Book reviews


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An important contribution to the field of indentureship studies in relation to women and systems of unfree labour in Malaysia, Arunima Datta’s monograph analyses the periodic resistance of female Indian labourers on the colonial rubber plantations of Malaysia (their moments of ‘fleeting’ agency) to argue for a better appreciation of their vital role in resistance to colonially managed, oppressive forms of plantation labour. Datta’s study refers not only to the period of indenture in Malaysia but also the Kangany system that followed it and lasted until 1938.

The great strength of Datta’s book lies in its convincing argument for a reconfiguring of female Indian plantation labourers in Malaysia during the period of indenture and beyond. She uses substantial archival evidence and oral history interviews to challenge constructions of Indian women as occupying inconsequential workspaces on the plantation, stressing the importance of their role as weeders on the plantations and highlighting the fact that they were able to perform the same tasks as men, tapping for example, to claim equal wages. She argues, with a good deal of evidence, for an understanding of these plantation women as fully aware of their value as labourers within the colonial rubber industry.

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Further Datta rejects what she perceives to be a rehashing of colonial stereotypes by some contemporary scholars of indenture whose work, she argues, perpetuates an image of female plantation labourers as solely the silent and silenced dual victims of both white planters and other Indian labouring men. In the first case, she uses evidence of Indian men and women working collaboratively and entrepreneurially on the estates to counter the repeated representations of Indian men and women in opposition to each other. Regarding ‘domestic’ violence, Datta draws attention to the extent to which the reduction of male violence to the domestic sphere neglects the fact that the nature of such violence often took place in complex individual circumstances with much of its recording by colonists, in memoirs and newspapers for example, ignoring the extent to which the plantation itself was a sphere of colonial cruelty and violence constructed entirely by the colonists themselves.

It is interesting, given the author’s desire for a more nuanced understanding of female plantation labourers, that she chose to refer to Indian indentured labourers and those who migrated through the Kangani system as ‘coolies’. Although the reasons for opting for this term are set out carefully in the Introduction to the monograph, it is difficult not to feel that the deliberate and repeated use of the word in an academic study erases the complex ‘before and after’ lives of those who migrated from India and performed plantation labour, confining them solely to the limits of the world of the plantation in the same way as the colonial systems of unfree labour that they fought.

The study would have almost certainly benefitted from some deeper engagement with historical sources from other sites of indenture. The missionary H.V.P Bronkhurst was a missionary in Guyana for several decades, not Surinam as stated in the text, and given his inclusion at such an important juncture in the relevant chapter, it is worth noting that he was of mixed South Indian and Dutch heritage. This is nevertheless an excellent work that is hopefully the start of many more such nuanced monographs on the accommodation and resistance of Indian women under indenture.