



Ajay Bhattacharya's Kuli Mem: Unveiling the Struggles of Tea Plantation Workers

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Abstract

This study critically examines *Kuli Mem* by Ajay Bhattacharya through a qualitative research approach, employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore the novel's depiction of labor exploitation, socio-economic struggles, and resistance among tea plantation workers. By situating the novel within the broader colonial labor system, the research integrates historical accounts, scholarly analyses, and archival materials to provide a multidimensional understanding of the socio-political dynamics embedded in the narrative. The analysis follows a thematic framework, focusing on key motifs such as labor exploitation, gendered oppression, and class hierarchies. To ensure academic rigor, triangulation is employed by cross-referencing literary interpretations with historical and contemporary studies on tea plantation labor. This interdisciplinary approach—drawing from sociology, history, and literary studies—offers a nuanced exploration of the lived realities portrayed in *Kuli Mem*, contributing to broader discourses on labor history, colonialism, and socio-economic injustice. The study highlights the novel's relevance in understanding historical and contemporary labor struggles.

Keywords: *Kuli Mem*; *Tea Plantation Workers*; *Colonial Exploitation*; *Labor Struggles*; *Indentured Servitude*; *Gender Oppression*

Introduction

Ajay Bhattacharya's life and work stand as a testimony to his unwavering commitment toward justice and equality. As a leader of the historic Nankar Rebellion and chronicler of its history, Bhattacharya stands out as an embodiment of the spirit of resistance and reform. Born into a feudal family, he defied the privileges of his upbringing to champion the rights of the working class. His leadership in the Nankar Rebellion, a powerful agrarian uprising against exploitative landowners, finally sealed his reputation as an indefatigable champion of social change.

Bhattacharya's political career was thus replete with courage and defiance, but it was no less revolutionary an exercise on the literary plane. His creative works ranged through poems, essays, novels, and short stories whereby he was able to express the pains and desires of subaltern communities. During his lifetime, he achieved mastery in both novels and short stories as literature that expressed the complexities of human life so inextricably intertwined with socio-economic and political eruptions. Humans in ancient times narrated stories after hunting, sitting around the fire, which means they reflected their thoughts and emotions artistically; hence, it is said that literature is the fine expression of life (Dash 1960).

The period of his imprisonment, spanning from 1947 to 1967, was a very important period during the regime of Pakistan. Not being free and yet not without spirit, he began to write as a method of resistance and introspection. After 1950, his writings turned securely into the voice of the oppressed, depicting the lived realities of people at the mercy of systemic inequality. The stories critique the rigid structures upheld by the ruling class through an indictment of the exploitation that undergirded the colonial and postcolonial structures of governance.

In *Kuli Mem: The Saga of Tea Plantation Workers*, Bhattacharya moves on to tell the tale of the lot of the laborers in India's tea gardens—a microcosm of colonial exploitation. The novel brings to the fore some of the most horrific features in the lives of tea plantation workers and gives special focus to women laborers. The term "Kuli Mem" is in itself an evocative reminder of the double oppression faced by these women, being laborers and women within a patriarchal and exploitative framework. Through evocative storytelling and meticulous research, Bhattacharya captures the socio-economic and cultural dimensions of their lives while critiquing the broader systems of power that perpetuated their suffering.

Review of the Literature

Socioeconomic struggles and everyday hardships of tea plantation workers have been a recurring theme in South Asian literature, especially regarding Bangladesh. In these works of literature, one vividly sees the exploitation, deprivation, and resilience of this underprivileged section, addressing their struggle for dignity, equality, and justice. The following section explores key contributions from notable writers who have documented the lives of tea workers, providing critical insights into their socio-political and cultural realities.

Kazi Nazrul Islam, called the Rebel Poet of Bengal, is still one of the strongest voices in labor literature. *Cha-Baganer Angikar* and *Shramik* (Islam, 1925) are two such poems that scream in protest against the exploitation of tea plantation workers with an appeal for justice and resistance against tyranny. Nazrul's poetry combines lyricism with revolutionary rhetoric, making him a literary spokesperson for the working class. His influence reached beyond literature, inspiring early labor movements in Bengal (Kabir 1999).

Humayun Ahmed is one of the most renowned figures in contemporary Bangladeshi literature, giving a deeply humanistic portrayal of tea plantation workers. His novel *Surjo Tumi Ekhon Kothay?* (Ahmed, 2011) presents a candid picture of their realities—harsh labor conditions, economic insecurity, and all forms of systemic injustices. Through his characteristic realist manner, Ahmed reveals both the suffering and resilience of workers, with the focus on workers' agency in the face of structural adversity. The academia further claims that Ahmed's work is an important counter-narrative to the often-romanticized account of plantation life (Rahman 2015).

The socio-historical realities of tea plantation laborers have been documented by historian Muntasir Mamun and writer-photographer Nasir Ali Mamun. In the study Mamun & Mamun (2002), they trace the course of worker exploitation from colonial to postcolonial Bangladesh and prove that the marginalization has persisted. By melding historical analysis with striking visual narrative, they create a rich record of structural injustices coupled with the persistence of these workers. Their works are important

historiographical contributions to the illumination of an overwhelmingly invisible labor force (Chowdhury 2018).

A well-reputed Bangladesh feminist writer, Selina Hossain, has always been concerned with the lives of the marginalized tea plantation workers. *Cha-Baganer Galpo* by Hossain (2016) is an assemblage that projects class and gender oppression, especially the double burden faced by women laborers. Her stories have criticized these systemic inequalities and call for social reform through the narratives themselves, reinforcing literature's commitment to its service as a tool of advocacy (Alam 2020).

While Munier Chowdhury does not author plays and essays that deal with workers on tea plantations only, his take on the theme of labor struggle remains very relevant. His works underscore the message of economic inequality and mass revolt and the dignity of labor indeed (Chowdhury, 1967). Basically, scholars avail this work as a theoretical framework for understanding labor exploitation across different sectors such as tea plantations (Hasan 2019).

Emerging Themes in the Literature:

The works of these writers collectively bring out a number of recurring themes: **Exploitation and Oppression:** The works range from the passionate poetry of Kazi Nazrul Islam to the empathetic fiction of Selina Hossain, all critical of exploitation of tea workers within both colonial and postcolonial power structures. **Resilience and Resistance:** Several authors foreground resilience among the workers and their capabilities for resistance in the face of oppression, whether through movements or everyday struggles for survival. **Intersection of Gender and Labor:** Selina Hossain, among others, brings into sharp focus the gendered dimensions of labor exploitation underlining the specific struggles of women. **Historical and Cultural Insights:** Muntasir Mamun and Nasir Ali Mamun contribute in placing historical contextualization that would relate past injustices with present reality. **Ajay Bhattacharya's Kuli Mem: The Saga of Tea Plantation Workers** fits into this rich tradition of labor literature while bringing unique perspectives to the fore. Bhattacharya extends the conversation by focusing on the intersectionality of gender, class, and identity, with a particular emphasis on the experiences of women laborers, the so-called "Kuli Mems." His narrative weaves together a comprehensive historical research effort with deep empathy for his subjects to create an evocative portrait of their lives.

While most of the above-named authors restrict their contributions within the socio-economic dimensions of labor exploitation, Bhattacharya adds depth to the cultural and psychological impact of such systemic oppression. His subtle storytelling, combined with his lived experience as an advocate for the working class, enriches the broader discourse on labor rights and human dignity.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, employing textual analysis to examine *Kuli Mem* by Ajay Bhattacharya. The primary method utilized is critical discourse analysis (CDA), which facilitates an in-depth exploration of the novel's representation of socio-economic struggles, labor exploitation, and resistance among tea plantation workers. To contextualize the novel within the broader colonial labor system, the study incorporates secondary sources, including historical accounts, scholarly articles, and archival materials. This interdisciplinary approach—drawing from sociology, history, and literary studies—ensures a comprehensive understanding of the socio-political dynamics embedded in the narrative.

The analysis is structured around a thematic framework, identifying and interpreting key motifs such as labor exploitation, gendered oppression, and class hierarchies. To ensure academic rigor and validity, the study employs triangulation, cross-referencing literary interpretations with historical and contemporary research on tea plantation labor. By integrating critical literary analysis with historical and

sociological perspectives, this research provides a nuanced exploration of the lived realities depicted in Kuli Mem, contributing to broader discussions on labor history, colonialism, and socio-economic injustice.

Major Findings & Discussion:

Ajay Bhattacharya's leadership in the historic Nankar Revolution (1947–1950), his imprisonment, lifelong political activism, and complementary literary pursuits reflect his commitment to Marxist and socialist ideals. During his prolonged imprisonment under Pakistani rule, he encountered numerous revolutionary writers and intellectuals, such as Satyen Sen (1907–1981), Shahidullah Kaiser (1927–1971), Ranesh Dasgupta (1912–1997), Abdul Haq (1918–1997), Sardar Fazlul Karim (1925–2014), and Charu Majumdar (1919–1972). These interactions profoundly influenced Bhattacharya's literary creations.

His revolutionary companions inspired him to use literature as a tool for advocating human rights, even within the confines of prison. Despite his aristocratic background, Bhattacharya's alignment with the proletariat and his participation in uprisings and political movements for workers' rights are remarkable. He holds a unique position in the history of Bengali literature as a life-focused storyteller committed to communist politics and Marxist ideology. His contributions underscore the integration of political ideals with literature, portraying the struggles of the oppressed with authenticity and conviction.

The imperialist British colonial capitalist business class first became interested in tea cultivation outside of China. As a result, experimental tea cultivation was carried out for the first time outside of China in 1838, in the Sylhet and Cachar districts (part of Assam Province). The successful production of tea in this region encouraged the colonial business class to pursue tea cultivation. Later, in 1854, the establishment of the Malnichhera Tea Estate in Sylhet was initiated by the Duncan Brothers, marking Sylhet's first commercial tea plantation. The success of tea cultivation in Sylhet inspired the colonial British business class and encouraged local landlords to collaborate with English entrepreneurs to establish tea estates in hilly regions. Thus, tea cultivation gradually spread across other British colonial areas such as Chittagong in East Bengal, Darjeeling in North Bengal, the Nilgiri Hills in South India, Ceylon, Myanmar, Malaya, and others.

"After 1854, the number of tea plantations in this region steadily increased, and tea cultivation became profitable. However, the local population could not provide the labor required for the maintenance of tea gardens. The bitter experiences of the 1857 Sepahi Revolt and the 1860 Indigo Revolt led the colonial British business and administrative class to realize that the people of this country could not be exploited indefinitely (Bhattacharya 1990). As a result, for tea garden labor, they lured impoverished famine-stricken lower-class workers from Central India with false promises through the "Girmit system," binding them to lifelong work in remote and hazardous hilly wilderness. Regarding this, Ajay Bhattacharya stated, "In India, especially in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam and the Sylhet and Cachar districts of the Surma Valley, almost all the workers employed in tea cultivation were outcast, backward agricultural laborers from famine-stricken regions of Central India bound by lifelong work agreements (Girmit). Despite their hard work, tea garden laborers never received fair wages; rather, the capitalist owner class, representatives of bourgeois society, exploited them under various pretexts. They were also restricted from leaving the tea garden premises, a modern version of slavery. Occasionally, when laborers rebelled and attempted to escape the gardens en masse to return to their homeland, the colonial British police force, protectors of the capitalists' wealth, arrested and brutally oppressed them. Gradually, they began to forget their homeland or where they had originally come from.

In the early 20th century, the European Renaissance and revolutionary ideas stirred the minds of the Indian people. Post-World War I (1914-1918), various movements against British rule emerged under Congress leadership. The 1921 Non-Cooperation Movement by Congress and Mohammad Ali's Khilafat Movement (1917) ignited sentiments across India. These movements also influenced the lives of tea garden

laborers. They rebelled against the capitalist owners and resolved to free themselves from slavery and return to their homeland. It is not clear which tea estate they first escaped from, but it is believed that laborers from a garden in the Chargola Valley of the Karimganj subdivision were the first to begin their journey back to their homeland. This news spread across the gardens, and laborers, in groups, started leaving the gardens, chanting "Victory to Gandhiji" as they walked barefoot. When the railway company refused to take them, they marched to the Karimganj rail junction and later gathered at Chandpur Port to cross the river. However, crossing the vast Padma and Meghna rivers on foot became impossible, leaving them stranded at Chandpur Station.

The colonial ruling class could not tolerate this resolute attitude of the laborers and unleashed the police force, who opened indiscriminate fire on the workers, killing many, including women, children, and the elderly. This barbarity sparked protests from all sections of society, with Congress and the Khilafat Committee vehemently condemning the attack.

Between 1929 and 1930, the global capitalist economy experienced a severe depression, severely impacting the tea industry. Many tea estates reduced production, and the number of workers and their wages decreased. During this period, unemployment and economic hardship led to frequent labor unrest and spontaneous strikes. Despite Congress's leadership in national political movements demanding Swaraj (self-rule), these movements failed to inspire tea garden laborers as profoundly as in 1921. Consequently, a faction within Congress adopted a policy of organizing the working-class populace, including workers, farmers, and various professionals, into the broader national movement. These efforts later gave rise to leftist Congress workers. In 1936, leftist Congress activists established the "All India Kisan Sabha" (Indian Farmers' Association) to organize India's farming community. Subsequently, leftist Congress activists in Sylhet formed the Sylhet Cachar Tea Garden Workers Union.

Post-1930, various strikes and movements arose in tea gardens over numerous issues. During the pre-World War II period (1939-1945), tea worker discontent grew due to various incidents. However, the government tactically suppressed the path of worker organization. Later, due to economic hardships, the pitiable state of tea estates, and wartime military assistance, the government used tea workers for minimal compensation, curbing organized labor movements. After the Second World War and the Partition of India in 1947, worker movements in tea gardens were entirely subdued, permanently breaking the morale of the laborers. Yet, the flow of life for tea garden workers today remains politically, economically, socially, and culturally far behind any other community in this country. Without organized labor movements, it seems impossible to bridge this gap.

In his novel *Kuli Mem*, Ajay Bhattacharya portrays the life struggles and stories of tea garden workers in the Sylhet region, highlighting their labor movements and the social, political, and economic context of the time through his experiences and perspective. Bhattacharya not only engaged in literary pursuits for the working class but also documented their history in his historical writings.

In *Kuli Mem*, Bhattacharya narrates the life of Notiya, the protagonist, as a lens to depict the struggles and stories of tea garden workers. Drawing from his own experiences, Bhattacharya brings the lives of tea laborers to life in literature. Alongside the hardships of laborers, the novel also addresses the exploitative mindset of capitalist owners and their treatment of women laborers, some of whom were used as concubines and referred to as "Kuli Mem."

Through *Kuli Mem*, Bhattacharya captures the lives of tea garden laborers, focusing on Notiya, born into a poor laborer's family in a tea estate. Tea workers' lives rarely change, as their profession is determined by birth and continues until death. Disease, suffering, and hardship dominate their existence, as they struggle to survive. Regarding Notiya's life, the novelist remarks: "Notiya's parents are laborers in the tea garden, 'plantation kulis.' Life flows in the same channel there; where would they find a different path?" (*Kuli Mem*, p. 11).

Indeed, the lower classes rarely find paths to change their lives and continue in the same cycle until death. Thus, in *Kuli Mem*, tea workers' lives remain unchanged, with owners providing minimal wages solely to maintain the labor system for production.

The novel *Kuli Mem* portrays the life of tea garden workers, highlighting the internal class divisions among them, such as "Chokra Dafa" and "Mordana Dafa," which represent different age groups and the nature of the work assigned to them. "Chokra Dafa" refers to lighter tasks given to young or underage children, such as picking insects off saplings, cutting grass, and tending to plants. On the other hand, "Mordana Dafa" refers to more strenuous work, such as digging with a hoe, taking cuttings from saplings, or felling trees, which is assigned to adults. The tea workers receive meager wages, and as a result, they put their children to work at a very young age in hopes of earning a little extra money. In the novel, Notiya, like other children in the Ringchera tea garden, is involved in "Chokra Dafa" work at a very young age. Notiya's mother dreams of him one day becoming an adult worker in "Mordana Dafa," and hopes he will marry and bring a beautiful bride into their home. For example: Notiya's mother imagines that her son will work in Mordana Dafa. He will dig with a hoe, take sapling cuttings, cut trees, chop bamboo, and pull logs through the forest. He will drive ox-carts and roam the fields. People will say, 'Notiya's mother's son is as strong as a man.' (*Kuli Mem*, p.13)

The true worth of the working class is never acknowledged by capitalist society, and their lives are dependent on the mercy and charity of the wealthy. This is the image depicted by the author in *Kuli Mem*, where the comforts and luxuries of the capitalist class stand in stark contrast to the neglected lives of the working class. The workers in Ringchera tea garden, for instance, never had access to education or a better life. While the European capitalist class enjoys all modern amenities, the workers have never touched modernity. Consequently, the workers live in cramped, subhuman conditions in small huts within the tea garden slums, constantly struggling for survival. When cholera broke out in the garden, many workers died without any treatment.

The workers' lives were cut short by cholera, but the disease did not affect the owners. In the novel, workers, ignorant and uneducated, sought healing through various superstitions, relying on mantras, prayers, and folk healers. Cholera-infected workers' bodies were dragged away and eaten by wild animals in the tea garden, highlighting the worthlessness of their lives, as described by the author based on real experiences and artistic insight.

In parallel to the workers' life portrayal, the author also presents the life of the middlemen, such as the local "Babus" (supervisors), who, though native, assisted the British colonial business class in their own interests. These Babus represent the under-educated segment of society. In the Ringchera tea garden, the larger Babus, the tea-house Babus, the godown Babus, and others often mistreated the workers while trying to gain favor from the owners. They frequently engaged in deceptive practices with the workers. The author states: Such incidents were nothing new; the tug-of-war between the owner and the worker was a constant occurrence in the tea gardens, often exacerbated by these minor middlemen. They worked for the owners but also sought to benefit personally. They altered the weights, manipulated the tally, and pocketed the extra money. (*Kuli Mem*, p.65)

Similarly, when the women workers complained about the reduction in the weight of the tea leaves they had harvested, Notiya's wife (later) Rupiya engaged in a dispute with the tea house Babus, which was a form of protest and rebellion for the workers' rights.

Ignorance, illiteracy, and poverty breed superstition in people's minds. The tea garden workers, deprived of modern education, believed in ancient rituals and superstitions. The workers of the tea garden perceived every disaster as God's curse. For this reason, they always turned to deities to seek protection from calamities. The author realistically presents the religious beliefs and superstitions of the workers in the context of the tea garden's environment and lifestyle.

At the beginning of the novel, when Notiya is sleeping in the birth room, a venomous snake spreads its hood and is about to strike, but it saves him. Notiya's mother believed that her son's life was saved due to the blessings of Ma Kali, as she had prayed for him: That day, Notiya's mother had prayed to Ma Kali for blessings. Ma Kali surely granted her prayer, and that's why Notiya survived. (*Kuli Mem*, p.12)

The British traders, who had come to the country, created an environment of modern living for themselves, following European models. They set up hospitals, churches, and clubs for their own comfort. In the Ringchera tea garden, they made provisions for workers' healthcare to increase production. However, due to the workers' ignorance, they feared doctors and avoided medical help. When cholera spread in the garden, they fled into the jungle, avoiding vaccination, but later, under orders from the masters, the workers were forcibly vaccinated with needles wherever they were found. The doctor's assistants, the compounders, and even the servants were involved in this process. The workers, terrified by the disease, fled into the jungle to escape the forced vaccination. The author describes the situation: The compounders and the servants took up needles and ran around, vaccinating everyone they could find, forcing them into vaccination despite the workers' terror. This panic, coupled with the doctor's assistants' negligence, led the workers to flee, even the sick ones. (*Kuli Mem*, p.17)

Despite fleeing to the jungle, the workers, driven by the need to survive, were eventually forced to return to the tea garden's slave-like life. However, the fear of their masters' cruelty made them hesitant to return, and the masters, while aware of the workers' presence in the jungle, did not force them to come back. The British colonial company, after reviewing historical precedents from around the world, quickly found a solution to this problem.

Ultimately, the sick and destitute workers returned to the tea garden slums.

In *Kuli Mem*, Ajoy Bhattacharya describes the lives of tea garden workers in the northeastern hilly regions of Bangladesh and the state of the labor movement before its rise. The novel uses Notiya's life story to present the inner inequalities and issues within the tea garden. Notiya dreams of a happy life with his wife, Rupiya, but her indifference, self-centeredness, and greedy nature ultimately destroy their marriage. Notiya loves Rupiya, but she marries him for his earnings, which are higher than those of other tea workers. She constantly neglects him, driven by the desire for more money, and later becomes involved with a new engineer in the tea garden, Mr. Dabbu, leading a life of prostitution, which is known in the local language as *Kuli Mem*.

The author presents the *Kuli Mem* characters—tea garden women who, driven by poverty and the allure of a luxurious life, become mistresses of the European masters. These women, who accept this life of exploitation, are called *Kuli Mem* in the tea garden's vernacular. Despite the name, *Kuli Mem* has no respect or dignity in European society. Women who become *Kuli Mem*s are abandoned by their families and society, often caught in conflicts over their relationships with the Europeans. The British company has warned against conflicts over *Kuli Mem*, as disputes between workers and the owners have often arisen due to these relationships: They say, 'Do it in such a way that the snake dies, but the stick doesn't break.' So, forcibly taking a worker's daughter away isn't acceptable. They must not touch her without her consent. Native workers could get angry, and that would hurt the company's business. But if the workers can be lured and persuaded to accept the situation, the company won't object. The *Kuli Mem*s in the gardens were made to accept this situation. (*Kuli Mem*, p.152-153)

Despite knowing their own situation, the kuli laborers did not view the sahebs' acceptance of a kuli mem favorably. They became rebellious to protect the honor of their wives and daughters, rising against the sahebs. When Rupiya moved into Mr. Dabbu's bungalow, the workers blamed him for taking her and tried to bring their daughter back, filing complaints to the big saheb. The youth considered Rupiya's acceptance of a kuli mem's life as a forceful act by the sahebs, and they became enraged. The sahebs immediately accepted the workers' demands in order to block the path to organized protests. Even though the workers would strike and protest in the tea garden, the owners quickly silenced their movements. The workers,

trusting the owners, would return to work, but when the oppression became too much, they would rebel, wishing to return to their homeland. The owners would then use state apparatus, such as police guards, to suppress the rebellious workers. As the author describes:

Terrified and devastated, the workers would take refuge in the hills and jungles. And in their hearts, they would think that they would return to their homeland. But they could not go anywhere, they did not know where their homeland was, or which path led to their native soil. They came from Birbhum, Santal Pargana, from Madras, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh—defeated farmers from barren lands, who had fought a losing battle for survival. They hadn't come here themselves, but their fathers and grandfathers had. They had heard tales of their homeland, of the Ganga, Yamuna, Krishna, Godavari, Kaveri, and Mahanadi—dreamy stories of their ancestral lands. That was their homeland. Whenever they were humiliated, that place called to them. But they had no way to go there. The company had bound them in lifelong labor contracts, known as the 'girmit' system, which kept them in servitude to the company for generations. No one could leave the garden. They had forgotten the way back. (*Kuli Mem*, p.176-177)

The owners, to maintain their production system, would immediately accept the workers' demands, but would ensure that their own interests remained intact. The owners accepted the workers' demands immediately in order to keep the production system running, but they ensured their own interests were protected.

The Novel is the epic form of our modern, bourgeois society... It did not exist, except in very rudimentary form before that modern civilization which began with the renaissance and like every new art form it has served its purpose extending and deepening human consciousness (Ralph 1937). In his novel *Kuli Mem*, Ajay Bhattacharya portrays the lifestyle of European sahebs who came to this country. These foreign sahebs, upon arriving here, tried to preserve their culture and distinct way of life. In the author's words: though they live in a native land, they have not, and perhaps never will, become natives. They are forever determined to maintain their lifestyle, shaped by the mold of England. In the midst of this jungle, their activities make it clear that this is not just talk; in both words and actions, they are truly one—one in mind and soul. (*Kuli Mem*: p. 15)

In order to alleviate the loneliness of their expatriate life here, they have taken kuli mems, but they did not grant them any respect within their society. As a result, kuli mems were not allowed to participate in the sahebs' social events, and the novel also presents the divisions and racial prejudices among the sahebs. Mr. Dabhu Saheb, for example, regards the younger sahebs as "Scottish Highlanders." Through Dabhu Saheb's dialogue, the novel highlights the animosity and racial tensions between the people of England and Scotland. According to Dabhu Saheb, the people of England or Wales are the true Englishmen, the kind-hearted ones. The sahebs who came from abroad would observe 'Club Day' every Sunday in an effort to improve relations among themselves and spend their leisure time together.

As a Marxist writer, Ajay Bhattacharya wrote *Kuli Mem* to portray the struggles and movements of the workers' lives, advocating for the establishment of rights and dignity for the working class. Although the workers were oppressed in many ways by the owners, they could not protest, but they continued their struggle and eventually passed it on to future generations. When Mr. Dabhu Saheb took Rupiya as a kuli mem, Notiya, despite not hating her, began to hate the saheb, as Notiya's rebellion was directed towards the oppressive British rulers. For example: He will hate the mechanic-saheb, he will hate the saheb-subah and the babu. They are his fierce enemies, the enemies of all the people here. When the time comes, he will settle this enmity. (*Kuli Mem*: p. 188)

Rupiya's acceptance as a kuli mem at Dabhu Saheb's bungalow shifts the novel's direction. Notiya, trying to forget Rupiya, wants to begin a new life, but when he learns that Rupiya has a son, he goes to see the child, only to be misunderstood by everyone at Dabhu Saheb's bungalow, with the ayah screaming. Rupiya believes Notiya has come to kill her and her child, leading to Notiya's dismissal from his job. This marks a huge turning point in his life, as described: For Notiya, this was a major change. From the

beginning of creation, the comet that has been circling the sun has undergone a small deviation, but what significance does it have in the vast, star-filled expanse of the sky? Amid the vast workings of the tea garden, it was but a tiny spark and Notiya quickly sank back into obscurity. This comet-like fall from grace was no small event. Where did Notiya end up, and who will care? (Kuli Mem: pp. 193-194)

Later, when smallpox breaks out in the garden, many fall ill. However, before the disease spreads widely, vaccination is provided and the sickness is controlled. But for those who had already been infected and were admitted to the "segregation" hospital on the mountaintop, no medical treatment was provided. The doctors and compounders, who were supposed to treat the patients, leave work and go home, selling the medicine outside. For example: The medicines that were taken from the doctor's compounder's back door were circulated, and the village people always praised the garden authority for the proper treatment. (Kuli Mem: p. 197)

Despite the medicines being handed over to the doctors and compounders, no one investigates how the hospital on the mountain top is functioning. Later, under the strict orders of the big saheb, everyone goes to the hospital and finds piles of decaying and half-cut bodies. To hide their disgrace, the workers bury the scattered bodies, but those who are still alive are tended to. In the end, the survivors, having crossed the sea of death, return to the garden. Notiya, severely ill with smallpox, returns from the brink of death, and Rupiya's friend Nunia gives her shelter. In bourgeois society, the working class is used as living machines for the capitalistic production system, increasing the wealth of the bourgeoisie. This is realistically presented in *Kuli Mem*.

The plot of *Kuli Mem* advances rapidly towards the end. Various changes occur in the tea garden. The previous big saheb, medium saheb, little saheb, and Rupiya are all gone. Only blind Notiya remains, waiting for death in the Ringchera tea garden. Although changes occur in the world, the lives of the tea garden workers remain the same. Just as things were, they continue to break their backs working in the garden, digging with hoes, picking leaves. The small children still perform various tasks for a few coins. The clerks, mechanics, and porters are still rushing around. Notiya has witnessed the changes in her life and blames the sahebs, babus, and the company for her misfortunes. She seeks revenge against the ruling classes. But Nunia wonders how Notiya can take revenge against the powerful company. Notiya, however, says, If only we could unite and become rebellious, the unjust exploitation would end. If we could just get angry, things would change. They would not dare to take away our women, nor would they kick us and throw us into the gutter. (Kuli Mem: pp. 210-211)

During the puja, when the mill in Ringchera tea garden breaks down, the workers rebel, believing the sahebs broke the mill on purpose to ruin the puja. They protest against the sahebs. The big saheb tries to solve the problem by offering rewards and bribes to the workers' leaders, but the workers protest against the sahebs and their leaders. This rebellion, after so many years of oppression, surprises the sahebs. After World War I, European Renaissance influences began to reach the workers' lives in the tea gardens. The big saheb calls upon the blind and old Notiya to fix the mill. A young mechanic saheb, newly arrived from abroad, is forced to listen to Notiya's complaints. With the mill repaired, the tea garden environment brightens, but for Notiya, the workers' protest and struggle symbolize the hope of freedom and the beginning of a fight for their rights and dignity. The workers have also petitioned the big saheb for Notiya's pension. The big saheb, observing the workers' movement, reflects on the fall of the Tsarist Empire, where workers' movements led to the downfall of the ruling classes.

Conclusion

Ajay Bhattacharya's *Kuli Mem* serves as a powerful narrative that sheds light on the harsh realities faced by tea plantation workers under the colonial labor system. Through a vivid portrayal of their struggles, the novel encapsulates the exploitative conditions, social injustices, and gendered vulnerabilities

that defined the lives of these laborers. The plight of the workers, characterized by oppressive wages, inhumane living conditions, and coercive labor practices, reflects the broader socio-economic dynamics of the colonial plantation economy. One of the novel's significant contributions is its exploration of gender dynamics within the tea plantations. Women workers, despite their crucial role in the industry, faced multiple layers of discrimination, including physical abuse, economic deprivation, and social exclusion. The protagonist's journey underscores how patriarchal structures, both within and outside the plantation system, compounded their suffering. During the festival, he compares the workers' joy and the light in the garden with the light within himself and says, They will rebel; one day, they surely will. In *Kuli Mem*, Ajay Bhattacharya illustrates the story and history of how the imperialistic capital in the tea industry once trembled under the workers' vibrant strides, through real-life experiences

Moreover, *Kuli Mem* not only documents oppression but also highlights the resilience and agency of the workers. Their acts of defiance, subtle or overt, signify the emergence of a collective consciousness that laid the foundation for future labor movements. The novel thus serves as an important historical and literary document that deepens our understanding of colonial labor exploitation. By revisiting Bhattacharya's work, this study reaffirms the need to examine historical injustices in the tea plantation sector and their lingering socio-economic effects. Recognizing these narratives can contribute to ongoing discussions about labor rights, migration histories, and post-colonial socio-economic structures, ensuring that the struggles of tea plantation workers are not forgotten.

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