

“It would taste better with sugar”—Navigating deprivation and confidence in everyday life on a tea plantation in Assam

Anna-Lena Wolf (she/her) 

Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg,
Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology,
Reichardtstraße 11, 06114 Halle (Saale), Germany

Correspondence

Anna-Lena Wolf, Martin Luther University
Halle-Wittenberg, Institute for Social and
Cultural Anthropology, Reichardtstraße 11, 06114
Halle (Saale), Germany.
Email: anna-lena.wolf@ethnologie.uni-halle.de

Funding information

Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Grant/Award Number:
Phd scholarship

Summary

This story focuses on an ordinary working day on a tea plantation in Assam from the perspective of Jiya—a tea plucker on Dolani Tea Estate. It illustrates how Jiya navigates fundamental deprivations in her everyday life structured by the company's relentless siren without losing track of the scope for confident action. The photos, the plantation, the protagonist, and the incidents described in the story are based on real places, persons, and observations I encountered during thirteen months of fieldwork on Assam tea plantations between 2014 and 2017. However, the compilation of multiple observations into one day is a work of fiction. All names of persons and places in the story are pseudonyms. Quotations in the text are my own translations from Hindi into English.

KEYWORDS

Assam, deprivation, everyday life, labor, tea plantation

FIRST SIREN: TIME TO GET UP

Jiya woke up late, at five o'clock in the morning, one day in November, when the company's relentless siren awoke the plantation with its howling, jarring sound. Jiya started her daily routine by washing yesterday's dishes since the water supply had already stopped by the time her family had finished dinner the previous night. Before daybreak, still wearing her loose nightgown, she stepped out into the dark street in front of her house, while her husband and children were still asleep. Holding the dirty dishes in her hands, she walked toward one of the two watering places in her street. Unfortunately, two women had been faster than Jiya, so she had to wait. “I just got up too late today,” she said ruefully. When it was her turn, she tied up her ankle-length nightgown to prevent it from getting wet

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2023 The Authors. *Anthropology and Humanism* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of American Anthropological Association.



FIGURE 1 A tea plantation laborer's kitchen. Photo by the author, Assam 2015.

and started to wash the dishes using a wadded wisp of straw as a dish sponge and solidified ashes from the kitchen stove as detergent. After cleaning the dishes, Jiya quickly washed herself at the same water spot.

Jiya was about thirty-two years old at that time. She lived with her husband and two children, aged twelve and sixteen, in a labor line on Dolani Tea Estate. The workers called her labor line the “Baptist church line” since the church was on that road. The labor line was close to the central marketplace, where a few shops were located, and the weekly markets and important events took place. Labor lines are usually spread out all over a tea plantation. In Dolani Tea Estate, however, all the labor lines were positioned together around the central marketplace. Jiya grew up on Dolani Tea Estate as the daughter of a tea plucker and a factory worker. Jiya's ancestors had migrated to Assam from the central Indian state of Odisha to work on tea plantations during British colonial rule in India. Jiya's father had died long ago. Her mother had retired a couple of years earlier and had fallen severely ill since. The mother lived with one of Jiya's brothers in the upper labor lines. Jiya had married young when she was only fifteen years old and had worked on the plantation for almost two decades. “I understood early what it means to suffer,” she commented once.

After Jiya had hurried back to her house from the water pit that day, she lit a fire in her kitchen—a room attached to her three-room house with a mud floor, bamboo walls, and a corrugated iron roof (Figure 1). The kitchen was almost empty, except for the fire pit, which Jiya had built barehanded from bricks and clad with a mixture of clay and cow dung. She had left two vents in her construction—one in front and one on top so that she could make a fire in the front opening. She gradually added the firewood, partly provided by her company and partly collected from the woods. The opening on top was used to place a pot over the fire. Jiya washed some rice and put it on her self-made fire stove.

SECOND SIREN: GETTING READY FOR WORK

When Jiya slipped into her house after putting the rice on the stove, the second company siren rang out at six o'clock, exhorting her and all the other laborers to get ready for work. Jiya woke her two children up to get them ready for school and dressed herself in an old sari. Her daughter was in class eight in a governmental Assamese-medium school in a nearby town. Her son was in class five in a private English-medium school. Neither Jiya nor her husband had ever attended school. Jiya regretted that her parents had never let her go to school. She had been obliged to help her mother with the housework and take care of her brothers and had started working when she was just thirteen



FIGURE 2 Tea laborer dressing in front of a mirror. Photo by the author, Assam 2016.

years old to support the family with some extra income. Jiya's only sister had died as a child. Her two brothers were allowed to attend school; however, one was not interested in it, and the other had dropped out at some point. Jiya's husband worked as an electrician for the tea company and had fluctuating working hours since he worked in shifts. Sometimes he did not feel like working at all. He aspired to work as an electrician outside the plantation, convinced he could earn much more for the same kind of work.

Jiya combed her hair in front of a small mirror with a yellow plastic frame (Figure 2). She also applied some purple lipstick. “To prevent the dry cold cracking my lips,” she said to herself. Suddenly, she knelt in the middle of the room, pulled the long edge of her dark green sari over her head, and uttered a prayer. When she got up, she commented: “I should not forget to be thankful since my life was gifted to me and for what I have.” Jiya was born into a Hindu family but converted to Christianity after she married her husband, whose family was Baptist.

Jiya's rice in the kitchen was ready to eat. She kept the rice water aside to drink later and served her children rice for breakfast and some leftover vegetables from the night before. Vegetables meant potatoes. She packed the same food for her children and herself for lunch. Instead of eating food herself, Jiya had tea for breakfast, which the company provided for her. On top of that, she washed down some Ayurvedic medicine with hot rice water to stave off the sensation of hunger. In the absence of milk and sugar, Jiya drank her tea black with salt, noting that “it would taste better with sugar” while stroking her spindly thin belly.

THIRD SIREN: BRISK STEPS TO WORK

Just as Jiya was collecting her working utensils in her big bamboo basket and strapping it onto her back, the siren rang for the third time, indicating that it was seven o'clock—the official start of work. Jiya stepped out of her house hastily, dawn having already broken its hazy light into the day. She went past the marketplace toward the garden section of the plantation. In the left corner of the marketplace, a barber sat in front of his hair salon on a bench, reading the newspaper. The barber looked up and gave a friendly greeting. Next to his salon was a small restaurant selling samosas, triangular fried dumplings with savory fillings, and jalebis, deep-fried flour batter in spirals. As usual, there were no indoor guests in the restaurant since workers only bought samosas and jalebis to take away for special occasions. On the right side of the marketplace were several small stores selling basic food and hygiene products. Every store had a low wooden shop counter facing the marketplace, decorated with lined-up plastic boxes of candy, one rupee each.



FIGURE 3 Tea pluckers carrying collected firewood in a labor line. Photo by the author, Assam 2015.

Jiya took a left turn after the marketplace. A vivid hustle and bustle of hundreds of laborers hurrying to work in different directions filled the roads. The younger ones rode on bicycles, ringing their bells playfully while overtaking the elder ones walking. Before the big crossroad in front of the factory, Jiya suddenly turned into a small lane (Figure 3) to prevent bumping into the overseer because he would have scolded her for being late. Jiya laughed into her sleeve for escaping the overseer successfully.

In front of Jiya, a water sprinkler irrigated the fields. Some water reached her track, so she ran to avoid the water jets. When one water jet hit her nonetheless, Jiya burst into laughter, and the women walking past her joined in. After about two to three kilometers of brisk steps, Jiya reached the garden section where her group was plucking tea. Behind the garden, one could see the mountains, which marked the border to Bhutan in the distance. They appeared as different shades of blue in the morning light.

IN THE FIELDS

When Jiya arrived at the garden, most of the women in her unit had already started working. One could see people's heads poking out of the wide, green fields of tea bushes in different positions in their lanes. Jiya quickly put on an old, ragged, oversized shirt on top of her sari to protect it from getting worn out. Additionally, she wrapped a striped rag around her hips, which she tied with a rope, covering her from toe to belly to protect her clothes and body against dirt, humid leaves, and harm from tea branches or biting insects. Jiya placed another small rag on her head—against the cold in the morning, against the sun as the day progressed, and to make the weight of her basket feel less heavy. Finally, she placed the strap of her tea basket on top of her head so she could carry the basket for collecting the tea leaves on her back. She entered one lane, approached her small group, and started plucking leaves. The tea bushes reached up to Jiya's hips. Each tea bush had one thick trunk from which several small branches spread out. Since tea bushes were planted close to each other and pruned evenly in the shape of a “plucking table,” they looked more like one even surface than separate plants. The lower tea leaves were resilient and had a dark green color. Tea pluckers were trained to pluck only the soft, light green tea leaves that grew freshly on the tea bushes' “plucking table”—those famous two leaves and a bud. Jiya plucked the tea leaves with both hands by turning the palms of her hands down, snatching the fresh leaves between her fingers, and tearing them out in one go (Figure 4). She tore as many leaves as her hands could hold and then threw a handful of leaves over her shoulder into the basket on her back. She plucked so quickly that her hands seemed to float up and down over the bushes.



FIGURE 4 Woman plucking tea. Photo by the author, Assam 2016.

That day, there were few leaves because November constitutes the end of the annual plucking time. The overseer urged the pluckers to only pick the small leaves, although they were scarce. At the same time, the company put pluckers under pressure to pluck at least twenty-four kilos of green leaves per day to receive their full wage. If laborers did not manage to pluck the required kilos, half of their wages could be deducted. When they could pluck more than the daily target, they got paid extra money per kilo. In the high seasons for tea, good pluckers sometimes managed to pluck one hundred kilos of tea leaves per day, while others struggled to reach the minimum target at less fertile times of the year. Jiya was one of the efficient pluckers who earned extra income in the high seasons by plucking extra leaves. She once showed me her and her husband's pay slips proudly to demonstrate that she earned more than him.

On that day, however, Anita, a plucker in Jiya's small group, accused her of plucking the bigger leaves in addition to the small ones to reach her daily target more easily. Anita told Jiya, “Look at my leaves; they are small and beautiful like rice!” Jiya protested that she would never cheat and had been falsely accused by Anita. Jiya insisted she always tried her best and was completely trustworthy: “We workers live from the tea leaves. I know that the company's management must sell the leaves. So, if the leaves are good, it is also good for us. If we do not work properly, it is also not good for us.” When Jiya collected her daily target of twenty-four kilos of fresh leaves, her tea company could create six to eight kilos of ready-processed tea leaves for sale. Jiya earned Rs. 137—about US\$1.90—per day in cash in 2015. Her company would sell one kilo of her processed tea by auction for about Rs. 140.

At around nine o'clock, the first tea leaf weighing took place. A *mohara* dropped by on his motorcycle. He arranged a suspended scale between three wooden bamboo stakes in the middle of the road (Figure 5). Behind the scale, pluckers formed a line to wait for their turn. Jiya queued with the other pluckers after transferring her tea leaves from her basket into a nylon bag, which had more space and was easier to weigh. The *mohara* stood next to the scale and wrote down how many kilos of leaves each plucker had collected on his yellow notepad. He knew every woman by name and by the number that the company had assigned for administrative purposes.

It was easy to spot the *mohara* among the laborers. He was wearing casual pants, a shirt, and sneakers, together with an expensive-looking branded wristwatch—symbols that indicated his better economic status and distinguished him from the “ordinary” laborers (Figure 6). Moreover, his physical appearance indicated that he did not have to suffer hunger in his life. *Moharas* were often the children of tea plantation laborers who had benefitted from above-average education. Some came from outside the plantations and obtained their jobs through official application procedures. *Moharas* earned about five times the wages of tea laborers and were given better facilities, including superior houses, cleaner drinking water, full-time electricity, gas stoves, and so forth.



FIGURE 5 Suspended scale for weighing tea leaves. Photo by the author, Assam 2016.



FIGURE 6 A *mohara* taking notes of the amount of collected tea leaves. Photo by the author, Assam 2016.

When it was Jiya's turn, she hoisted her heavy bag full of leaves with both hands to hang it on the suspended scale. The scale showed that she had collected seven kilos this morning, but she did not pay attention to the measurement because she was busy quickly taking her bag down and moving on to make way for the next plucker waiting for her turn. The *mohara* stimulated a high pace by calling the next woman's name and number even before Jiya had fully grabbed her bag back from the suspended scale. She placed the bag on her head and moved on to a red midget tractor waiting at some distance. Three male field laborers collated all the leaves in front of the tractor. They emptied Jiya's nylon bag into an even bigger nylon bag of the same kind. To stuff as many leaves as possible into one big bag, one of the field workers pressed the leaves deep into the bag with his bare feet. When a bag was full, the field workers placed it onto the tractor's trailer.

After dumping her tea leaves, Jiya moved on to the water tanks, which provided fresh cold water and hot, salted tea. Jiya pushed herself in front of the water tap with her co-workers and reached for the water jet to clean her feet, hands, and face. Then, she took an old plastic bottle and filled it with drinking water for herself. All workers shared the same tap of water (Figure 7).

When Jiya moved back slowly to the garden to continue plucking, the tractor driver started his engine and drove off to deliver the leaves to the company's factory for further processing. Jiya's collected fresh tea leaves would be processed into orthodox or CTC (Crush, Tear, Curl) black tea. Ready-processed



FIGURE 7 Tea pluckers accessing a water tank. Photo by the author, Assam 2016.

CTC tea took the shape of small-hackled crumbs, typically used to prepare Indian chai. Fresh tea leaves were collected and weighed three times a day—at nine, twelve, and four o'clock. After the second weighing, pluckers had about an hour's lunch break.

FOURTH SIREN: LUNCH BREAK

Jiya sat with Anita and the other pluckers from her small group for lunch. They formed a circle in the middle of a dusty road that separated two garden sections. Jiya untied the rope around her hips and loosened the fabric which she had wrapped around her body while plucking. She spread the fabric on the ground to sit on. She opened her bag, in which she kept her lunchbox—quite a big stainless-steel bucket full of rice, together with a small number of potatoes on top. Her lunchbox looked like those of the other group members—in shape and content (Figure 8).

Jiya placed the lid of her box carefully in front of her, got up, and walked around with her bucket to share a tiny amount of her potatoes. The other women in her group did the same. After everybody had shared parts of their lunch, each woman had a mixture of differently prepared vegetables on her bucket's lid, although the variety was limited to potatoes and spinach.

After lunch, everybody relaxed a bit. Some women in Jiya's group combed and dressed someone else's hair. The conversations revolved around daily issues: “My daughter-in-law prepared food this morning.” “There was no water at four o'clock this morning, so I went to sleep again for an hour.” “I have pains everywhere.” “The tea bushes do not provide good leaves today.” “Why didn't Rita come to work today?” “My daughter needs to get married soon.” “I have not seen the manager (*barā sahib*) for a few days.” And so on.

Everybody listened carefully when one woman shared that she heard about a woman and her unborn baby who had died the night before. She told the others that the pregnant woman had gone to the hospital because her baby was about to be born. Only one doctor was employed on the plantation, and he spent very little time in the hospital, apart from two consultation hours each afternoon. The rest of the time, one or another nurse or helper was responsible for overseeing the hospital. Moreover, medical equipment and medication were very limited. The woman narrated that the pregnant woman had faced difficulties in birth labor the previous night. When the nurse present could not reach the doctor, they transported her to the next tea plantation's hospital, where a doctor was available, in the company's ambulance. However, the pregnant woman and her baby did not survive the journey.



FIGURE 8 Nylon bags containing tea pluckers' lunchboxes. Photo by the author, Assam 2016.

After the lunch break, Jiya and the other women reluctantly returned to work. Although the winter season was about to start, and the morning hours were already getting cold, the sun was boiling after lunch. Jiya struck up one song after another as a pastime to overcome her boredom—popular Bollywood songs and *bhajan* devotional songs. Jiya also hid between tea bushes to take a small break by disappearing from the overseers' sight. The last weighing took place at four o'clock. The pluckers had to wait for this last weighing because they wanted to add the tea leaves they had collected from their afternoon working hours. On some plantations, laborers complained that the company conducted the last weighing even later than four o'clock to force laborers to work overtime—especially during the high seasons. On that day, however, the final weighing was on time.

FIFTH SIREN: END OF THE WORKDAY

Afterward, Jiya and the others swarmed back home. Walking home could take half an hour to an hour, depending on the work section's distance to the labor lines, which changed daily. As Jiya walked home, she said to her neighbor, “You don't feel like walking so far after a day of work, do you?” Her neighbor nodded in agreement.

As Jiya reached the marketplace, she saw lots of people standing in front of the labor club, a small building that the company provided to the laborers for meetings, to watch TV, or just to hang out. The people were talking across each other excitedly. Jiya approached the crowd and tried to figure out what was going on. The local president from the All Adivasi Students' Association, one of the main interest groups working on behalf of tea plantation laborers in Assam, told her that a girl from a neighboring plantation had been “kidnapped by an agent” who wanted to take her to Delhi for work. “Another case of human trafficking,” the president concluded, slipping back into the labor club. Jiya decided to go home since she needed to get some housework done. As she walked to her house, she became very angry, as her daughter had recently been “kidnapped,” along with another girl. Almost every family on the Dolani tea estate had some family member who had been kidnapped in that way.

When Jiya reached her house after work, it was already past five. Since it got dark very early in the latitudinal lines where the plantations in Assam were located, Jiya worried about finishing her housework soon. Reaching her house, she dropped her working utensils and washed her feet and hands properly. “The garden is so dirty,” she said. Washing her feet after plucking also helped remove the unpleasant itching that is an ordinary concomitant of working between tea bushes. Jiya hurried back and forth around the house to get the housework done as quickly as possible. She took the dishes she had used

for breakfast to the watering place and cleaned everything. When she returned, she cleaned the house floor with a handmade broom. In the meantime, Jiya's husband and son played carom in the garden. Jiya often regretted that she and her husband could not help their children with their homework because the children were the first ones in their family to have an education.

Before Jiya started her preparations for dinner, she took a bath. There was a vivid hustle and bustle around the watering place since so many women needed water simultaneously after work. Jiya wrapped a thin cotton towel around her wet hair after bathing. Her whole body shivered from the cold. The water provided came from the nearby mountains and was extremely cold. Jiya rubbed her shaking hands in front of her body and blew some air from her mouth into her hands to feel warmer. She carried buckets of water to her kitchen and started cooking with her daughter's help. Her son had collected the weekly food ration from the company's distribution center today. Jiya was excited to make roti tonight since the company's whole wheat flour ration was never sufficient for a whole week and had run out. While she prepared bread and vegetables for dinner, neighbors visited. Jiya's husband and son were watching TV and entertaining the guests. Jiya had to stop cooking to prepare tea for the visitors since the fire stove only had one hob. During the winter days, it was very pleasant to spend time in front of the fire to stay warm, and sometimes the whole family gathered around the fire pit in the kitchen during the evening while the food was being prepared, although that made their eyes burn from the thick fire smoke after a while.

Jiya's family gathered in front of the TV for dinner that evening. The pleasant smell of flame-grilled hot bread filled the house while they ate. They watched a news channel. A few weeks previously, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had announced the demonetization of five hundred- and one-thousand-rupee notes, and the news was reporting on people waiting in long lines in front of ATMs to take out money. While they were watching TV, the electricity cut out several times. As Jiya lit a candle and placed it on the table, the candlelight broke the complete darkness. After dinner, Jiya and her family members got ready to sleep. It was only seven thirty in the evening, but her day would start early again tomorrow. She would try to get up before five o'clock—early enough to avoid queuing at the water spot again.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This story is dedicated to Jiya, who allowed me to share some time of her life with her. Her wisdom, strength, warmth, and confidence deeply impressed me. I thank Julia Eckert, Ravi Ahuja, and Edda Rohrbach for their helpful comments on earlier versions of the story. The research project was funded by the Heinrich Boell Foundation. Open access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

ORCID

Anna-Lena Wolf  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4307-0506>

How to cite this article: Wolf, Anna-Lena. 2023. ““It Would Taste Better with Sugar”— Navigating Deprivation and Confidence in Everyday Life on a Tea Plantation in Assam.” *Anthropology and Humanism* 48(2): 319–327. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anhu.12432>.