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Plantation crisis: Ruptures of Dalit life in the Indian tea belt

By Jayaseelan Raj, London: UCL Press. 2022. pp. 234. £40 (hb); £20 (pb). ISBN: 9781800082298, 9781800082281

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This book is a detailed ethnographic account of the crisis that confronted workers in the tea plantation sector in Kerala from the early 1990s onwards. Rather than engaging too much in the debate on the causes and consequences of the crisis, the central aim of the book is to analyse ‘the nature of the intimate experience of extraordinary crises by the poor such as the workers in the plantation frontiers’ (p. 5). ‘Alienation’ is the main answer to the question of how workers experience the crisis, and every chapter adds a layer of ethnographic and analytical understanding of how such alienation comes about and what it entails.

What makes the book particularly original is the positionality of its author, who carried out systematic ethnographic fieldwork in ‘the very micro community’ into which he was born as the son of Tamil Dalit plantation workers in the tea belt of Peermade in Kerala (India). This positionality raises the question of ‘what the relationship would have been between Sidney Mintz and Don Taso if Mintz had been a Black anthropologist. Or, for that matter, if M.N. Srinivas and André Béteille had been Dalits trying to walk ... Brahmin streets to conduct research on caste’ (p. xvi). We learn that plantation workers worry about the author actually being ‘too close’ and potentially divulging ‘too much’. Meanwhile, he has other challenges regarding upper-caste managerial staff, trade union leaders and

government officials who forcefully ascribe the same identity to him as the people whom they talk to him about in narratives filled with sarcasm and stereotypes.

It is fitting that the book starts out with a nuanced and complex reflection on the challenges of the author's rather unique positionality because this positionality is a big part of why this book is so positively remarkable compared to the existing anthropological literature on plantation work. The author's 'becoming an anthropologist' involved both daring to become (even) more intimate with life in the tea belt, collecting emotional stories that people would not normally divulge to neighbours, while simultaneously attending to structural processes that go beyond subjective experiences. Meanwhile, the author attributes his deep sensitivity to the economic crisis that the workers confronted from the early 1990s to his being an insider in the community. I moreover suspect that the book's overall aim to keep workers' lives at the centre of the analysis also stems from that, as does the author's scepticism towards anthropological orientations that celebrate workers' agency 'without examining the true liberatory potential of workers' actions' vis-à-vis structures of exploitation: In a small sardonic side remark, the author reports that whenever he tried to 'appreciate' the workers for their 'creative engagement' with the crisis, they remained impassive (p. xv).

To introduce the reader to the setting of the Kerala tea plantations in crisis, the stage is set through a discussion of the pre-crisis 'moral order' of the plantations, characterized by economic alienation and exploitation as well as by forms of surveillance and hierarchy that are so socially and spatially engrained that they easily become internalized. There are also certain welfarist and 'modern' aspects to this plantation order. And though the caste system generally assigned different workers a place in the occupational hierarchy (higher caste/Syrian Christians as owners/managers, lower caste/'lower-class Christians' as superintendents and clerks, and most Tamil-speaking Dalits/Dalit Christians as workers), what is interesting is the fact that in the relative seclusion of the plantation, caste became 'atrophied': It lost its connotations to ritual purity and pollution and was not an essential part of the functioning of the plantation. Instead, caste became overshadowed by class as the central order reinforced by the plantation's production system. The reversal of this process—the re-emergence of a logic of caste—is then one of the mayor sources of the intensified alienation that the workers develop as the plantation goes into crisis. In its various chapters, the book reveals layer upon layer of understanding this alienation and caste re-emergence as part of an 'ontological transition' whereby workers started to reposition themselves and adopt a different self-perception in the context of the crisis of the tea plantation.

For one, workers' livelihood was reduced to the barest subsistence level. With the abandonment of the tea plantations by capital, the tea processing factories were shut down, and workers had to survive by plucking and selling tea leaves in a system controlled by the existing unions, which thereby transformed fully into a managing authority. Work inside the plantation was supplemented by work outside the plantation—including NREGA (a national rural 'right to work' scheme) for the women, construction and manufacturing work for the men, and recruitment by 'home nursing agencies' for high-school-educated girls and boys. Workers were moreover increasingly becoming indebted to moneylenders of the 'micro-credit' type. Besides being forced to become footloose labourers, the price of survival for Dalit workers in this new context was also being confronted with overt, unbearable types of caste discrimination that had not existed in the plantation itself.

What the crisis means for retirees is captured in a particularly harrowing chapter where it becomes clear that the end-of-employment pay-out or *service kāsū* was no after-thought in workers' lives but often the only thing that sustained them throughout the hard years of plantation life and the only way through which they had hoped to retain respect, sustain kinship relations and continue to engage in everyday sociality in the plantations. Raj shows powerfully how the indefinite deferral of the pay-out in the context of the crisis evokes an intense form of alienation 'from their labour, plantation life, kinship relations, family and from their own being' (p. 78). Retirees are left with a strong sense of the futility of human life. Meanwhile, for the plantation youth, who engage in urban migration so as to escape the crisis, self-alienation is shown to also be particularly acute. Almost all of them end up hiding their caste background in order to make their way in the city and avoid hurtful casteist prejudice. Raj argues that while this can be seen as a political act of negating caste, it simultaneously constitutes a radical denial of oneself that clearly shows

how contrary to modernization narratives, the caste system continues to oppress Dalits in neoliberal Indian society through 'the hidden injuries of caste'.

Adding a layer of complexity, we subsequently learn that the Tamil identity of the Tamil Dalit workers is, for them, not without consequence: Unlike for other Tamil group ethnicities in Kerala (e.g., Iyers or Tamil Muslims), for Tamil Dalits, their Tamil identity does not become easily integrated within the generalized Keraliyar identity and instead remains strongly marked as their outcaste Dalit identity gives them the virtually permanent status of migrant. With increased linguistic nationalism in the context of the antagonism between Kerala and Tamil Nadu over control of the Mullaperiyar Dam, Tamil Dalits workers in particular experience an abrupt shift from being inside the total institution of the plantation to suddenly, with the crisis, being placed outside society altogether.

While becoming alienated from the larger Kerala society, the workers however also become alienated from each other: Social relations and solidarity amongst the workers break down severely—a classic case, as I see it, of the disorganization of labour (Carbonella & Kasmir, 2017). Trade unions degenerate into agents of social and political fragmentation, all the more when they take up different positions concerning the reopening of the tea estates. It becomes so bad that even marriages and funerals are attended only by members of the same union. Moreover, jumping into the vacuum left by the collapse of the moral order of the plantation and the suspension of its welfare activities, a number of Hindu nationalist volunteer organizations start introducing Brahmanic and Vedic festivals in the tea estates while also Pentacostalists see new opportunities to propagate their faith, intensifying the polarization amongst plantation workers. A 'politics of decency' takes hold as the erstwhile homogeneous occupational identity of the plantation workers gives way to differentiated quests for livelihood whereby workers try to distinguish themselves from those amongst them whose livelihood strategies are deemed morally and intellectually backward.

There are phenomena that counter the absolute breakdown of solidarity, and one of them discussed at some length is the practice of workers gossiping about their exploitation, which was always integral to the plantation's social life but becomes more focused on the economic crisis and intensively used as a way to maintain belonging. The related phenomenon of circulating rumours—mainly about the transfer of ownership of the plantations—is another coping mechanism as it provides the workers with (false) hope. Raj also argues however that in encouraging workers to wait and remain relatively quiet, these hopeful rumours become yet another instrument perpetuating their alienation.

The penultimate chapter of the book turns to what is a rather striking phenomenon for anyone visiting Kerala today: the near-ubiquity of migrant labour from other, poorer, Indian states. In this chapter, we learn that a few tea estates do reopen, yet under an entirely different labour regime. The 'new-generation companies' prefer subcontracting to the wage-labour system, suspend almost all welfare measures and withdraw workers' rights to, for instance, the kitchen gardens and common yards at the tea plantation. While lobbying legislators to get rid of remaining legal workers' protections, the companies evade these by illegally recruiting vulnerable seasonal workers from for instance Jharkhand and Assam, who can more easily be super-exploited and controlled as they are fully dependent on the company and without access to the Public Distribution System shops or to union representation. Again demonstrating his exceptional and critical fieldwork skills, Raj describes in all its complexity, opaqueness and intimacy how the companies turn some migrant workers into ideal recruiters of flexible labour supplies and buffers against workers' protest.

What might surprise the reader familiar with the unique history of Kerala as a state that, through mass organizing led by the Communist Party, achieved exceptionally high levels of literacy, health and life expectancy is that *Plantation Crisis* wastes precious little words on the paradox that others might have noted about the existence of such acute poverty-related suffering in this 'model' development state. Perhaps, this is because the tea belt in which the author grew up and did his research only received the ossified, institutionalized outposts of Kerala Communism in the forms of clientelist unions and not the more radical energies of the early Communist organizing. Or perhaps there is so little left of Kerala's exceptionalism in terms of socialist commitment and egalitarianism that, unlike scholars of a previous generation, Raj feels no need to engage seriously with it. Either way, pegging the analytical debate onto global debates about the plantation economy rather than onto debates about the vicissitudes of the

Kerala model of development is legitimate and refreshing. Ignoring the baggage of Marxism in its dominant political variant in Kerala could, however, have opened the door to a more serious engagement with the heterodox theoretical Marxism in anthropology—and in the anthropology of the plantation in particular. The frequent references to for instance Eric Wolf and Sidney Mintz, the centrality of the concept of ‘alienation’, and the palpable outrage against the systemic injustices that confront the workers, all clearly bring the book close to Marxist anthropology, but the author never engages fully with its theories. I believe a deeper theoretical engagement with this tradition would have benefitted the book, allowing it to add a more powerful theoretical intervention.

Instead, there is to my taste a bit too much quick flirting with trendy theorists that distract from making such a more powerful theoretical impact. The last chapter of the book for instance approvingly references Donna Haraway’s discussion with Anna Tsing about the plantationocene as reminding us that plantations ‘are radically incompatible with the capacity to love and care for place’ (p. 190). But already in the next sentence, we are in fact reminded that plantation workers did engage in generating a sense of belonging and ownership of their line houses and the tea fields. Raj’s book itself, moreover, is to my mind the opposite of the kind of intellectual project that Tsing and Haraway engage in. Where Tsing and Haraway seem to care mostly about the grand philosophical lessons they manage to draw from ethnography, Raj clearly cares most about the people on which his ethnography is centred, making theory subservient to the aim of understanding their lives. And whereas Tsing and Haraway militate against capitalism as an abstract set of normative and cognitive thought patterns, Raj’s book is a grounded, relational and holistic ethnography of just what it means to be bearing the true costs of production in a global process of capitalist accumulation: What it means to be forced into a liminal juncture as the social order in which one has grown up abruptly shuts down in what is a ‘normal’ part of capitalist production cycles. There are very few ‘silver linings’ in this. Raj’s painful and empathetic documentation of the process in all its many aspects in social life is as powerful an ethnographic indictment as it gets of capitalist crisis and of the normalization of its brutality through the logics of caste society, the market and the corporate state.

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