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Steeping Gendered Labour: Nostalgia and the Sri Lankan Tea Plantation Economy

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Abstract

The socio-historical relationship between the state and unfree labour systems creates space to analyze the ways in which unfree labour is reproduced across temporal periods. In 19th century Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka), unfree labour begins as a distinctly colonial project, seeking to manipulate an indentured Indian Tamil workforce for agricultural tea yields. Such a process involved high levels of colonial manipulation, which was made possible through illiberal gender dynamics, class structures, racial constructions, and religious affiliations. While contemporary society generally challenges such notions, Sri Lanka curiously continues to employ such practices on tea plantation estates in modernity. In particularly, the continuity of a gendered labour division in plantation communities remains as commonplace today as it was at the system's inception in the mid-1800s. This paper examines the concept of nostalgia and the ways in which unfree labour systems have been reproduced even beyond its colonial inception. In analyzing Sri Lanka's trajectory and cyclical return to gendered and unfree labour, one can appreciate the how the contemporary state maintains unfree systems for the benefit of the state. The analysis concludes that, while it may be economically advantageous for states Sri Lanka to maintain this nostalgic link to unfree and gendered labour systems, the social implications of these illiberal policies remain overwhelmingly detrimental for the rights and well-being of its citizens.

Keywords: unfree labour systems, gender divisions, nostalgia, contemporary illiberalism

Introduction

How has gender figured in the historical and contemporary Sri Lankan tea plantation economy? Why has modern economic development pertaining to labour failed on Sri Lankan plantations, and how does the contemporary experience with labour on the plantation mirror its gendered origins? During the early 19th century, many British colonies and possessions turned towards agricultural yields as a means of providing sustenance to the British Empire and revenue from exports on a newly globalized market. Towards the late 19th century, British Ceylon (now known as Sri Lanka) turned towards tea as a resource with burgeoning demand, both in England and abroad.[1] The rapid growth and demand of this industry required significant amounts of manual, low-skilled labour that planters were determined to acquire in order to readily capitalize on this market. From this sociohistorical context, the famed Ceylon tea trade was born. From its inception, the Ceylon tea trade used various forms of unfree labour—namely indentureship and Kangani migration—to incentivize labour transfers. While it is generally accepted that these migration systems as a whole incorporated a serious element of coercion and deception, there still remains gaps in the analysis of socioeconomic conditions on the plantations, particularly in relation to female-centric labour and dynamics. Even more curious, however, is how these dynamics extend beyond their historical context into the contemporary tea industry in Sri Lanka, in spite of such practices being widely regarded as illiberal by modern standards. In this essay, I will analyze the history of labour migration in Ceylon and how its gendered divisions came about in a historical context. In moving into the contemporary period, I will reflect on how these gendered divisions remain present in modernity, and provide sociological rationales for how these elements have been maintained in Sri

[1] The contemporary nation-state of Sri Lanka is sometimes referred to by its colonial name, Ceylon. For the purposes of this research paper, the name Ceylon will be used to refer to the state prior to 1973, and Sri Lanka will denote the state post-1973.

Lankan society today. In reflecting on these tenets, I will posit a *Nostalgia Theory*, which suggests a sociohistorical linkage of historical forms of unfree gendered labour in Ceylon with modern forms of female-centric bondage in Sri Lanka. By bringing together historical and sociological knowledge of the former and contemporary systems respectively, one will be able to appreciate the ostensive immovability of unfree labour systems, and how historical systems can bleed into modernity.

I. Note on Terminology and Defining Labour

In this essay, I will be employing varying definitions of unfree labour in relation to the Ceylonese and Sri Lankan systems. Each will be further examined in the following sections, but I will move here to provide definitions for analysis. The first form of unfree labour employed in Ceylon was that of Indian indentured labour. Indentured labour is typically defined as labourers who are recruited on contracts that bind them to servitude with limited rights for a defined period of time (Heartfield 2017, 335). This evolved into the second form of unfree labour, the Kangani recruitment system, loosely based off indentureship, which will be discussed at length in a forthcoming section. The third form, representing the contemporary system of unfree labour in Sri Lanka, is that of contemporary or modern slavery. Bales describes this form of slavery as "a relationship in which one person is controlled by violence through violence, the threat of violence, or psychological coercion, has loft free will and free movement, is exploited economically, and paid nothing beyond subsistence" (Bales 2007). Forthcoming sections will illustrate relationships between these forms of bondage and how modern forms of unfree labour became enshrined in Sri Lankan society today.

II. Background

Sri Lanka is an island nation in South Asia located off the southern shores of India in the Indian Ocean. The most populous ethnic group is the Sinhalese people. The Sinhalese speak the Sinhala language and predominately identify as Theravada Buddhists (Holt 2011, 14). Historically, the Sinhalese are considered to have been settled on the island since the 6th century BCE. Within Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese are the majority population located in every region except the contemporary Northern Province. The largest minority group in Sri Lanka is the Tamil population.[2] There is no known consensus on the specific period in which Tamils settled in Sri Lanka. Older theories suggest that Tamil settlements occurred around the 10th century CE, but modern anthropological and archaeological evidence suggests that Tamils have a long history in Sri Lanka where they have been present since 2nd century BCE (Mahadevan 2003, 33).

For most of Sri Lankan history, the island was divided into kingdoms that collectively ruled over the entire region. In general, the North and Northeast regions were run by Tamil Kingdoms, while the remaining Central and Southern regions were headed by Sinhalese Kingdoms (Holt 2011, 4). Other ethnic groups have coexisted alongside Sri Lankan Tamils and Sinhalese, such as Burghers of European and Sri Lankan ancestry, Moors of Arab ancestry, and Malays of Southeast Asian ancestry. These groups came about in colonial Ceylon, predominately through various traders, colonial administrators, and skilled labourers that migrated to aid in the development and maintenance of the newfound Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonies (Mahadevan 2003, 45).

During British colonial rule (1796-1948), the advent of a newfound Indian Tamil community came about in Ceylon. This group is of particular interest to this research essay as Indian Tamils were the central actors involved in transfers of unfree labour to work on Ceylonese

[2] The term ‘Eelam Tamil’ or ‘Ceylonese Tamil’ are also used interchangeably to differentiate Sri Lankan Tamils from Indian Tamils.

tea plantations, and they remain a sizeable community today. It is important to note that, although Indian Tamils share Dravidian ancestry and cultural similarity with Sri Lankan Tamils, they are nevertheless considered a unique group due to their recency in migrating to Sri Lanka. While both groups may share common cultural elements, the development of Indian Tamils and Sri Lankan Tamils has differed greatly in Sri Lankan history, and thus warrants a demarcated category.

III. Commodification of Tea in Ceylon

The first recorded instance of tea planted in Ceylon was in 1840 by Scotsman Sir Anthony Oliphant, the Chief Justice of Ceylon. It is thought that he planted tea in the Kandyan highlands (Nuwara Eliya region) for his personal use and cultivation (Oliphant Bungalow – Nuwara Eliya 2017). Although the conditions in the Kandyan Highlands are now known to produce high quality teas, this was not why he chose to do so. Rather, it is likely a coincidence that he chose this prime location given that the majority of the colonial administrators preferred to settle in the cooler highlands as opposed to the more humid and tropical coastal regions of Ceylon.

The first large-scale tea plantation in Ceylon is thought to have been founded by James Taylor, a Scottish lawyer, in 1867. This was an intentional process aimed at cultivating agricultural yields for economic gain (Wenzlhuemer 2008, 76). Taylor had some experience in the tea industry from his time in Assam (British India) during his early adulthood. The East India Company and Ceylon Planter's Association held interest in prospective tea yields in Ceylon, and supported Taylor by providing seedlings of Assamese tea for his expedition. From these conditions, Taylor created the first plantation at Loolecondera, located in Ceylon's Kandyan Highland region.

Ceylon was an attractive plantation economy due to its unique geographical conditions. Tea as a whole was favourable as it could grow anywhere from sea level up to 6000 feet in altitude.

The Ceylonese highlands were conducive in the sense that the wet conditions and high altitude produced a smoother, less bitter tea composition. The cultivation period was also significantly shorter, being about 2 years in lower areas and 5 years in higher areas (Wenzlhuemer 2008, 82). This was a much faster growing period than for Assamese or Chinese tea, which took a minimum of 6 years to reach full potential at a lower altitude. By the late 19th century, tea acreage and exports reached an all-time high. Acreages and export volumes increased exponentially between 1880 and 1890, and the Sri Lankan tea industry was born.

IV. Indentureship, Kangani, and the Contemporary Systems of Labour Transfers

Once tea was proven to be a profitable industry in Ceylon, planters faced a crisis of labour. Tea production requires high volumes of human labour in order to delicately plant, pluck, and dry tea leaves in a manner that cannot be replicated by machinery. As a result, planters recognized the intensity of labour required to maintain the tea plantations and had to conjure a system by which labourers were brought on a large scale to work on these plantations. While it may seem apparent to turn to the existing population base in Ceylon for labour, it is important to consider the strategies needed to maintain power dynamics within the plantation economy. The pre-existing population living in the Kandyan highlands of Ceylon had very little to gain in the system because they did not experience enough economic pressure to default to low-paying agrarian work (Wenzlhuemer 2007, 579). Further, if a Kandyan individual found the conditions to be too harsh on the plantation, they could, in theory, access their home regions and return to their former way of life relatively easily. In this context, planters had to look outside the pre-existing socioeconomic dynamics of Ceylon to import labourers that could be controlled and held in a power hierarchy without room for flexibility.

Given this demand, planters in Ceylon turned to South India as a geographically close region where labour could be sourced relatively easily (Ibid. 581). For South Indian Tamil communities, Ceylon was made attractive relative to their own home conditions. The lens of poverty alleviation and environmental calamity is one framework employed by planters to incentivize Indian Tamil migration to Ceylon. Labour transfers from India to Ceylon scaled up in the late-19th century, coinciding with the large-scale Great Famine of 1876-1878 affecting the Madras Presidency of Tamilian South India (Mishra, et al. 2019, 2079). It is estimated that, during this period, landless agricultural labourers constituted approximately 10 to 15% of the Madras Presidency as a result of frequent crop failures, famines, and other catastrophes (Wenzlhuemer 2007, 582). Thus, many Indian Tamils found comfort in the prospect of migrating to Ceylon, as initial plantation workers were to be provided accommodation and provisions in exchange for their labour.

Another explanatory framework is that of caste. Although limited documentation is accessible on this topic, it is understood that planters sought to capitalize on existing caste dynamics in South India to source labourers for Ceylon. Generally, it is accepted that most workers departing from Madras would have been of a lower caste with no documented differential treatment during this stage of migration (Philips 2003, 21). Indeed, those who would have been relegated to low-skilled and low-paying work in Madras were seen as optimal migrants as their newfound situation in Ceylon would be a considerable increase in their social positionality compared to in South India.

Ceylon was further positioned as an ideal destination for labour transfers due to its cultural and geographical closeness to South India. The South Indian port of Rameshwaram is only 50km away from the Ceylonese port of Mannar, and is generally accessible year-round irrespective of

the northeast monsoon (Wenzlhuemer 2007, 587). The ease of travel between the regions (as opposed to West Indies or Mauritian indentureship) also aided in a labourer's ability to send remittances or return to India, either for a short period or time or to depart Ceylon permanently.

After identifying this labour pool, planters then had to construct an organized system through which labour transfers could be made. This originally came about through the traditional concept of indentured labour, but eventually transitioned into the *kangani system*.

Indentured Labour

The first system of labour migration, commonly referred to as Indian indentured labour, involved a five-year contractual agreement of servitude by Indians and the supposed advancement of wages, accommodation, and health care among other benefits by the plantation owners (Wenzlhuemer 2007, 582). This arrangement was popularized in the 19th century by the English throughout the British Empire, predominately in agricultural yielding colonies like the West Indies, Fiji, Natal (South Africa), Mauritius, the Strait Settlements (Malaysia and Singapore), and Ceylon (Lal 1998, 216). In Ceylon, the vast majority of migrants during this period hailed from Tamil regions in South India and were selected to work on coffee plantations prior to the tea discovery.

Estimates indicate that this system was the dominant one from the 1830s until the 1870s. While the *Indian Emigration Ordinance* enacted by the Government of India sought to regulate this migration, controls seldom existed to regulate the number of workers transited or the conditions they faced in the new destination (Wenzlhuemer 2007, 583). This is, in part, due to a false assumption that Ceylon's geographical proximity to India made it unnecessary and impractical to regulate controls. Another probable rationale for lack of documentation pertains to the assumptions made by colonial administrators that labourers brought from India had shared

cultural and genetic ancestry with Ceylonese communities and, thus, were not regarded as heterogenous groups until early in the 20th century. Issues with this lack of documentation arose during the Ceylonese censuses where the failure to accurately account for differences between Indian Tamils and Eelam Tamils brought about skewed and impractical statistics. In all, modern analyses lack comprehensive data on how many South Indian Tamil migrants entered under this particular system, and if any left after their indentureship term was completed.

Kangani System

The second system, referred to as the *kangani system,* was rooted in indentureship, but differed in its style of recruit and leadership once the immigrant workers arrived on the plantation. This system came into effect towards the end of the 19th century when the tea industry began to blossom in Ceylon. Due to its close similarities to indentureship, many historians do not differentiate the two systems. This, however, fails to encompass the complex social power dynamics and gendered differentiations of the kangani system over the indentureship system.

The kangani system was more flexible than indentureship in that it appointed a Tamil male overseer (known as a 'kangani') from South India himself to recruit villagers from his native region to emigrate to Ceylon. It is likely that the male kangani would have been of higher caste positionality in his South Indian community, which may have given him more weight and influence in incentivizing others to emigrate to Ceylon (Philips 2003, 21). This male kangani served an important role in not only navigating the route to the plantation by foot, but also serving as a supervisor or manager of the migrant workers once they arrived at the plantation (Guilmoto 1993). It is also reported that the Tamil male kanganis sometimes shared the profits of the plantation alongside the plantation owner, whereas other migrant workers were paid a set wage proportional

to tea yields. In this instance, the plantation began to take on a distinct gendered hierarchy where the European planter and Tamil male kangani profited from tea exports and sales, while women and children, lacking leadership roles, remained the cheaper labour force of the operation.

The kangani system sparked broad issues of status for the Indian Tamils migrating to Ceylon. For many years until 1911, British Ceylon chose to lump Indian Tamils and Sri Lankan Tamils into the same category on the census. This makes it challenging to ascertain how many Indian indentured labourers existed in Sri Lanka at the time, and whether there was ever a mass influx or exodus. Further, various citizenship laws like the *Ceylon Citizenship Bill* (1948) de facto and de jure created a stateless status for Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka as they were seen as not indigenous to the land (compared to the Eelam Tamils with generational connections), but were also seen as too far removed from their Indian roots by the Indian government. Indeed, it was not until 2003 that the Indian Tamils received full citizenship in Sri Lanka.

Further along in its development, the kangani system became more documented than the former indentureship system. At the peak of the kangani system in 1927, it is recorded that approximately 285 000 Indian Tamils arrived in Ceylon that year alone (Guilmoto 1993, 112). By 1942 accounts, the representation of Indian Tamils living in Ceylon had reached almost 816,000 or 2.3% of the population of Tamil Nadu itself. By 1946, Indian Tamils constituted more than 11.6% of those residing in Ceylon as a whole (Ibid. 112).

Contemporary scholars debate whether the kangani system was a form of free or unfree labour. While the kangani system technically construed a simple facilitation of migrant workers from one state to another, it also bore stark similarities in relation to the mistreatment of migrants in indentureship and provided a two-tiered system of labour management. The legal constraints placed on kangani migrants constitutes one area where their labour can be considered unfree.

Under laws like the Labour Ordinance of 1841-1865 (otherwise known as the Master and Servant Laws), magistrates were empowered to return any workers who escaped the plantation and impose imprisonment of one or two months for 'insolence' (Kurian and Jayawardena 2014, 14). The movements and activities of migrant Indians were navigated through the criminal legal system, whereas contractual employment-based issues were typically adjudicated through the lesser-punitive civil system under British common law. For instance, if one was to resign or defect from a posting without adequate notice as outlined in their contract, British civil law would ordinarily provide avenues for employers to recoup financial damages resulting from the resignation. For plantation workers, however, criminal law applied to defecting or resigning without notice, and they could be prosecuted with a possibility of jail time if found guilty of such an offence. In applying definitions like Bales's to the kangani system, it becomes clear that the threat of structural and physical violence alongside unruly economic circumstances allows this system to be defined as slavery by modern conceptualizations.

Contemporary System (c. 21st Century)

In the contemporary period (c. 21st century), Sri Lanka is still regarded to be a labour-receiving country (Integral Human Development 2022). While the majority of migrant labourers still emigrate from India, they work predominately in skilled infrastructural projects rather than in unskilled agricultural plantation work.

Apart from new influxes of labour, there still remains the question of the existing tea plantation labourers. The 2001 Sri Lankan census indicates that approximately 900,000 Indian Tamils still live on these plantations, with 95.9% of them belonging to estate worker families hailing back to the origins of the system in the 19th century (Jayathilaka 2014, 2). Indeed, while

the structured system of labour transfers has ended, it is equally no longer needed to maintain the system. This is primarily because the socioeconomic conditions of the plantations, particularly gender dynamics, have ensured its survival until the present.

V. Gendered Continuity of Labour in the Ceylonese Tea Plantation Economy

From the inception of the kangani system, female labour participation increased significantly relative to the broader Ceylonese populace. By 1870, women constituted the majority of the manual labour force in the tea plantation regions, while women in more urban developing regions of Ceylon typically did not participate in the workforce as frequently (Kurian and Jayawardena 2022, 337). Male plantation workers, conversely, either own shares of the plantation or performed more technical tasks, such as operating heavy machinery or spraying pesticides. In other cases, men were given the administrative tasks of coordinating and managing the plantation. This division of labour operated on a misogynistic principle of 'female manual dexterity,' suggesting that women have a better temperament to work in the field. This led to an overall paternalistic sentiment in which female was regimented and supervised on the plantation, while men had more relative freedom in participating in different forms of labour. As such, even though Tamil Indian men faced challenges in this system, the crux of unfree labour rested predominately on the shoulders of women. Women were often regarded as 'slaves of slaves' in this system (Kurian and Jayawardena, Persistent Patriarchy 2014, 1).

While the intentional process of transferring labour ended in the 1930s, the effects of the kangani system remained in full force. Many European planters remained landholders or shareholders of plantations and sought to reinforce harsh conditions as a means of ensuring low-cost and high-quality tea. This meant maintaining existing gender dynamics and hierarchies in

order to preserve the economic model that had functioned for a century. Plantations eventually became nationalized in the late 20th century and moved towards a state-centric employment system of labour. As the system moved away from the European planter and towards freehold landowners of South Asian descent, gender dynamics curiously remained largely the same. In the following section, I will identify and analyze how this system remained upheld in the contemporary period with relation to particular pain points for plantation women across the 19th and 20th centuries.

VI. Contemporary analysis of gendered labour in Sri Lanka

While the gender imbalance of the kangani system was figured in the 19th century, the upkeep of the system remains active today. One of the most pressing areas of contemporary research in the field is how gender norms became realized over the 19th to 20th century peak period of tea cultivation, but still remains prevalent in the present day. In other words, how can such a repressive system tied to indentured labour still be functioning in the same capacity today? In the same vein, many contemporary organizations, such as the International Labour Organization, are active in Sri Lanka today, but fail to provide assessments or remedies for the roots of this gendered issue. Some existing literature, however, provides particular elements of how these historical gendered norms are maintained.

Access to Education

The most contemporaneous perpetuation of gendered norms is through education. Modern reports suggest that the lack of comprehensive co-gender education limits the ability to challenge the gender imbalance against women on the tea plantation. This is to suggest that education is a key means through which women across the world have ameliorated themselves of gender disparities,

either through becoming learned in higher paying fields, or simply through the education of global liberal norms in the education system.

While plantation schools are run by the Sri Lankan Ministry of Education, students learning on the plantations experience significant challenges compared to their urban school counterparts. In this sense, there is a significant barrier to access. Tea plantations are a de facto closed community of Indian-origin Tamils, where education in the Tamil medium is often less comprehensive when compared to Sinhala or English. Funding and teaching resources in Tamil can be scarce as a whole in Sri Lanka, but is made especially difficult when considering that the tea plantations are located in a Sinhalese-dense region of the country (Kurian and Jayawardena, Persistent Patriarchy 2014, 29). Further, due to equalization quotas imposed by the Sri Lankan government, it is much more difficult for Tamil students to achieve grades high enough to advance beyond secondary education. Reports provide that rates of achievement of secondary education are approximately 70% in Sri Lanka as whole, but only 35% on the plantations (Kurian and Jayawardena 2014, 29). This has led to an overall disenfranchisement of Indian Tamils from achieving higher education or higher paying jobs outside of the plantation.

Indeed, this discrepancy is worsened for girls. Reports suggest that girls are educated at a rate of approximately one third of their male counterparts on the plantation. This is reflected in literacy rates where over 25% of women and girls living on the plantations are deemed to be illiterate in either English, Tamil, or Sinhalese (Jayathilaka 2014, 14). This is, in part, fueled by the aforementioned issues with access. Many families with young girls see little benefit in educating them, given that they will likely end up working on the plantation anyway. Further, young girls are eligible to work on the plantations as early as age fourteen, so many families reflect

that it is more beneficial to have them work, given that educational advancement is unlikely to be achieved.

Barriers to Diverse Thought and Achievement

The issue of gender disparity is also worsened by the lack of diverse thought brought into the plantations. Bearing in mind that the Indian Tamil community is closed off from the rest of Sri Lanka, one can follow that new liberal gender norms that exist elsewhere in Sri Lanka rarely make its way back to the plantation. Many individuals living on the plantation cannot afford to travel even within the highlands of Sri Lanka, let alone visit to the major nearby cities of Colombo or Kandy to bear witness to the potential for women and achievement in society. Further, the lack of appropriate wages exacerbates the issue of leaving the plantation to achieve a broad liberal education, as one can neither afford leisure travel or tuition fees for higher education. This explains why, even though female university education has exceeded male education in Sri Lanka broadly (Gunawardena 2003, 439), and skilled female labour participation is on the rise, these diverse liberal gender norms have not been brought back to the plantation because it remains inaccessible to Indian Tamil women.

This is not to say, however, that female labourers never leave their communities. While it is true that some do leave, those that do rarely return to the plantation system with the resources necessary to alleviate its weighty gender dynamics and power structures. This is primarily related to the fact that Indian Tamil women have few opportunities beyond the plantation to work in skilled industries due to the lack of educational training and financial backing. For example, the most common exit industries for plantation women are that of domestic work in Colombo, or as migrant workers (oftentimes also domestic work) in regions like the Middle East (Haddad Summer 1999,

39). While these opportunities may seem better than remaining in unskilled plantation work, domestic labour systems in and of themselves pose an entirely separate issue of gendered labour divisions and the challenges faced by women in those roles. Thus, although these opportunities provide Indian Tamil women exposure to a world beyond the plantation, the types of work accessible to them does little to address the inequal role of women in society.

Religion and Caste

As a closed community, religion and caste also play a key role in the Indian Tamil community. This system perpetuates the status of women by preventing upward mobility on the plantation. In a historical context, plantation owners were known to encourage narrow patriarchal elements of Indian Tamil's common belief in Hinduism as a means of reinforcing gendered ideology (Kurian and Jayawardena 2014, 14). For example, karma was mobilized to suggest that one was born a woman in this life as a result of negativity from their past life (Ibid. 15). Planters encouraged Hindu temple construction and other practices as a means of creating space for women to seek amelioration to their condition without turning against the planter. This was also represented by an influx of Goddess worship traditions where worshipping the Goddess provides a female-centric form of consolation for one's own gendered circumstances. Many plantation women note that devotion to Goddesses like Kali, Sarasvati, and Lakshmi are thought to be commendable deeds by which a woman can achieve good karma and be born as a man in the next life (Ibid. 15). Contemporary sociologists studying gender dynamics on the plantation remark that it is plantation men that perpetuate the 'women's work as karma' narrative, while women seemingly reinforce the concept by describing their labours as 'the boon they have received from the gods' (Philips 2003, 26). By narrowly focusing in on their internal religious conditions, planters and even fellow

plantation men deter women away from challenging their inequal status through other social or political means.

With regards to caste, the closed system of the plantation sector ensured that the caste system of South India was maintained on Sri Lankan plantations. Unlike in the Caribbean or Mauritius, caste could not be reinvented in Ceylon because of the closed nature of the community all hailing from the same communities in India. In short, there was no assimilation into another population that would have been unaware of one's caste – everyone came from the same background. In relation to gender, men were often picked from higher caste communities in South India as they were given leadership roles, while women were chosen from the lower caste communities (Philips 2003, 21). This doubled down on their lessened status in Sri Lanka within the closed plantation community.

The Role of Trade Unions

Trade unions offer an alternative paradigm through which to analyze gendered labour on the plantations. This is because labour organizations were not widespread and accessible in Ceylon until the late 20th century. The All Ceylon Estate Labour Federation (founded in 1931) and the Women's Franchise Union (founded in 1927) were two groups aton the forefront of labour movements in Ceylon. One of their foremost issues pertained to achieving universal franchise for plantation workers (Kurian and Jayawardena 2014, 16). At this time, the franchise was limited to the literate population whose income was at least Rs. 50 per month—a feat that only 4% of Ceylon could achieve. While the two aforementioned unions were successful in achieving universal franchise by the 1931 Ceylonese election, little movement occurs on the labour front until much later in the 20th century.

In 1972, Sri Lanka began to nationalize plantations and brought approximately 60% of plantation land under state control. This system, however, collapsed in 1977 when the state reverted to a neoliberal privatization model. By 2009, 23 private sector companies controlled the majority of tea-cultivating land, with a small subgroup of private owners with less than 50 acres of land each. Contrary to popular discourse, unions have welcomed privatization, as it brings about new employment contracts that narrow the scope of collective bargaining (Jayathilaka 2014, 122). This separation from the state also allowed unions to take on a relationship with various political parties. While this would ordinarily be regarded as a positive for the lobbying of worker's rights, high levels of exclusion and corruption create a labour organization system by the which the majority of workers (i.e. women) are excluded from the discourse and treated as political pawns for electoral gain (Jayathilaka 2014, 122).

Broader issues exist with trade unions and the engagement of the female workforce on the plantation. While women make up the majority of the trade union members, it is noted that women are often excluded from the union leadership and decision-making processes as a result of long hours in the field, domestic duties at home, and the paternalistic gender dynamics that upkeep their limited role. Women are further excluded from the labour organization discourse as it relates to their education background. Aforementioned higher illiteracy rates and lack of education as a whole are often cited as rationales for male participation in union activities, despite women's rights being the chief topic at hand. This adds to an already complex dynamic of gendered labour and the lack of female-driven participation in their labour rights and outcomes.

This does not entirely suggest that unions play no role in the amelioration of women's conditions on the plantation. Unions have been successful in some regards for achieving marginal improvements, namely those related to wages. For example, an August 2009 labour strike

ultimately yielded an increase of wages to 405 rupees [~ USD $3.50] per day (Jayathilaka 2014, 120). While this was a significant increase from the previous collective agreement, which set the rate at approximately 100 rupees per day [~ $1 USD], it did not match the rate of inflation more and the costs of goods in Sri Lanka. This is further complicated by the nature of how women's wages are paid out. While women's wages are legally required to be equal, women face additional deduction if they arrive late, take sick leave, or fail to reach the daily target of kilograms plucked. Men, conversely, do not face deductions as their labour regimentation is not based off the outputs they produce. The union dues themselves are also a site of discontent for workers as many wages are often significantly diminished by deductions. Mandatory garnishments, for example, for the Funeral Society and other religious organizations can be deducted from one's paycheque even when these services are not frequently used by all plantation workers (Jayathilaka 2014, 120). While some advancements have been made, therefore, they do not go far enough in addressing the permeating challenges faced by women in the plantation economy.

VII: Discussion: *Nostalgia Theory*, Gender, and the 1880s Plantation

In synthesizing the dynamics of gendered labour on both historical and contemporary plantations, one can appreciate that the plantation zone has remained relatively unchanging in its social and economic development. It remains curious how a system tied to slavery, indentureship, social stratification, and gendered labour can continue to have longstanding impacts today. Even with broader societal movements on the advancement of women and labour rights, the plantation sectors remain immovable. While this is not to suggest that no reforms have been made, it does indicate that the existential structures that uphold the system remain the same—gendered and hierarchical.

It is important to clarify that this system differs significantly from historical alienation and disenfranchisement. For example, when analyzing the Atlantic slave trade, one can appreciate the long-standing historical effects of slavery on African American populations and how this has impacted their ability to equitably achieve social and economic development in their communities. While disenfranchisement can certainly apply to a breadth of historical issues and effects in contemporary life, the situation for Indian Tamils living in Sri Lanka constitutes a different system through which individuals are actively marginalized in the present day in a manner almost identical to their historical past. For the purposes of argumentation, I term this phenomenon *Nostalgia Theory*, as it is a means of upholding historical unfree labour principles precisely as they were in the past, but in the contemporary period.

In synthesizing the education situation, female labour participation, labour organization, social elements, and the closed cultural environment of the plantation, one can appreciate that the plantation zone is ostensibly stuck in the 1800s. Gendered ideology that permeated at the conception of this system remains ever present in contemporary Sri Lanka, despite the very same ideologies ceasing to exist in the otherwise urban and even rural zones of Sri Lanka. The gendered labour of women on the tea plantations in Sri Lanka is inextricably linked to colonial legacies, imperial history, economic, social, and religious exploitation, slavery, and an overall lack of social mobility. The closed nature of the plantation economy remains the crux of the issue as these communities have not developed much more than their situation upon arriving in Ceylon during the colonial period.

It is also important to refute the notion of allochronic discourse when positing the *Nostalgia Theory*. Allochronic discourse, coined by Johannes Fabian, posits that scholarly works on post-colonial spaces tend to analyze with an assumption that a given society is pre-modern (Fabina

2014, 174). In other words, the physical and social post-colonial space comes to represent a time that is decidedly primitive. On the contrary, the idea of *Nostalgia Theory* in this context seeks to analyze the linkage between the historical sociocultural life and structure of the plantation in relation to its contemporary continuities that rely on those very same colonial structures. *Nostalgia Theory* reflects on the impact of colonial practices themselves, while also contextualizing them in their modern reproductions. As such, this cannot be considered an act of allochronic discourse, because it lacks the active view of post-colonial societies as both pre-colonial and pre-modern.

Nostalgia Theory suggests that the unchanging nature of the plantation environment is directly tied to its cyclical maintenance of its roots. In spite of marginal modern advancements, the system itself was construed in such a manner that the nostalgic link to bondage cannot be broken without a dismantling and reconceptualizing of the system as a whole. Indeed, broader contemporary Sri Lankan politics and social organization benefits from the labour of the Indian Tamil women on plantations, while also subverting their status through the lack of social development programmes. In short, even though the European planter and imperial period is long gone, the modern state and society still benefits from maintaining a nostalgic link to the British colonial period rather than reforming it to bring Indian Tamils into the fold. In moving forward from these concerns, serious thought must be given to methods of dismantling early colonial systems, and reconstituting them with modern ethics and principles on the broad rights of labourers and women.

VIII: Conclusion

In moving forward from Sri Lanka's history with gendered unfree labour on tea plantations, the state and society must untangle its web with unfree labour. While there is not one party to blame

for the evolution of indentureship into the contemporary period, one can appreciate the threads of nostalgia that uphold adverse misogynistic principles in contemporary life. In analyzing social sectors like history, education, religion, and labour participation, one cannot deny that these elements enacted to maximize female-driven outputs that permeated in the 19th century remain ever present today. While advancement is marginally achieved in narrow aspects of female labour discipline, this does not go far enough in addressing the long-standing impacts this system has had on Indian Tamil families and women. While Sri Lanka attempts to become an independent beacon of international development in Asia, it equally cannot ignore the hinterlands of its own country where colonial life and disenfranchisement of women is propagated. In implementing good development, the state and society must consider its colonial discontents and actively work to dismantle these structures according to international human rights and labour standards. The example of Sri Lanka and its history with unfree labour speaks to a larger context of slavery systems and how they remain unchanging over long periods. The cyclical trajectory of labour and gender speaks to bonded labour systems as a whole and how this discipline reproduces its negative elements long after colonial life. If Sri Lanka is to speak for unfree women in unskilled industries across the world, post-colonial states must do better in considering the roots of their citizen's discontents and actively work towards creating systems of free and fair labour for all.

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