiwi, and his beloved ginger. However, more was needed to revive the plantations, he believed, than a fresh portfolio of plants. On the human side of the equation, Dr. Rai set out to reinvigorate the pride and heritage of the cinchona plantations. With his wife, he began publishing a biannual journal, *Cinchona Sandesh*, showcasing the work of local intellectuals and artists, as well as his own forays into cinchona's colonial history. Pride and heritage couldn't just be the erudite stuff of a literary magazine, however. These sentiments also needed to become part of workers' everyday lives. To that end, Dr. Rai began summoning managers and *gangmen* to Mungpoo for biannual meetings, where a barrage of PowerPoints and corporate motivational lessons implored them to champion the dignity of the cinchona plantations to their workers. The "My Plantation, My Pride" banner (featured in this book's opening scene) was part of Dr. Rai's efforts to reinstill purpose in these plantations—botanical, cultural, and otherwise.

Midway through our tea, a plantation gardener strode purposefully across the lawn toward the table where we were sitting. His clean slacks and button-down shirt betrayed little of the soils in which he worked. The gardener was carrying something strange—an oblong object roughly the size of two bricks, with a fleshy, brown and white skin and some odd, almost extraterrestrial protrusions poking out from the top. Unfamiliar with mycelia-laden mushroom blocks, I had no idea what we were looking at until Dr. Rai set us straight: shitake. The directorate had recently sent researchers to gather shitake spores elsewhere in India in the hope that the lucrative mushroom would grow on the plantations' dank ground. The preliminary results of those experiments were now in—and robust! A quick exchange with the director, a flash of satisfaction across both men's faces, and the gardener



was off, returning to his experiment. Turning back to us, Dr. Rai explained that the initial results of the mushroom experiment were promising. Now the question was whether they could be reproduced and scaled up. If so, shitakes stood to become part of a new portfolio of crops that he hoped could steer the plantations out of their present impasse.

Shortly after this lunch, the anthropologist Anna Tsing published her influential book, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. The book centered on foragers (most of them refugees from the highlands of Southeast Asia) in Oregon searching for matsutake, the most valuable mushroom in the world and a species that happens to thrive in the disturbed soils of late capitalism. Following the matsutake from the “blasted landscapes” of the Pacific Northwest timber industry to markets in Japan and beyond, Tsing’s magisterial study challenged readers to see indeterminacy and contingency—in this case, the chance meetings of spores, damaged environments, and humans—as wellsprings of collaborative life in the Anthropocene. Tsing’s call to notice the patches of possibility that arise from the detritus of capital’s world-making resonated with much of what I was seeing on the cinchona plantations—not least my encounter with the shitake in 2015.

And yet there was much more happening on the cinchona plantations. Dr. Rai’s forays into shitake cultivation were but one of the many experiments conducted at Mungpoo over the years. From cinchona’s introduction to the region in the nineteenth century to the array of plants currently being tried, experimentality and its attendant contingencies have been central to the plantations’ development. Some of these experiments worked. Some did not. And none (to my knowledge) sprouted miraculously from the ground on their own accord. It took significant work—human work—to make the fever tree grow on these hills. On the steep slopes of the cinchona plantations, indeterminacy always cut multiple ways. For every cinchona seedling that survived, others were decimated by wind, freezes, hail, landslides, and fungal blights. The same holds for the experiments of today. The best laid revitalization plans have been waylaid by the Himalayan elements. The cymbidium orchid farm, the pride of the previous director, Dr. Subba, was destroyed by a windstorm. Forays into other medicinal plants like ipecac (for making the antiprotozoal emetine) and dioscorea (for making the antioxidant steroid diosgenin, used for neurological disorders) showed enough promise to warrant the construction of on-site factories in 1982 and 1984, respectively. But these forays eventually petered out, prompting both factories to close. Other experiments like rubber and citrus remain in limbo. One can still find several hundred acres of rubber trees growing in the plantations’ lower elevations. And while tapped, their small yields lend the plantations little economic viability. Mandarin orange stands covering 246 acres are now many years into a devastating fungal blight.

As for the shitake, I didn’t hear much of Dr. Rai’s mushroom experiment in the years that followed. I did, however, watch his gusto for the job wane. The

plantations' social, political, and material complexities were formidable, particularly for an outsider like himself. The West Bengal government and its Department of Food Processing Industries and Horticulture to which he officially answered had its designs. The GTA, to which he also answered, had its designs. On the cinchona plantations, local political parties and the trade unions pulled him this way, then that. Workers showed little buy-in. Officers had little leverage to crack the proverbial whip. This is to say nothing of the plantations' dire material and economic conditions—a problem that Dr. Rai, with his PhD in agriculture, was largely brought in to solve. The job wore on Dr. Rai. The lines outside his office became longer. His smile flashed less frequently. His voice boomed in harsher tones. His time and words with me became shorter. His support of my research became more circumspect and cagey. I got it: Dr. Rai was under immense pressure. The circumstances of the job made it so.

But he pressed on, nonetheless. He laced up his boots, made the commute, and took his seat as director. A man of plants, Dr. Rai continued experimenting with alternative crops that might help save the plantations. None, to date, has shown a clear path forward. While many of these experiments are still works in progress, others have joined the long list of projects whose carcasses lay scattered across the plantations—remnants of futures that were not to be.<sup>13</sup>

The accumulating failures give workers reason to be wary of these revitalization efforts. Nearly everyone hopes that something someday will emerge to make these lands and livelihoods viable again. On that hope, workers by and large embrace these experiments and the contingencies they entail. Few, however, are willing to leave it *only* to chance. Outsiders like Dr. Rai can carry on with their experiments. Cinchona workers wish them well. But they aren't holding their breath. Until and unless an actual savior sprouts from the ground, many have preferred to take matters into their own hands—never more than now, with time running short.

#### ARTFUL DEALINGS

Bibek and his family were poor, but they always did their part. Bibek's father worked for the Public Works Department and thus wasn't technically part of the cinchona plantations. But he and his family had lived in a small roadside shack in Mungpoo for decades. When roads needed repairing, Bibek's father was there for the work. Bibek therefore grew up in Mungpoo. When he was of working age, he eventually gained employment constructing tunnels for the new railway being built to Sikkim (which passed just below the plantation). After his father died, Bibek decided to upgrade the family home. He applied for a small loan through the central government's PMAY housing program,<sup>14</sup> tore down the decaying wooden shack, and began building anew. The modest one-room home wouldn't be much, but it would be his. A fresh start.

It all came crashing down on June 28, 2019, when a newly hired plantation manager ordered the dismantling of Bibek's "illegally constructed" house. The orders were executed quickly, and by the end of the day, the house lay in shambles. The crackdown caught many off-guard and met with widespread indignation. It didn't help that the manager who ordered the demolition was a Bengali. Bibek's neighbors rallied to his side, seeing this as an attack on one of their own and an enforcement of plantation authority devoid of any respect for the day-to-day realities of its people. As crowds gathered in protest, politicians joined the uproar, insisting they "would not allow injustice to be meted out to the downtrodden." The directorate quickly backpedaled, issuing a statement through a spokesperson that read: "Illegal construction has grown in the cinchona plantations. There is always a tipping point and it has to be controlled somewhere. However, considering the sensitive nature of the issue, this particular episode could have been handled with more tact."<sup>15</sup>

This not-quite-an-apology merits scrutiny. Consider the mention of "tipping points" and the "sensitive nature of the issue." As we saw in the discussion of the *parja patta* movement for land titles in chapter 2, most cinchona workers and their families have lived in their homesteads for generations. In the de facto logics of the cinchona community, these homesteads are theirs. The de jure reality, however, is that workers' houses and fields are government properties subject to significant restrictions, including rules concerning what can and cannot be built. Workers may be said then to have land but not land *rights*. For this reason, the cinchona plantations have featured centrally in the *parja patta* movement. Particularly in the wake of the 2017 Gorkhaland agitations, land reform emerged as a hot-button issue on the cinchona plantations—"sensitive," as the directorate's statement would have it.<sup>16</sup>

As politicians pounded podiums promising land reform, some cinchona plantation residents began taking matters into their own hands by subdividing, leasing, and even selling their government-appointed land. Technically, this is in violation of the plantation's restrictions, but the practice has become commonplace and widely accepted as workers look to ease the pressure of growing, multigenerational families crammed into the small homes provided by the plantation. Breaking up the family homestead allows residents to construct new homes and businesses in the vicinity of their families. It also allows family members not employed by the plantations to create livelihoods without leaving them. Bibek's case was a bit different. He was merely rebuilding a home on plantation land that his family had earlier appropriated. Though this was technically illegal, he and his family had lived there for years, so nobody thought much of it. Until, that is, the directorate made an example of him. Until, that is, his home became a "tipping point."

Others have been more audacious in their appropriations. Some residents have begun leasing and selling plantation land. These transactions are clearly illegal. And no one is quite sure of the extent of these artful dealings. Nevertheless,

a growing black market for real estate *within* the plantations is now a public secret. Plantation officers know these clandestine practices are happening. But the bleak horizons, coupled with Gorkha officers' own entanglements in the community, make them hard to call out, much less combat.

One such Gorkha officer was Kiran Sinha, who watched the black market develop during his final years of working on the plantations. When I first met him at his officer's bungalow in Rongo, we steered clear of the topic. The next time we met, this time at a relative's house in Kalimpong *off* the plantations, the freshly retired officer was at more liberty to speak. The issue surfaced when discussing how the plantations allotted land to laborers. "Nowadays, an acre is divided into five parts. Each worker used to get 20 decimals," Sinha explained. "At present land is not being given to anyone. The acre of land that was given to the worker in the old days is now being utilized by the successors of the worker. We are trying to set the land-labor ratio straight, but that too has not worked out well."

This was 2019, shortly after the demolition of Bibek's house became the talk of the plantations. Vikash noted the timing. "Yes," he said, as we sipped tea with Sinha, "and somewhere in between the director took an initiative to dismantle houses. There was widespread protest for this."

Sinha acknowledged the crackdown. "Well, the administration had become loose," he admitted. "Workers had stopped growing crops on their land. They gave away their land to others for money to make houses and shops. This was illegal encroachment of cinchona land."

Hoping to hear it straight from the horse's mouth, I played dumb. "Whose property is the land technically? The plantations' or the workers'?" I asked. "Can workers *sell* their land?"

Sinha was patient with his explanation. "These transactions happen clandestinely," he responded. "The greed for money is intense. There are no papers. . . . If a worker sells his land illegally to someone else, and they make a house there, there are no checks for this."

The directorate's inability to "check" these transgressive practices marks a major break from the past and owes largely to its dwindling personnel. Over the years, the plantations' rank-and-file population of workers has remained relatively stable (at roughly five thousand), thanks to the trade unions. Leadership positions, though, have dwindled significantly. Where the plantations once had fifty-eight officer-level positions, ranging from quinologists and botanists to factory and field managers, there were in 2019, at the time of this conversation with Sinha, fewer than ten.<sup>17</sup> As these experts have retired, taking with them knowledge that could be instrumental to quinine's rebirth, the West Bengal government has not replaced their lines. Many retired Gorkha plantation officers I interviewed saw this as the single biggest threat to the industry's future. On their more conspiratorial days,

they framed it as a strategy of attrition—West Bengal’s way of slowly killing the “sick” cinchona plantations. Bereft of their apex leaders, the plantations consequently lack the hierarchy to enforce the discipline that previously ordered their more-than-human ecology. This includes controlling what people are doing with plantation land. “Nothing like that is done now,” Sinha continued, noting the lack of officers, “Who will do it? The new appointees are new to the place. They are non-Gorkhas and have no inkling about these things. . . . The incidences of such illegal constructions have greatly risen. The directorate started to look into these discrepancies to stop this, but it could not be stopped.”

Importantly, Sinha shared these insights as a retired officer, a Gorkha, and a member of the cinchona community. Outsiders like Dr. Rai and the new Bengali manager at Mungpoo could invoke their logic of tipping points and make examples of people. But so long as the directorate lacked personnel—and moral leverage—it would be hard-pressed to rein in this “illegal” practice. Up until the demolition of Bibek’s house, the subdividing and selling of plantation land remained a public secret. But the directorate’s crackdown pierced the veil of plausible denial. The black market was now, officially, on the plantation’s radar—and, as such, a problem for officers and workers alike.

Talking about these things required deep knowledge of the plantations’ inner workings and levels of trust that can sometimes be elusive for ethnographers like me. When friends and collaborators opened up to me about these ways of getting by, I was struck by how up in the air the ethics of these practices were among the community. Carried out under the pall of the plantations’ possible demise, the lines between “right” and “wrong” appeared increasingly blurry.

Consider again the case of Bibek. As his neighbors made clear when they rallied to his defense, the plantations’ bleak horizons rob the law of much of its authority. With workers finding it difficult to fulfill basic needs like houses to raise families, fields to grow food, and financial capital to forge a life within and/or beyond the plantation, the moral leverage lies not with an industry meant to serve humanity’s mortal battle with malaria (as the British framed it) but rather with those who have little choice but to make do with what remains. Most members of the cinchona community have turned a blind eye to the subdividing of homesteads and the real estate black market, seeing these transgressive practices as either a by-product of the industry’s dismal economic outlook or an opportunistic way of cashing in on the plantations’ resources before these places meet their end.<sup>18</sup>

Still, I did hear concerns about where this would all lead. Residents lamented how the selling and leasing of plantation land has enabled outsiders to gain a foothold in the insular plantations. There was growing talk of “land mafias” from the plains buying up plantation land and imposing their economic will. The sight of outsiders and non-Gorkhas setting up businesses and homes on the

plantation left many residents wondering what this might mean for the cinchona community—particularly in the event of any future redistribution of the plantations' lands. Would these shifting demographics not cloud workers' claims on the land? Others feared the practices were leading the tight-knit cinchona community down a slippery slope that would end in division and greed. A former director shared with me his thoughts on what he saw as two emerging camps. The first believed that cinchona was finished and was content to live out the plantation's dying days. The second wanted to "make hay while the sun shined" by capitalizing on the resources at hand. He saw in both camps a fatalism that he feared could spell the social disintegration of the cinchona community. When I asked the former director what *he* thought the future held, his response was also dismal. "Well," he surmised, "if you follow the current graph of cinchona from its history until now, I don't see any future. Unless they do something drastic, it's going to be a dark age."

Others saw it differently. For the opportunists, the dark age was now, and they *were* doing something drastic by appropriating government lands. Socially these lands were, in effect, already theirs. So morally speaking, these appropriations were not a bad thing but good—a way of taking what should have been theirs all along. Clearly, opinions differed and, with them, people's relationship to the things and time that remained.

Everyone conceded that dividing and selling government land was in clear violation of the plantation's formal rules. But what these artful dealings might mean, now and going forward, remained an open question. For a community facing an uncertain future, overrunning the strictures that had gotten them this far brought with it a new set of risks, rewards, perils, and possibilities.

The dark clouds overhead, in this sense, have been generative. The possibility that West Bengal could soon end the cinchona plantation has altered the calculus by which people are adhering—and not adhering—to its disciplining of land and life. It has, in turn, fundamentally affected how people are orienting to what remains of this once-thriving industry. This kind of ethical reorientation is not uncommon. The industrial twilight is often a time of schemes and cunning—whether the "reallocation" of property, the selling off of trade secrets, or the hedging of workers into other enterprises to make ends meet. Side hustles, illegal activities, and before-it's-too-late opportunisms are to be expected when an industry no longer supports a community the ways it once did. These practices may be illegal, but they are not necessarily wrong in the moral economies of the end times.

The specter of the cinchona plantations' end has prompted an inventive redrawing of the lines between *illegal* (wrong in the eyes of the law) and *illicit* (wrong in the eyes of a people).<sup>19</sup> As I learned through fieldwork, the ethics of once-transgressive practices like selling plantation land are still being worked out—as are their outcomes. These practices underscore the openness of

becoming-after as an ethical and practical project. We might judge these artful dealings. Or we might take into account the circumstances, share with cinchona workers an anthropological wink,<sup>20</sup> and appreciate these dynamics as what happens *after* a world-historical substance runs its course . . . but *before* the window of opportunity closes on all that remains.

### HOMESTAYS

The After is a time-space best painted in shades of gray.<sup>21</sup> While some families were selling and subdividing their homesteads, some saw other possibilities. Mingma and his neighbors all worked for the Munsong cinchona plantation. Unlike their coworkers' houses tucked deep into the forested recesses of the plantation, Mingma and his neighbors' homesteads were located along a motorable road—a particularly scenic route connecting Kalimpong Town to Sikkim via the ridge at Munsong. The views were magnificent. In 2011, Mingma and his neighbors began exploring the possibility of converting their plantation homesteads into homestays—small guesthouses, where guests could pay to stay the night, get a homecooked meal, and take in the sights.<sup>22</sup>

The legality of these business ventures was questionable. There was nothing in the plantation's by-laws that prohibited the establishment of homestays. But there was also nothing that expressly permitted these businesses. Mingma and his fellow entrepreneurs saw that this could be a problem. So in 2011, they approached the directorate for a No Objection Certificate (NOC). The directorate initially refused, but Munsong's manager (who was also a Gorkha familiar with the plantation's hardships) was sympathetic to their ambitions. They thus began collaborating to find a workaround. This they found by way of the Development and Cultural Boards established under the administrative control of the Backward Classes Welfare Department, Government of West Bengal. The Development and Cultural Boards were created to help ethnic groups within the Gorkha conglomerate—Tamangs, Sherpas, Gurungs, Rais, and so on—preserve and develop their heritage.<sup>23</sup> This included subsidies for the construction of “model houses” for their members. The cinchona directorate was already on record for having no objection to these model houses being built on the plantations. If Mingma and company could coordinate with their boards and approach the directorate under the pretense of transforming their homes into model houses, then the manager saw no reason he couldn't issue NOCs.

The workaround worked beautifully. In 2012, Mingma and thirteen others received NOCs, which they proudly displayed on the walls of their newly renovated homesteads-turned-homestays. The businesses opened to rave reviews. As tourists began arriving and money began to flow, other cinchona families took notice. Soon a rush of homestays were in the works. The directorate now found itself in uncharted waters. At one level, it was on board. It had long looked to tourism as a





FIGURE 23. Signs advertising homestays at Munsong, 2022. Credit: Photo by author.

way to mitigate the plantations' losses. Officers were therefore willing to collaborate with the homestay owners on the establishment of tourist viewpoints, cafés, and parks. On another level, though, the directorate was facing a proliferation of businesses for which there was little precedent or legal standing. It was all very gray. Shortly after Mingma's homestay opened, the directorate ordered managers to stop issuing NOCs. The directorate would not crack down on the homestays. But neither would it endorse these entrepreneurial endeavors. The "policy," instead, was to turn a blind eye.

The lack of NOCs did not stop construction.<sup>24</sup> By 2022, there were thirty-six homestays in Mingma's local division of Munsong alone—and hundreds scattered across the plantations more broadly. At these guesthouses, you can arrange tours of the plantations' sites, enjoy a homecooked meal of Nepali *daal-bhat*, and watch the sun set over the world's third-highest peak, Mount Kanchenjunga. If you know how to ask right, you might even get a taste of *tongba*, the warm millet wine that has long been the spirit of choice on the plantations. Though modest in their accommodation, the homestays offer their own kind of experience. Word spread quickly through the region's tourism networks. And with homestay owners tapping directly in to social media and websites like Airbnb, more and more tourists, mostly Bengalis from the plains, began visiting the cinchona plantations, bringing with them much-needed cash.



The homestays have been transformative. They have provided cinchona workers and their families with a new income, purpose, and pride of place. Through these entrepreneurial ventures, workers have actively capitalized on the cinchona plantations' history and natural beauty—effectively extracting value from these historic sites of extraction. Importantly, the homestays have also provided jobs and livelihoods that do not require leaving, leasing, or selling off their homesteads. In so doing, the homestays have allowed people to remain on the plantations—to stay home, as it were, yet become something different. Someone in the family still needs to answer the plantation's bell and put in the work. In this sense, homestays have hardly freed families from the plantation's clutches, but they have opened new prospects for life in the remains.

These projects stand on shaky ground, however. The land itself remains government property. Most homestays, moreover, lack NOCs. The lack of legal standing has brought with it insecurities in the near term and the long term. Without titles for their land and NOCs for their businesses, homestay owners have been unable to access bank loans and government schemes to support their small businesses. What homestays' lack of legal standing might mean if the government ever decides to privatize or do something else with the cinchona plantations is unclear.

COVID-19 exacerbated the insecurity. Like tourism industries around the world, the homestays suffered during the pandemic. As Mingma recounted in 2022, "Two or three years ago, business was good, but then came COVID." Tourists stopped coming. Money stopped flowing. Lacking proper papers, homestay owners were unable to access the emergency funds that the government was providing to help small businesses survive the crisis. "I started this in 2012. So it has been about twelve [*sic*] years, with COVID disturbing it in between," Mingma explained in 2022, just as guests were finally starting to return. "We've been running these homestays, but we've been running it entirely on our own without any support from any department or government."

Recognizing their shared insecurity, Mingma and other homestay owners organized. They founded the Kulain Gau Homestay Association (with Mingma as president) and took their cause to the directorate in hopes of securing NOCs for *all* of their members.<sup>25</sup> "We are not asking for any vacant land of the cinchonas," Mingma continued. "This is my residence, and we have a floor downstairs also. What we are saying is that we will run homestays in our own residences, like I have been doing in this top floor of my own residence. The state government is giving a certain amounts of grants, but we have not been able to get those. So why don't you award us NOCs in your own pad [bearing the directorate's letterhead]."<sup>26</sup>

If the homestays opened possibilities, they also introduced less savory elements of business into the cinchona community like risk, competition, and conflicts of interest. The "if you build it, they will come" entrepreneurial logic had its limits.

Amid the sudden glut of homestays, coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic, many new homestays suffered. Rooms stayed vacant. Debts remained unpaid. And tensions rose between owners vying for their share of the market, and for their share of the plantations themselves. One afternoon in June 2022, I encountered a scene that showed these dynamics in particularly ugly terms. Not far down the road from Mingma's place, two families were renovating their homes to become homestays. During construction and long after the concrete had set, a dispute arose as to where exactly the boundary between the adjoining properties lay. Only a couple of meters separated the homes, and one still needed space for a staircase. Hoping to stave off what they perceived as an encroachment on their land, one homestay owner filed a complaint against the other with the plantation manager. The tensions escalated in the days ahead. Police were now on hand and crowds had gathered at the disputed property line, where the respective homestay owners were screaming to protect what was theirs. Some bystanders (like me) stood at a safe distance, watching the drama unfold from the road. Others shoved their way into the crowd gathered at the property line itself. Amid shouts and occasional shoving, police monitored the situation, hoping to keep the peace.

At the center of the mayhem stood the plantation's acting manager holding an iron rod, roughly the height of a man. *He* would draw the line. As he touched his rod to the earth and began scratching a line in the dirt, the matriarch of one family lurched violently toward her neighbor, screaming in anger. Suddenly a male relative clubbed the woman with his arm to stop her and then dragged her away. The crowd gasped and shifted, and the police dove in, trying their best to separate and calm the crowd's most volatile elements. All the while, the manager stood firm—rod in hand.

This chaotic scene showed a darker side of the homestays. It simultaneously underscored something more fundamental: cinchona workers are legally landless. While they may build businesses on the land where they have lived for generations, in the technical sense, these are castles built on sand. On that chaotic day, it was, in the end, the plantation manager who drew the line. Not the police. Not the courts. Not the community. It was *his* iron rod that scratched the line in the sand, determining who could use what. The property in dispute was never workers' property to begin with. It was the plantation's. The plantation would decide.

Still, one mustn't write off the meaningful changes that homestays have brought to cinchona workers and their families. They may rest on shaky ground, but these entrepreneurial endeavors have provided needed forms of income and purpose. For cinchona families trying to stay on the plantations yet become something beyond their toil, homestays represent an inventive way of repurposing the remains. The livelihoods workers are creating through these ventures are real. They are also tenuous. That is why Mingma and others are banding together to shore up the ground on which they stand. Their efforts, as the manager and his rod

made clear that day at Munsong, haven't yet afforded the rights and legal standing they desire. And so, for the time-being, the homestays continue to operate in the After's gray.

## OF MIRACLES

It took a pandemic for a phoenix to rise from quinine's ashes. In early 2020, humanity was just coming to terms with the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) virus spreading rapidly across the planet. Knowledge was limited. Treatments were lacking. As is often the case when new diseases appear, scientists began exploring whether existing drugs might be used to treat the novel disease. In February, Chinese researchers began studying whether the antimalarials chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine might be effective against COVID-19. These were the synthetic drugs that largely replaced quinine, beginning in the 1940s. Though originally used to combat the parasite-based malaria, both drugs were known to have antiviral properties.<sup>27</sup> Hence the Chinese's experiments to see if these old drugs might be put to a new scourge.

Chinese scientists weren't the only ones in those early days of the pandemic wondering if chloroquine (CQ) and hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) could be repurposed to fight COVID-19.<sup>28</sup> On March 13, 2020, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved two proposed trials by David Boulware, an infectious disease expert at the University of Minnesota, to study HCQ's efficacy against COVID-19 as a postexposure prophylaxis and/or a treatment for symptoms themselves. Boulware's studies were to be double-blind, randomized, controlled trials—the gold standard of scientific inquiry.

However, the same day that the FDA approved Boulware's trials, the interest in chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine took a markedly unscientific turn when an ophthalmologist (and professional bitcoin investor), David Todaro, tweeted that chloroquine could treat COVID-19.<sup>29</sup> Todaro's tweet included a link to a Google Doc, where the attorney Gregory Rigano and the supposed Stanford biochemist Thomas Broker were compiling evidence of chloroquine's efficacy.<sup>30</sup> Several days later, Didier Raoult, a controversial French doctor, got in on the act, proclaiming that he had proof that HCQ worked against COVID-19. The hype grew quickly. Elon Musk tweeted out the Google Doc "study." Rigano crowed about the drugs' virtues on Fox News. And shortly thereafter, Larry Ellison, chair of Oracle, met privately with President Donald Trump to laud hydroxychloroquine and offer Oracle's services to promote it.

By March 19, Trump himself was touting hydroxychloroquine, telling the American public of the "very, very encouraging early results" (a major stretch of the truth) and that the FDA had approved the drug (it hadn't, at least not for use against COVID-19). When asked why he was so enthusiastic about HCQ, Trump responded that it was "just a feeling" he had, being a "smart guy."<sup>31</sup> Pressured by

the Trump administration, the FDA issued an emergency use authorization for HCQ and CQ on March 27—a mere two weeks after the Google Doc went viral. The widely available drugs flew off the shelves in the United States and worldwide. Pharmaceutical giants like Bayer, Novartis, Mylan, and Teva meanwhile pledged tens of millions of doses to bolster the global fight against COVID-19.<sup>32</sup>

With the scramble on for HCQ and CQ, some began to wonder if quinine might also be an effective treatment. The link wasn't hard to make. HCQ and CQ were synthetically modeled on quinine. If synthetic versions worked against COVID-19, then why not the natural original? On that shaky logic, sales of all three antimalarials skyrocketed, with off-label use proliferating worldwide and black markets taking shape on the dark web and as far afield as Beirut, Cameroon, and Russia.<sup>33</sup>

Back in India, hope of quinine's rebirth raced through the cinchona plantations. By April 2020, the directorate had received numerous queries from Indian pharmaceutical companies interested in obtaining cinchona bark. Dr. Rai issued statements that with 500,000 kilograms of raw bark on hand and more available for harvest, the cinchona plantations stood ready to furnish the quinine the world needed to fight COVID-19.<sup>34</sup> Rai further took the opportunity to tell journalists what this moment might mean for the beleaguered cinchona plantations. Renewed global demand for quinine, he told reporters, had the potential to reverse "years of disappointment," "benefit thousands of laborers," and prompt the reopening of the government quinine factory.<sup>35</sup> Paradoxically, then, as COVID-19 began its deadly spread across the globe and into the plantations, it engendered hopes of quinine's resurrection. In these logics of a second coming, quinine and the cinchona plantations again had a place on the world stage, not wholly unlike the past. Same drug. Different disease. Another miracle.

The pandemic-born belief in quinine was not only about the plantations' future. It was also about surviving the present. As fear and the virus spread through the plantations, workers began helping themselves to the vast stores of bark that sat rotting in go-downs and drying sheds. They made the bark into teas and other homemade medicines that they hoped might stave off COVID-19. Even the director, with his PhD in agriculture, carried with him a tincture of local bark, which he took daily as a prophylactic. It was all very uncanny.

And it was cruel.<sup>36</sup> The science, once given the chance to run its course, did not pan out. Boulware's trials showed no significant evidence that HCQ prevented COVID-19 illness or infection.<sup>37</sup> Other trials of HCQ and CQ corroborated Boulware's findings. That, coupled with these drugs' well-known side effects and the dangers of off-label use, prompted the WHO to issue statements condemning the use of HCQ and CQ as treatments for COVID-19.<sup>38</sup> On June 15, 2020, the US FDA revoked its emergency authorizations for both drugs. As for quinine, preliminary research suggested that quinine sulfate (QS) had at least some antiviral activity against SARS-CoV-2 *in vitro*.<sup>39</sup> A review funded by the government of Indonesia (a country with its own history of cinchona and quinine production)

accordingly concluded that quinine sulfate “has the potential to be developed as a Covid-19 treatment with a better safety profile than that of CQ and HCQ.”<sup>40</sup> Those recommendations, however, went nowhere. Whatever marginal gains quinine offered failed to lure the interests of big pharma, which had pivoted to the development of vaccines, monoclonal antibodies, and synthetic treatments like remdesivir. Quinine’s second coming was not to be.

The wishful thinking that raced through the cinchona plantations is understandable, given the pandemic and everything else that was going on at the time. When COVID-19 struck, the cinchona plantations and the greater Darjeeling-Kalimpong Hills were still recovering from the 2017 Gorkhaland agitations. Privatization remained a perennial threat. The perils of the National Register of Citizens likewise loomed. Workers still did not have the documents and land rights to help them move forward, with or without cinchona. The pandemic added another layer to these compounding precarities, deepening the desperation for something—anything—to allay the maladies at hand.

COVID-19 took a deadly toll. Once inside the plantations, the virus spread quickly. Lacking equitable access to health care, many plantation elders died from diagnosed and undiagnosed causes during this period, including some who feature in this book. The plantations operated intermittently throughout 2020 and 2021, at times under lockdown with only essential workers on the job, at other times with a full workforce. When I was finally able to reconnect with my friends in person in 2022, the disruption and human and financial losses were difficult to weigh. One thing, though, was clear: the false coin of quinine’s resurrection proved particularly cruel for a community already addled with more than its fair share of adversity.

The purported miracle of quinine’s return to glory may have been uncanny, but it was not uncommon. Remains writ large breed hopes—some more substantive than others. Myths of Phoenix rising from the ashes find fertile ground in the barren landscapes of deindustrialization. In Appalachia, for example, politicians and laid-off miners still crow about coal’s return, despite the turn to cleaner energy. In America’s Rust Belt, where factories have closed and jobs have gone offshore, many workers still believe those same jobs can and will come back. Never mind that the world has moved on. Never mind that the equations of global capital are written on the wall. The promise of resurrection does important affective and political work for communities who feel themselves left behind by the march of history. In these nostalgic longings, history’s recursion moves in another form: not only as the colonial or industrial past returning to compound the duress of the present,<sup>41</sup> but as hope. These wishful imaginings of the halcyon days of old are often based on grossly inaccurate representations of the past. And they are prone to conspiratorial logics. As right-wing regimes often illustrate, nostalgia for the fabled glory days can take dangerous political forms. That these regimes and the dark (often racist) logics they traffic in have found fertile ground among communities hard-hit

by deindustrialization is no coincidence. In their twilights, industries' remains easily transform into crucibles of credulity, nostalgia, and prophesied returns—however far-fetched.

That said, it was not simply nostalgia that drove cinchona workers' belief in quinine's possible rebirth. Even if it invoked quinine's colonial past, the miracle of the alkaloid's return to the world stage was not a dream of the past but rather a hope born from the desolations of the present. No one wants to return to the exploitations of the colonial days. No one wants *that* kind of recursion. Gorkha workers have made it perfectly clear through their agitations, through their demands for rights, and through their many projects of forging a life beyond the plantation's toil: they will no longer stand for the undying colonialities that have defined these places to date. No, a return to the colonial past is not what Gorkha cinchona workers want. What they want is a purpose and a place, *their* place, in the present—some solid ground on which to stand and become who and what they want to be.

Ultimately, this is what is at stake. Penultimately, this is what they are fighting for—now, while they still can.

#### LIFE IN THE MEANTIME

The COVID-19 pandemic made returning to India for fieldwork untenable in 2020 and 2021. During this time, I relied on Vikash and my personal contacts to keep in touch with the cinchona plantations. But the pandemic also prompted me to embrace other methods—most notably, the use of social media. The videos and articles that workers and journalists were posting were not quite the same as being there, but they gave me important glimpses of the plantations during the pandemic. As I pored through the videos of local political meetings and rallies, I began noticing a familiar face: Anit. Since our last meeting, his life seemed to have taken a political turn. So when I returned for fieldwork in 2022, I was curious to hear more.

We reconnected one afternoon in Mungpoo and began sharing our experiences of the pandemic. “In the meantime,” I asked Anit, “have you been doing any sort of community work, activism? Have you gotten involved with politics at all?”

“Politics I was doing,” Anit told me, switching between English and Nepali. “I was the spokesperson of the Bharatiya Gorkha Prajatantrik Morcha [the regional party that would go on to win the 2022 GTA elections]. I was very active.”

“I thought you were,” I said, “because I kept seeing you on videos posted on Facebook.”

“Yeah, yeah. I was involved. Completely involved!” But, as Anit went on to explain, he had since resigned as party spokesperson in order to pursue his career on the plantation.

His career on the plantation? The same plantation that had earlier stymied his trajectory as a lawyer? This struck me as another unexpected turn, but as Anit

caught me up on his life since we last saw each other, it began to make sense. In October 2021, the directorate promoted Anit from his position as *chaprasi* (overseer) to the post of *gangman*—a position in which he would command upwards of five hundred workers. The promotion afforded him higher wages, a pension, and direct access to directorate leaders. The promotion was a recognition of his experience, seniority, and leadership abilities. It also marked a warming of relations between Anit and the director—an alliance he hoped to capitalize on going forward. As the promotion started coming into view in 2021, Anit strategically withdrew from politics. There would be too many conflicts of interest, he recognized. And besides, there was a longer game to play.<sup>42</sup>

Anit's ascension through the plantation hierarchy did not spell the end of his law career. Nor did it lessen his commitment to his community. Rather, he harbored designs of leveraging his law expertise for his people's gain—but now from *within* the plantation administration itself.

When I asked him, "Where do you see yourself in the next five years? What do you foresee? What do you hope for?" his answer was telling.

"Actually, right now," Anit answered, "I'm hoping to become a law official in the cinchona directorate. If I become a law official [working for the directorate], I can serve the people from so many angles. Because I know the problems of this society from the grassroots level to the official level. I can understand. And I want to go *through* this law profession. Being qualified, learned, and an advocate also."

Anit's credentials for such a position, were it to exist, were remarkable. And he was well aware of the quandaries that such a position might entail. How, as a law official working for the directorate, he might simultaneously serve the plantation's and laborers' interests remained to be seen. Having come up through the ranks, Anit knew full well that exploitation is part of the plantation's DNA. Still, he was optimistic that he could strike a balance and help his community from within the plantation's administration. No such position yet existed, he noted. But conversations were happening. An initiative was under way.

In the meantime, Anit was doing what he could as a *gangman*. Putting his law career on hold, resigning from politics, and doing the plantation's bidding wasn't ideal. "Being *gangman*," he confided, "I am not satisfied. But I have to do this. There are not really other options."

Certainly this was not the Plan A that the aspiring young Anit might have imagined for his life, but it was Plan A now. Recognizing its shortcomings, Anit made a pact with himself. If his plan to go from *gangman* to plantation law officer didn't work out, he would resign in two years' time, "live hand to mouth," and recommit himself fully to law, activism, and politics. "I need not only money," he explained. "I need my dignity also."

Early the next morning, Anit gave me a ride to the Mungpoo *muster*. In the backseat of his newly purchased sedan were several laborers, neighbors to whom he had offered a ride. No one said much as we drove sleepily through the cinchona



stands and early morning light. "This is our life," Anit commented, as we neared the field where hundreds were gathered to receive his orders. "At 6:30 every morning, by hook or crook, we must make our way to the day's *muster*. This is our life here."

Anit's comment captured the drudgeries of life after quinine: the repetition, hardship, bleak horizons, and inexorable paradoxes of laboring for a plantation that history has seemingly rendered obsolete. Yet as his story and others' showed, there were other kinds of life stirring in the remains: experiments to grow something new from the grounds of old; artful reclaimings of the lands and resources on hand; revolving doors of other Plan As and Plan Bs for making a life in the remains. In perpetual formation and multiple, these becomings bear their colonial burdens. But despite the weight, they also carry in them vital signs of hope and a better life thereafter.

Watching Anit work that morning, I was struck by the equanimity with which he commanded the *muster*. He managed his staff and moved through the laborers with a grace and respect that belied his authority as *gangman*. These were his neighbors, his people, the community that had helped him become who he was. He was above them in title only. Whether his aspirations of serving his community as a law official with the plantation administration will materialize remains to be seen. In the meantime, Anit moves through his days with a quiet resolve and unmistakable hope, built on a lifetime of bucking the odds that history has dealt him. What will become of his life—and the plantations and community that were so instrumental in shaping it—will be decided in the years ahead. In the meantime, there is work to be done.

. . .

Becoming something viable and dignified after quinine continues to prove challenging. The difficulties are largely written into the remains. Because remains involve such dense entanglements of the past and the present, material and immaterial forms, and human and nonhuman forces, becoming-after brooks little resolution. It is instead confounding and riddled with paradox. It is also vital for shaping the life ahead—both on the cinchona plantations and beyond.

The After will look and feel very different depending on where one stands. The horizons will appear very different in post-quinine Darjeeling than they will in post-coal Appalachia. The carcasses of industry will rot differently in Mungpoo than they will in America's Rust Belt or in post-Soviet Russia.<sup>43</sup> The colonial plantation will linger differently in Munsong than it will in sugar's wake in the Caribbean or cotton's in the American South.<sup>44</sup> These are different Afters, structured by different colonial histories and different world-historical substances. Identifying the histories of becoming-with that made these places and linking them to their communities' current struggles of becoming-after is not simply a matter of history



for history's sake. It is a prerequisite for mapping the challenges and unevenness of our anthropogenically affected present.

For Anit, the challenge of forging life after quinine is simultaneously a project of remaining on the plantations while becoming something beyond its ruin. To date, he and his community have not yet freed themselves from the cinchona plantation's unrelenting grip. As he suggested so evocatively with his "this is our life here" comment as we made our way through the dawn of another day, the After isn't so much a place one gets to as a condition in which one perennially dwells, struggles, and works. The meantime is hardly ideal. Chance and luck will undoubtedly have their say in determining what comes next. And while many hold dear to the hope that a savior will again rise from the cinchona plantations' tired ground or that quinine will miraculously return to the world stage, few are leaving their future solely to chance. They are instead taking it upon themselves to forge their own kinds of life, their own kinds of futures, with what remains.

That time may be running out for the cinchona plantations has imbued these projects with palpable urgency. It has also fundamentally altered the calculus through which people are engaging with the remains. Whether in the spores of shitake, the artful dealings of workers selling plantation land, the entrepreneurial designs of homesteads-turned-homestays, or the remarkable life of a laborer-turned-lawyer, these projects of becoming-after are experimental, tentative, and in constant formation. The same may be said of their outcomes and ethics. Until and unless the cinchona community finds a viable way forward, we can expect it to embrace a bevy of paths into the future. Some of these, of necessity, will lead to the cinchona fields. Others will follow different lines of flight.<sup>45</sup> Plurality is part of the process. Indeed, life on the twenty-first-century cinchona plantations augers a suite of tactics and the possible end of these places, an all-of-the-above approach.

Remaining after quinine may well require "compulsion" and "sacrifice," as Anit put it to start. But becoming-after requires something else altogether: perseverance, experimentation, and, as Anit himself illustrates, the belief that things can be better and the will to make it so. At the end of the day, becoming-after quinine may be freighted by the colonial past, but it is not without hope. Miracles aside, it is not without possibility.

Beyond all else, the work of becoming-after is ongoing—a project without end.