



BOOK REVIEW

Plantation Workers in Sri Lanka

John Cameron*

Jayawardena, Kumari and Kurian, Rachel (2015), *Class, Patriarchy, and Ethnicity on Sri Lankan Plantations: Two Centuries of Power and Protest*, Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, pp. 348.

This book is a rich account of changes in the institutional environment determining the lives of people who work on plantations in Sri Lanka. The spatial scale embraces all the plantations on the island and the time scale is an ambitious 200 years. The book includes insights from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives to create an intersectional pattern that involves generally negative reinforcing interactions between identity markers of class, ethnicity, language, and, over time, nationality. A strong parallel theme is the patriarchy that divides the plantation people's experiences into differently gendered experiences.

The book has a central concern with the slow and uneven transition from the working and living conditions of *de facto* chattel slavery to wage labour with severely restricted upward mobility opportunities. The journey is recorded in detail in thematic "episodes" in a chronologically open, descriptive style. Each chapter moves the story forward thematically and also broadly corresponds to a new chronological period. The authors do not, however, become trapped by the chronology, and move back in time to pick up the long-duration history of the chapter's theme. So the story moves forward in spirals, a method slightly disconcerting at first (as the travel back in time can be substantial), but the style does work once one is accustomed to it. More generally, the book is written in a very accessible style, in which vignettes of people's biographies are introduced to humanise the institutional narrative.

The book deals directly with many "outsider" individuals who attempted to intervene in the lives of people on the plantations. Most of these people were attempting to improve the working and living conditions on the plantations, but voices of

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reactionary planters appeared regularly to interrupt the benign intentions of enlightened colonial officials (especially when medical-professional concerns outweighed more general State coercive solidarity with the “plantocracy”), social reformers carrying liberal ideals, trades union and political organisers, and Indian nationalists. While the book does have the word “protest” in the title, suggesting a focus on actions by people in the plantations themselves, their voices are rarely heard directly (though mass actions are well documented).

Although the theorisation in the book is light-handed, the authors do make relevant references to seminal inspirational sources, such as James Scott (“weapons of the weak”), V. I. Lenin (trade union consciousness), and clusters of thinkers on feminism, social justice, and human rights. But the literature on subalternity is not mentioned, and it would have been interesting to read how the authors would engage, albeit critically, with that concept. Overall, in terms of both theorising and empirics, the scope and approach of the book brought Gramsci to mind, though his work is not explicitly mentioned.

This book merits careful reading by anyone interested in the path dependence of oppressive relationships that link long-duration colonial influences with post-colonial societies (that is, post-colonial in the contemporary sense of being still marked by the colonial past). For instance, this reviewer was vividly reminded of research in Fiji uncovering an institutionally contrasting, but similarly painful, journey for people who came to Fiji as indentured labour and became sugarcane-growing small-holders.

There are many points of detail that would be worth highlighting, but for the purposes of this review, four of international interest are selected:

- i. The early plantation period was marked by the transfer of labour practices from the West Indies.
- ii. There were supportive contacts between the British women’s suffrage movement and leading women in Ceylon in the 1920s. The universal adult enfranchisement of women over 21 years was implemented historically relatively early – in the 1931 General Election – and appears to have included women on the plantations.
- iii. The interventions of the Indian nationalist movement before and after Indian Independence, though well intentioned, may have played into the agenda of Sinhalese ethno-religious nationalists seeking to deny rights to people on the plantations.
- iv. The people on the plantations, despite their long history of economic exploitation and political exclusion, were not a significant factor in the Tamil Eelam secessionist movement.

A small suggestion for a future edition of the book: maps and timelines would help the reader, although their absence did not detract from the reading of a very engaging and well-researched book.