

## IN LIEU OF CONCLUSION

# An Ethics for the Time-Being

It's 2022. After years of gathering dust, the Research and Development Lab at Mungpoo is thrumming with activity. A massive test is under way to determine what quinine—and life—is left in the plantations' cinchona trees. Lab technicians are at the bench, prepping samples, filling beakers with solvents, and loading test tubes in order to determine the alkaloid content of the plantations' barks. Everywhere one looks are samples. Thousands of cellophane bags, each containing bark and a tag indicating the location from which it was taken, line the lab's desks, shelves, and floors. Of the 200,000 samples collected, some are to be tested here; others will be sent to higher-tech labs across India. Laboratory glassware, much of it tinged by past chemical reactions, clutter the bench. Dusty bottles of toluene oil and hydrochloric acid with peeling labels sit below. On the wooden floor, three women sit trimming and bundling fresh cinchona cuttings, which their foreman packs hurriedly into coolers bound for Kolkata. There these live specimens will be tested for tissue culturing—an advanced biological technology that, if successful, would allow the most potent trees to be cloned in a lab and then repropagated on the plantations' steep hillsides.

The quinologist who has invited Vikash and me to the lab walks us through the chemical reactions she and her staff are using to test the bark.<sup>1</sup> It's an old process, she explains, but accurate enough to get a provisional sense of the cinchona trees' chemical vitality. She has recently been hired from the thriving private pharmaceutical industry of Sikkim. On taking this government post, she was shocked, she tells me, the first day she walked into her new lab. The open windows, dusty floor, antiquated machinery, heat, and humidity were a far cry from the climate-controlled, state-of-the-art labs she was used to in the private sector. But here she

was, a government scientist overseeing an experiment of critical importance to the cinchona plantations' future.

A year before, the West Bengal government hired Dex-Deft Research and Consultancy, an international firm based in New Delhi, to carry out a comprehensive study of the plantations. The government gave Dex-Deft license to study nearly all facets of the "sick" industry. On the plant side, Dex-Deft's consultants would analyze the plantations' soils, cinchona cultivation techniques, and diversification possibilities. On the chemical side, they would examine the factory's aging machinery, pharmaceutical manufacturing methods, and marketing. No analysis was more important, however, than that concerning the alkaloid content of the plantations' bark. This material reckoning would be pivotal in determining whether there was any hope in cinchona.

"What is the target that you think you need to hit—bare minimum?" I ask the quinologist.

"Three and a half percent," she says.

This strikes me as low. The Congolese barks that dominate what is left of the global quinine market average over 6 percent alkaloid content.<sup>2</sup> When I ask the quinologist about her logic, she explains that India's domestic market has shown 3.5 percent to be the minimum at which pharmaceutical companies are willing to buy bark—typically small purchases used for the manufacture of ayurvedic and homeopathic medicines (not for antimalarial or beverage quinine). She thinks that 3.5 percent would give the cinchona plantations at least some market to move their raw bark. Not ideal, but something. Perhaps enough to limp along a little longer.

When I ask the plantations' director, Dr. Rai, a week later what he sees as the target, he offers the more ambitious goal of "at least 6 percent." Producing barks in that range, he tells me, would enable the plantations to sell on the global market where major pharmaceutical and chemical companies buy bark to produce medical and beverage quinine.<sup>3</sup>

The initial results from the lab aren't great. The bark sampled from the plantations' go-downs, much of it old and deteriorated, is averaging between 2 and 2.5 percent—far short of the mark. The living trees, however, are giving some reasons for hope. The quinologist calls me over to her desk to have a look at the numbers. Her finger guides me through the figures. I see plenty of 2's and 3's, even some 1's. But then her finger stops. "Look!" she says, pointing to a number she underlined earlier. "See that? There's a 7 percent in Ranju Valley, an 8 percent in Rongo, and," turning the page, "another 8 percent in Rungbee."

If these high-yielding trees can be isolated and cloned via tissue culturing, there might be a future in cinchona yet. The plantations would likely need to outsource this cutting-edge work to commercial labs and then buy back the cloned specimens for cultivation, the director later explains. They would, moreover, still need

to speed up cinchona's notoriously slow time to harvest (from the sixteen-year life cycle to something closer to six or seven, the director estimates). Nevertheless, if they could combine the right trees with the right technology, the plantations stood a real chance at revitalization, he tells me. The factory could be reopened. Its product could be sold on the global market. India's quinine industry could finally move out of the red and into the twenty-first century, thereby giving these places and their people renewed purpose in the world.

But first they would need to determine the chemical vitality of the fever trees that remain. A threshold of viability would need to be met.

. . .

In my years of working on this book, India's cinchona plantations frequently reminded me of other places and times. The abandoned fields, dilapidated buildings, and bewildered eyes often brought me back to the scarred hills, boarded-up main streets, and uncertain outlooks of rural Appalachia, where I've spent much of my life. The crumbling quinine factory looked eerily like the shuttered albatrosses of the Rust Belt. The overgrown cinchona fields reminded me of the postplantation Caribbean and worn-out landscapes I had traveled through in the Global South.

But the resonances also went beyond these postcolonial, postindustrial circumstances. The horizons of life after quinine, in many ways, resembled those of twenty-first-century humanity writ large: the setting and falling short of acceptable goals; the mounting frustrations with the present circumstance; the dawning realization that things cannot go on as they are, coupled with the inability or unwillingness to change; the sense of being stuck under the relentless weight of history; that nagging feeling that time may be running out to find a better way forward. As I delved further into the cinchona plantations, I began to see the problem of remains—how to live with them, what to make of them—as one of planetary proportions.<sup>4</sup>

Today the toxic legacies of empire and industry are accumulating in our bodies, lands, and communities. Microplastics drift ubiquitously through the atmosphere and seas. On these grounds, it could be argued that humanity has made—and is making—the earth a world of remains. So construed, the problem of remains figures as not simply a quandary for those that empire and industry have left behind. It is a central challenge of our anthropogenically affected times, now and going forward. I will not foist these big questions of the Anthropocene on the cinchona community with whom I have had the privilege to work. They have already borne more than their fair share of the world's burdens. One also needs to be careful to not map the conditions, projects, and horizons of life after quinine too precisely onto those of the world writ large. That said, I am interested in exploring what lessons if any stir in quinine's remains. What can the cinchona community teach us about the difficulties—and imperatives—of remaining when so much else is changing? How might their agitations for rights and justice provide some bearings for parsing other remains? What do their projects of becoming-after tell us about

the audacity, wherewithal, and risk necessary to create something new from the remains of old?

The cinchona community's answers to these questions are small in scope. But they may offer some traction for forging ethical forms of life thereafter. In this world of remains, my friends on the plantations pose a pressing ethical question: What do we do? And then how are we to do it? These questions conjure an ethics in two senses of the term. The first is *ethics* in the Kantian sense of how one acts unto others in the world.<sup>5</sup> What constitutes right and good? And how does one live a life according to these values? The second is *ethic* in the Weberian sense of fulfilling one's duty, one's calling—one's work ethic, as it were. As the cinchona community illustrates when they show up to do their day's work and when they struggle and strive for a better tomorrow, both kinds of ethics are invaluable. With the future undetermined, we might think of this as an *ethics for the time-being*—an amalgam of responsibility and perseverance that might help us meet at least some of the vast challenges at hand.

Back at the R&D lab in Mungpoo, a lab tech named Suraj is finalizing a bark sample for testing. Still in his twenties, Suraj wasn't of working age when the lab



FIGURE 24. Preparing a bark sample at the R&D lab at Mungpoo, 2022. Credit: Photo by author.

was last in operation. In fact, he only learned this process several months ago, when Dex-Deft called for testing. But he's getting more comfortable, he tells me, handling the chemicals and equipment. I look on as he mixes the finely ground bark with lime and water and then packs the paste into the long glass tube of a Soxhlet extractor machine. Suraj then measures out 250 milliliters of toluene oil, which he pours carefully into chamber. The viscous oil streaks slowly down the glass walls and into the bark, where it will begin to chemically extract the bark's alkaloids. With the sample now loaded, Suraj hits the switch on the Soxhlet.<sup>6</sup> It takes a few minutes for the machine to warm up, but slowly the solution starts to boil, steam begins to rise through the tubes, and the toluene begins pulling the alkaloids from the bark.

It is a time-tested method of extraction but with a new set of stakes. Can India's cinchona plantations still produce barks capable of competing in the global market? Does the fever tree still have the capacity to find a place in this world? Or has the chemistry—of the bark, soils, medicine, and the world itself—irrevocably changed? Is there enough life in what remains to revitalize this industry? Or should the plantations cut their losses and move on? If the results come back short of the mark, as initial results suggest they may, how much longer should these places and people stay the course that got them this far? How much longer can they?

These are questions that quinine's colonial history has distilled down through ages. And so, with the future hanging in the balance, we watch the alkaloids boil.

#### PARSING THE REMAINS

The tests I observed at the R&D lab in 2022 were similar to those run during the British colonial period. For an empire at war with malaria, alkaloid content and quinine extraction rates became an obsession. Saving lives, in a very material sense, boiled down to cinchona bark's molecular composition and quinine's unique chemical ability to stop the reproduction of the malaria plasmodium in the human body. If the colonial obsession with alkaloid content underscored quinine's materiality, it obscured the *other* forces—the plants, land, people, and extractive power of empire—that also made this alkaloid a world-historical substance. Without this assemblage of human and nonhuman elements, there would be no quinine to count. Not then. Not now. Although quinine no longer occupies its place at the fore of human history, much of what—and who—made it still live. What then is one to make of these remains?

The stories that make up this book, I hope, signal the need for nuanced engagement with the elements of the colonial past that remain. In writing this after-anthropology, I've sought an approach that doesn't shirk the ambivalences and antinomies of life in the remains for easy analytic distinctions or a pat politics. For however *colonial* quinine's past may have been, the cocktail of forces that made this humble alkaloid a world-historical substance also made the cinchona plantations and their communities what and who they are.

Today, those pasts of colonial becoming are not easily ferreted out. Nor are they easily forsaken.

If the cinchona community prompts a rethinking of clearcut distinctions between “colonial” and “noncolonial,” they similarly beg deeper consideration of a people’s changing relationships with the plants, land, chemicals, and infrastructure that compose the cinchona plantations. As the alkaloid tests of 2022 suggest, the materialities of these things still matter. They still have much to say about what and who the plantations and their people will become. In these places where plants, people, land, the colonial past, and the postcolonial present swirl into one another, the boundaries that often give us ethical and political bearings—for example, human and nonhuman, colonial and noncolonial, material and immaterial, past and present—are categorically obscure. For the cinchona community and others forged in the crucible of colonial becoming, separating the proverbial wheat from the chaff may be neither possible nor desirable.

Which is not to say that Gorkha cinchona workers lack ways of sorting through the imperial aftermaths. To the contrary, the cinchona community has its *own* ways of parsing the remains. Trade unions defending the plantations against privatization, Gorkhas agitating for Gorkhaland, and plantation workers artfully reclaiming the resources at hand all are ways of asking and answering: What must stay? What must go? What needs to change? And who has the right to decide? The cinchona community’s answers to these questions may not map neatly onto prepackaged distinctions, but they are true to the concrete (though confounding) realities of their everyday lives.

In puzzling our way through this morass, we can ill afford to ignore the paradoxes that remains impart to the present. For those who live and labor on cinchona plantations whose product has run its course and whose bark now goes to rot, antinomy and ambivalence are inexorable conditions of the life thereafter. Foregrounding these inhabited paradoxes—and the creative ways people are working through them—has been central to this book and the *ethic/s for the time-being* I’m trying to chart here. Ultimately, though, the struggles and triumphs of the cinchona community show it best: remains may make for a complicated ground on which to forge just and viable forms of life. The worlds they constitute may be murky and hard to parse. But they are not without hope, possibility, or a politics.

#### ON BORROWED TIME?

It’s getting late. Around the offices of the quinine factory, a dozen clerks sit at wooden tables, watching the clock, waiting for their shift to end. In another time, these desks teemed with ledgers tabulating factory inputs, outputs, extraction rates, medicines produced, and so on. In another time, clerks worked feverishly to keep pace with the pharma-industrial giant, steaming

and groaning away next door. Not today. The gates of the hulking factory are locked. Vats brought by the British to boil the fever tree's bark sit corroded and dry. Desks worn smooth by generations of paperwork are empty, save for a few personal items—a calendar here, a photo there. These clerks were once the factory's brains, the counters, the calculators. Yet, at 2:00 p.m. on a Friday afternoon in 2017, the main calculations concern the clock. The clerks who have made it this long sit watching the minutes tick away, doing their best to complete an honest day's work. By 3:30, when I pass back through the offices after visiting the factory, the desks are empty. The clerks have returned home. Another day in the books.

At this hour, similar scenes are unfolding across the cinchona plantations. The most earnest workers have lasted their full shift. Others went home hours ago to do other things with their day. Some, having gotten their name in the books at the morning muster, never reported at all. This is what work has become for many: doing what is required and little more. This is understandable in a plantation industry that history has rendered obsolete. But while the world has turned, the drudgery of life on the cinchona plantations remains.

Scenes of factory clerks watching the clock count down their days stand in stark contrast to the urgencies of the *parja patta* movement and insurgencies for Gorkhaland covered in earlier chapters. Sleepy and downtrodden one moment, agitated and hopeful the next, the cinchona plantations are places of multiple, often contradictory temporalities. In one instance, time can appear sullen and stultifying, and life can appear a mindless going through the motions, yet going nowhere. At another, time can feel as though it is running out, and life can be animated by increasingly desperate and inventive efforts to find ways forward, before it's too late. These scenes and jagged temporalities may be hard to square and harder to stomach. At the end of the day, though, they are homologous.

And they are embodied. Workers submitting to the plantation's orders, rising up against its injustices, and/or seeking lives beyond its grind may seem incommensurate. Until, that is, one realizes that it is the same workers shuffling their way to work one day and agitating for Gorkhaland the next. It is the same clerks staring at the factory's clock who are then going home to do other things with their day, like attend to their newly founded homestays or lead their trade union's next mobilization for workers' rights.

Cinchona workers understand that, despite their rich history, the plantations may be running out of time—at once obsolete and nearing their end. One might argue that the cinchona plantations and their people are living on borrowed time. But that would be to tacitly endorse a proclamation of doom—a doom deferred but a doom no less—that the cinchona community refuses. As their politics illustrate, the moment requires a different ethical and temporal formulation. “Borrowed” or not, my friends on the cinchona plantations believe there is still

time to revitalize and make something better of these places.<sup>7</sup> The challenge is how to do so before the book closes on them once and for all.

#### REMAINING/BECOMING

On April 29, 2022, cinchona workers began a fresh march for justice. “We want justice!” trade union leaders chanted. “JUSTICE! JUSTICE!” the marchers responded.<sup>8</sup> The procession of roughly a hundred workers snaked slowly through the Rongo cinchona plantation, keeping time with the call-and-response cadence of their chants. “All laborers are one,” union activists shouted. “WE ARE ONE! WE ARE ONE!” workers responded. They were marching to the plantation manager’s office with a message. “Give the Group D appointments urgently. URGENTLY! URGENTLY!” Once at the doorstep of the colonial-era building, the crowd gathered around as their leaders stepped before the cameras to convey their grievances. The employment system on which workers depended, the union leaders proclaimed, was being undermined. “Fill the vacancies in the cinchona plantations at the earliest. EARLIEST! EARLIEST!” Worse yet, the cinchona community was being overlooked for the few opportunities that the plantations did afford. “You cannot appoint outsiders inside the cinchona plantations. YOU CANNOT! YOU CANNOT!” After laying out their grievances to the press, the union activists went into the manager’s chambers to put their demands in more personal terms. “Remove the director. Save the cinchonas. SAVE THE CINCHONAS! SAVE THE CINCHONAS!”<sup>9</sup>

The day before, many of these same union activists had flooded into the directorate’s headquarters at Mungpoo with a twofold demand. First, they wanted the growing number of Group D employment vacancies on the plantations to be filled. Second, they demanded that the recent hire of two data entry operators from outside the plantations be immediately revoked. Insisting on the cinchona community’s rights to these jobs, nearly a hundred union members crammed into the headquarters’ boardroom, effectively cornering the director, Dr. Rai. Surrounded by angry workers, the director agreed to call his superiors in Kolkata on speakerphone. He dialed the number of the Department of Food Processing Industries and Horticulture. The room went quiet. The call didn’t go through. He tried again. This time, the private secretary to the minister in Kolkata picked up, and the room listened with bated breath as Dr. Rai briefed him on the situation. The conversation lasted only a few minutes and yielded only the promise of a meeting in two weeks to further discuss the matter.

But workers were tired of talk. For years, they had watched the government steadily erode their rights to employment and benefits. And now they were mobilizing to force a solution. From the first march at Rongo on April 29, the Group D agitations spread quickly. Within days, hundreds were ensconced for sit-ins (*dharnas*) outside the headquarters at Mungpoo, with smaller *dharnas* gathered outside

the offices at Munsong, Latpanchar, and Rongo. With union leaders and workers commencing a tireless chant for justice, the Group D agitations escalated into the most significant cinchona-specific political disturbance in decades.<sup>10</sup>

The protests focused on the growing number of Group D vacancies appearing throughout the plantations' workforce. As government entities, the plantations' workforce is stratified by scheduled "Groups," each bearing its own kinds of posts, benefits, and status. The following is a sketch of this hierarchy.

#### Officers

Group A—director, managers, assistant managers, quinologists, etc.

Group B—divisional officers, horticulture assistants, assistant quinologists, etc.

#### Staff

Group C—head clerks, upper and lower division clerks, foremen, etc.

Group D—gangmen, munshis, chaprasis, dafadars, paniwallas, drivers, etc.

#### Laborers

Permanent—the majority of the plantation's workforce (roughly 5,000)

Seasonal—casual laborers (numbers fluctuate)

Where rank-and-file permanent laborers earned daily wages (271 INR/day, or roughly US\$3.40, at the time of the protests), workers promoted to Group D and C status were salaried "staff" who received higher pay, pensions, better benefits, and greater standing in the community. Traditionally, this hierarchy has lent the *badli kam* system structure and mobility, affording the plantations the power structures it needs to run and workers the ability to move up through the ranks. But recent years have seen a steady erosion of this vital system. To mitigate the plantations' financial losses, the West Bengal government has stopped filling vacant posts.<sup>11</sup> (An estimated 681 lay vacant at the time the Group D agitations began in 2022.) Rather than promote laborers into these vacancies (as the *badli kam* system dictates), the directorate has utilized temporary "helpers"—that is, *laborers*—to do the work of *chaprasis*, *dafadars*, and other Group D staff but *without* the salaries and benefits that Group D status affords. "Helpers," in this way, are cheaper because they are only paid as laborers. Moreover, as long as a laborer is serving as a temporary "helper," no new laborers are being appointed to replace them. The plantations are therefore able to operate with one less employee.

For cinchona workers, the effects are multiple and none of them are good. First and most critically, the vacancies are undermining the *badli kam* system that is the backbone of life and work on the plantations. Second, the vacancies are eliminating mobility within the plantation, thus robbing workers of motivation. "Without promotions," a union leader at the fore of the Group D agitations explained to me, "there's consequently no energy or interest in working." What is more, with

laborers serving in overseer roles like *chaprasis* and *dafadars*, “we have laborers supervising laborers”—an awkward situation that further tears at the social fabric.

Trade union leaders and workers I spoke with during the agitations framed the Group D vacancies as part and parcel of the plantations’ broader crumbling—a falling apart years in the making but now reaching a breaking point. Though workers remain generally aware of the global histories that precipitated quinine’s fall, they lay blame for the current abandonment squarely on the shoulders of West Bengal and the directorate. From the workers’ vantage point (and my own), it sure looks like a strategy of attrition—a way of letting a “sick” industry die one vacancy at a time.<sup>12</sup> By 2022, cinchona workers had seen enough. So when the directorate advertised for two data entry operator positions and proceeded to hire two outsiders without interviewing a single candidate from the plantation, the frustrations boiled over. And the Group D agitations began.

Coming toward the end of my research, the Group D agitations tied together many of the threads I had been investigating. They were part of the cinchona community’s broader struggle to maintain their place in the world—in other words, a politics of remaining. They were likewise a collective project to attain security, justice, and rights—another kind of agitation in the remains. In subtler ways, they were also a project of becoming. These themes became especially clear on the veranda of the directorate’s headquarters in Mungpoo, where the Group D agitations took their most dramatic form. There hundreds of workers gathered in protest, seated for *dharna* beneath the bust of Thomas Anderson, the British botanist who founded the cinchona plantations in the 1860s. For more than a month, workers waved their flags, chanted their chants, and spoke their truths through a PA system cranked loud enough to rattle the windows and mind of the director working in the office next door.

One by one, union leaders and workers took to the mic, sharing their grievances and demanding Group D vacancies be filled. With local GTA elections only weeks away and plenty of press on site, the protests soon drew Gorkha politicians from the region. Binoy Tamang, former head of the GTA (now campaigning with the Trinamool Congress Party), gave a particularly rousing speech on May 19, 2022.<sup>13</sup> Speaking in crescendos of ire and waving his extraordinarily long finger, Tamang spoke directly to workers’ fears of losing their place in the world. As he told it, this went well beyond the current matter of the Group D vacancies. “I’m warning you,” Tamang told the workers seated across the veranda. “You have to be cautious. The land mafia has gotten into the cinchonas. And it’s not only about the issue of Group D. There is a conspiracy [*sadiyantra*] to sell cinchona land on the sly. If you are not careful today, one day you will become refugees here.”

The well-informed Tamang went on: “There’s been talk of privatization here. We have to protest against this. The Bengali government machinery needs to understand that cinchona is our heritage. . . . A few days ago, there were people here measuring land [an apparent allusion to the Dex-Deft consultants who had

recently been spotted surveying the plantations]. Soon, you will not even be able to extend your chicken coops!”

This was all part of the “conspiracy,” Tamang suggested, to end these places—or at least sell them off and sell them out little by little. Tamang next turned his anger to the plantations’ director, Dr. Samuel Rai, whose office was within earshot of the screaming PA system. “You’ve become like the owner of a tea garden!” he quipped, playing the communal card. “What? Has the government given you this land on lease? Like cinchona workers, you are an employee of the government! The only difference is that your chair is high and ours is low.”

Workers began nodding and clapping in agreement. Tamang continued, “I went home last night and thought, ‘We ought to get a DNA test done on this director.’ He is Samuel Rai [of the Gorkha-Rai community], but could it be Roy [a Bengali surname]? Not R-A-I, but R-O-Y!” The audience erupted in laughter at Tamang’s zinger. Emboldened, he carried on in his address to Dr. Rai: “You are a Gorkha, and all of us sitting for this dharna are Gorkhas too. If injustice is done to our people, I don’t know about you, but *I* am going to make a personal decision. *I* am going to fight for my community!”

The crowd was now cheering. Having whipped up their fervor, the firebrand politician issued his closing ultimatum. “Don’t take this lightly,” he warned Rai, wagging his long finger ever more violently, “If you want to stay on as director, then you have to get this done. Either you remain and those of us sitting for this dharna will not or *we* remain and *you* are out!”

Tamang’s flourish was telling. The Group D agitations were indeed a matter of remaining: a way of fending off the attrition and “conspiracies” at hand. Yet, as other facets of the protests made clear, there was more to the agitations than simply maintaining (or restoring) the status quo. The agitations also concerned forging lives beyond the plantation’s toil. In these regards, they were also about becoming. Consider the catalyst. It is not coincidental that it was the directorate’s hiring of two data entry operators from outside the plantations that sparked the protests. These were high-tech positions that would afford local youth meaningful careers on the plantations. Residents were furious that they had been overlooked for these promising jobs. Union leaders harped on this point from the first days of the agitations. They told management, journalists, and workers alike how insulting it was to be passed over for these positions, how easy it would be to train plantation youth for this work, and what these kinds of jobs would mean for a community desperate to find a way forward.

Here’s how one union leader framed it to workers on the morning of April 29, 2022.<sup>14</sup> Smartly dressed in a blue Izod shirt and matching baseball cap, the local union leader began by outlining the agitation’s primary demands. “Before the director appoints a data operator from outside,” he told workers at the Rongo plantation, “all vacant posts need to be filled. All ‘helpers’ need to be absorbed as ‘staff.’ Then, increase our daily wages. Then, give us replacement lines (*badlis*).”

He then framed the matter in especially poignant, generational terms. “The data operators who can operate computers, they are in fact right here,” he declared. “Our own children, right here! They are the ones whom the parents have educated with their limited means—sometimes with enough to eat, sometimes not.”

Now speaking to the cinchona directorate, the well-spoken union organizer went on, “So interview *those* sons and daughters. Appoint *them* as data operators. Only then can our fathers and mothers hold their head high, claiming, ‘I worked as a laborer and managed to educate my children, and today they are sitting in a chair at a table with computers and earning their living.’ Parents will be proud. Children will realize that if we are qualified, it is in fact possible to get a job right here in the plantation. It will boost their confidence. Not outside, but inside. Right here!”

At first glance, remaining and becoming may seem to be countervailing projects. But as the trade union leader helps us see, they can be intimately connected. The Group D agitations marked an overt effort to shore up the system that has allowed cinchona workers and their families to live and work on the plantations since their founding. In this regard, they were a politics of remaining. Yet their focus on the data entry positions also showed plantation workers’ intent to forge different kinds of lives and livelihoods. In these regards, they were also a politics of becoming. The union leader made it plain on that May morning in 2022: the cinchona community wants to remain in the place that is their home, but they also want to become something to be proud of—something beyond the drudgeries handed down through the generations. They want it right here. They want it now.

#### FOR THE TIME-BEING

These stirrings from the twenty-first-century plantation refresh the premise with which this book began—that there is life in the remains—and the question with which it necessarily ends: What kind of life?

One hundred fifty years after the British brought the fever tree to Darjeeling, Gorkha cinchona workers are still there, struggling for traction on the steep, slippery slopes empire has left behind. Clerks are still sitting at their desks, watching the clock count down their days. Cinchona workers are still agitating for rights, land, and justice. Unrequited, they are still fighting for their place in this world.

What will become of the cinchona plantations and their community is hard to say. As I bring this book to a close, I will not prophesy what comes next for these lands and lives. Like the cinchona community, I don’t have definitive answers to what comes *after* quinine. Like them, I’ve been mostly preoccupied with life in the meantime: with the daily grind, small triumphs, emergent politics, and pending projects of life in the remains. This book’s original question of how empire and life were made with quinine, in these regards, has proven far easier to answer than the question of what happens now that quinine has seemingly run its course. What happens *after* quinine is still being worked out. It promises to be for some

time. Materiality will certainly play its part in determining what comes next. The chemical analyses ordered by Dex-Deft indicate as much. Perhaps those tests will identify a select group of super trees, which the advanced technologies of tissue culturing will allow to be propagated at an accelerated rate. Perhaps humanity's war on malaria or other scourges will prompt a miraculous pharmaceutical shift back to quinine. Perhaps regional and national political configurations will realign in the Gorkhas' favor, and *they* will gain the sole right to determine the cinchona plantations' fate. Perhaps something somewhere will change and these places will be reborn. Perhaps it will not. Perhaps the techno-optimisms will prove cruel. Perhaps the government will continue its slow abandonment. Perhaps the plantations and life in them will deteriorate further. Perhaps the end will come sooner than later. The current moment feels at once pivotal and critical.

My friends on the cinchona plantations know their days may be numbered. From where they stand, the future can appear grim. It does not lack options, however. Privatization, diversification, the Gorkhaland agitations, cinchona workers' creative efforts to transform the plantations into something viable: all of these are options. Just not "good" or mutually acceptable options for the various stakeholders involved. Until and unless a dignified future is attained, the cinchona community, for its part, has committed to a rearguard politics of remaining while simultaneously pursuing other kinds of viability in the remains. That so many of their efforts to forge a better life thereafter have been ignored, thwarted, and/or violently suppressed underscores the undying colonialities of their particular circumstance—and those of the contemporary world more broadly. The cinchona community's stories and struggles illustrate the difficulties of some to simply remain, let alone become, amid the inherited burdens of our imperial and industrial pasts. That this community persists, despite it all, should likewise give us inspiration as we too rise to meet the small and big challenges of our day.

In the epochal logics of our times, humanity is nearing a tipping point where we either change our ways or suffer grave, planetary consequences. Some believe this tipping point has already passed. Some see it as rapidly approaching. Others envisage a more distant horizon of demise. As on the cinchona plantations, the outlook can be grim and riddled with contradiction. We know humanity's current trajectory is unsustainable, yet too many of us seem to be stuck in the ways of old. The burdens of the past are accumulating all around us, infecting the air we breathe, the lands where we live, and our own flesh and blood. We now find ourselves increasingly confronted by remains. More are coming. What to make of these inheritances and how to do it have consequently emerged as questions of planetary urgency.

These challenges are obviously too big for any one people. Yet it's worth noting how the general form of these challenges resonates with those that cinchona workers face every day. Writ small, the question of remains—how to live with them, what to make of them—is one that quinine's colonial past has bequeathed this

community in especially acute terms. It boils with the alkaloids in the R&D lab and in the blood spilled for Gorkhaland. It reverberates through workers' calls for justice. And, as it has for generations, it sounds with the morning bell that rings through the cinchona, where workers still work, supervisors still shout, and picks and shovels still strike the earth. *Dak. Dak. Dak.*

The cinchona community has not yet vanquished the end that haunts them. Neither have they given up the hope—and will—to find a way through the impasses of the present. The end may or may not be nigh. No one is quite sure. For the time-being, cinchona workers and their families have little choice but to focus on the here and now. The After, for them, is not a threshold to be crossed. It is a time-space in which one lives and works—day in and day out. Amid otherwise dark horizons, workers and their families are doing what they *must* to remain and what they *can* to make something good of what remains—not least, lives and a world worth living. In so doing, the cinchona community offers not so much a path to the future as an ethics for the time-being: a call to the present and the tireless work thereof.

As we go forward into this world of remains, we'll need an ethics in both senses of the term. That is to say, we'll need an *ethics* to guide our actions and a work *ethic* to meet the daily challenges of building another world together. The future may be uncertain. For the time-being, there is vital work to be done. Here and now.

Finding ways forward will require time, perseverance, and nuanced appreciation of all that history has bequeathed the present and all that it has not. Beyond all else, it will take work and a shared commitment to each other. In rising to meet that challenge, we would do well to remember how unevenly the spoils and hardships of empire were distributed then and how unevenly they are embodied now.

And all the while the clock ticks. For cinchona workers and others laboring in the fields and factories that empires and industries have left behind, these are days that cannot be gotten back. Neither are they days that should be wasted. For still the bell tolls. Depending on who one is and where one stands, the hands of time may be moving fast or they may be moving slow. But they are moving, nonetheless. Lives are being lived. But not in ways they could be. Lives are being lost. Opportunities for meaningful change are passing by. For humanity and the planet, the challenges of the contemporary moment can seem foreboding. But as quinine's remains help us see, the moment contains within it seeds of hope, possibility, and an ethics. "Borrowed" or not, the time we still have can still be a time of becoming—and rebecoming—something newly viable and dignified. Through even our best efforts, we too may not vanquish the end that haunts us. But like the cinchona community, let us not be faulted for trying.

The bell, after all, does not toll only for them. It tolls for all of us.