

BOOK REVIEW

Fleeting Agencies: A Social History of Indian Coolie Women in British Malaya by Arunima Datta. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 254 pp.

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THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF DATTA’S “LANDMARK” STUDY

Arunima Datta’s study, *Fleeting Agencies: A Social History of Indian Coolie Women in British Malaya*, is a challenge and correction to both male-centred labour histories and to the absence of gender issues in colonial Malaya’s historiography. As Datta notes, the conventional historical narrative of South Asian coolie migration has overwhelmingly stressed “the experiences of coolie men and their instrumental role in the success of plantation colonies” at the expense of women coolies (p. 1). Thus, Datta asserts that “colonial gender politics, a key motivator in engaging coolie women as migrant labourers, remains to be explored” and the omission has to be rectified (p. 11). To unpack and provide an important corrective to male-centred histories of colonial labour, Datta “develops an innovative theoretical framework, situational agency, to explore and understand the ways migrant women negotiated the complex texture of temporality, gender, race, class and migration” (p. 3). Yet, does Datta’s innovative theoretical framework and the data she has selectively assembled, rationalised and interpreted, offer “a bold new perspective on the concept of agency and the history of long silence coolie women – their role in the colonial economy and transnational movements” as the publisher states (p. i)?

Datta in her narrative contends that coolie women as a labour force have played a crucial role in all parts of the rubber production process: from weeding, tapping

and creping rubber in factories as well as for reproducing their labour force (p. 51). Despite this fact, present-day plantation labour scholarship has, to a large extent, overlooked this and has “refused to acknowledge the importance of the agency of women workers” (p. 163) thus denying them a voice and representing them as passive figures (p. 20). Furthermore, in colonial or nationalist treatises they have been depicted “either as appendages to their coolie husbands who followed their men or as victims of kidnapping or false promises by recruiters” or primarily as “dependent” secondary labourers or victims (pp. 41, 50). As Datta says, historians of the Empire in their interpretations, “have excluded coolie women from the centre of their studies of colonial labour and migration, ... [and] much of the literature is imbued with a victimology approach that stresses the image of coolie women as victims rather than paying attention to actions taken by such women in their own interest” (p. 123). This oversight has represented their contributions across colonial plantations and society merely as an appendage to the nation’s history.

As Datta goes on to note, the only exceptions to this are the works of Jomo et al. (1984) and K.S. Maniam’s (2003) fiction (p. 161). Such literature “have laid bare, some of the real and everyday challenges that Malaysian-Indian estate women are forced to engage with in post-independence Malaysia” (ibid.). By combining and critically discerning the past and present-day lives of coolie women in Malayan/Malaysian plantations, she asserts that her study has come to grips with “a community ensnared in the debris of colonisation and decolonisation” (p. 163).

The omission of coolie women was, according to Datta, because they were primarily designed and conceptualised by men in authority (p. 1). Consequently, studies “often favoured men’s roles and voices over those of women” (ibid.). On the contrary, Datta asserts that her study will demonstrate that coolie women were not merely an auxiliary labour force (p. 11) and appendages to their men (p. 42), but, instead, that their migration had contributed to the development of the colonial political economy of British Malaya (pp. 41–42).

From this, Datta proceeds to conceptualise a methodological framework to highlight the colonial backdrop to coolie women’s migration, the factors that incentivised their migration and their emergence in colonial capitalism’s plantations as a vital labouring class. Not surprisingly, colonial capitalism’s plantations enticed the further migration of coolie women both to stabilise the Indian labour force through an “ideal moral family” and simultaneously commodified women and child labour into a cheap work force to minimise their cost and maximise their profits.

The study’s primary objective is to counter the influential judgement of coolie women by the Victorian ideals of womanhood, marriage, family life and

femininity with its compass of morality (p. 100) and to provide greater weight and fresh perspectives to the silenced history of the imperilled subalterns through “an innovative theoretical framework” based on the concept of “situational agency” (p. 2). From this, Datta aims to explore “the ways migrant women negotiated the complex textures of temporality, gender, race, class, and migration” (p. 3).

In the author’s words, the “Situational agency focuses on conscious acts of individuals, seeking to reconstruct the history of social relations and daily engagements of the subaltern subjects with different hierarchies and structures of power” (p. 16). Through this focus, Datta’s study then demonstrates the ways in which coolie women showed an understanding of the rules and their rights as labourers, and explores how they used this knowledge to create their own narratives in negotiation with estate authorities (pp. 49, 77). As Datta argues, “Some coolie women, for instance, embrace colonial stereotypical categorization to gain sympathy from planters, judges, and even coolie society while performing ‘immorality,’ while others revolted against stereotypical identities to claim labour rights as estate workers. Yet others participated in anti-colonial movements, not necessarily on patriotic grounds propagated by nationalist leaders, but to ensure survival and protection in a context of chaos and uncertainty” (ibid).

The centrality of Datta’s argument is that “despite being exploited, oppressed, and used by more powerful actors, including colonial planters and administration, middle-class Indian nationalists, and their own husbands or sexual partners, [coolie women] did not consent to be passive victims but exercised agency in navigating the complex dilemmas of plantation life in protean ways ranging from strategic compliance to armed resistance. In so doing, coolie women in Malaya played diverse and vital roles in local and transnational histories: roles which have not, to date, been fully explored by historians” (p. 2).

The notion that coolie women were solely victims of “enticement and violence of men” and “victims of moral failing” has arisen, she argues, largely due to a surface reading of the archives (p. 5). However, Datta asserts that her study endeavours to engage with the various intimate relationships’ coolie women were involved in and to tease out the vital role they played, both within the colonial plantations and the transnational nationalist movements (p. 1). Therefore, *Fleeting Agencies* aims to be the first history book to interrogate and portray respectively the vibrant role played as well as the experiences and responses of coolie women to both colonial and nationalist efforts (p. 2).

Turning to the politics of coolie women, she states that “Between the 1920s and late 1930s, Indian coolie women in British Malaya found themselves central, to a power

struggle between the British Imperial government and the Indian nationalist...” and with the entry of the Japanese military occupation in 1941 and the rapid defeat of the British imperialist these struggles were transformed (pp. 125–126). Thus, she asserts that her study has unprecedentedly excavated an important untold history of coolie women’s engagement in the Subash Chandra Bose led Indian Independence League’s (IIL) women’s wing Rani of Jhansi Regiment (RJR) and to becoming “Ranis” to fight for India’s independence (p. 125). She states, “Even popular histories of the RJR barely do justice to the complex history of the regiment and its coolie recruits” (p. 127).

Datta attributes several reasons for coolie women to become “Ranis”. The defeat of the British by the Japanese Imperial Army in late 1941 and the Japanese military occupation of British Malaya from 1942 to 1945 had a huge impact on Malayan Indians and in particular on plantation coolies. Indians irrespective of their social status suffered from a devastating psychological, economic and social impact and faced abject hardship, the nastiest of this being starvation. A combination of these factors led to fast-deteriorating livelihoods on a daily basis and Bose’s gender politics steered coolie women to be enrolled in the IIL Indian National Army (INA) and the women’s wing the RJR in 1943 to fight for India’s independence.

Datta’s study ends with an epilogue. The epilogue emphasises that such studies from below, highlighting the entanglement of the life histories of coolie women, are both of vital academic interest and important in order to unpack the life of marginalised people in postcolonial societies (p. 157). She suggests that in postcolonial Malaysia, past and present remain inseparable as “certain trends in gendered dynamics in migration and labour politics echo past colonial designs” (p. 163). Datta states that “little has changed, especially for women estate workers who continue to work in similar conditions for different owners” (ibid). For Datta, this is because Malaysia “remains deeply enmeshed in an exploitative global capitalist network, whilst maintaining racial hierarchies rooted in the colonial past” (ibid).

A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE STUDY

Although the historical importance of the study is undeniable, its weaknesses have to be highlighted. Has, for example, Datta’s “history from below” approach systematically used the rich tapestry of extant case studies, multi-sited archival research and everyday histories to chart the historiography of coolie women in the British-owned and British-managed plantations of the late 19th and early 20th centuries? Further, has Datta’s scholarship effectively teased out reliable

evidence to coherently as well as thoughtfully articulated “the lives of the socially, politically, economically, and archivally marginalized Indian ‘coolie’ women ...” (p. 1)?

Like most Eurocentric scholarship, the study’s analysis lacks a detailed focus on colonial capitalism’s exploitative mode of production within the plantation system and its profound implication on coolies’ (both men’s and women’s) lived experience in the plantations. This ideology impinged on every aspect of the coolies’ lives and, in the process, South Indian coolie labour was marginalised and manipulated to endure, suffer and survive in silence.

As George Beckford the Caribbean scholar in his pioneering and seminal study points out: “From the very outset then the plantations began as a unit of authority with control over all aspects of the lives of the people within its territory” and represented the “totality of institutional arrangements surrounding the production and marketing of plantation crops” to the metropolitan centre (Beckford 1972, 8–9). Hugh Tinker further echoes the point in his classic study *A New System of Slavery* that “though the history of Indian indenture is filled with incidents of protest, leading to violence, the most significant feature of these incidents is their short-sightedness. They thought only in terms of immediate objectives; there was no planning, and absolutely no coordination between workers on different estates. There was no coolie rebellion” (Tinker 1974, 226) and in British Malaya’s plantations resistance was individualistic and not collective (Ramasamy 1992, 95).

As Ramasamy further points out, in British Malaya’s plantations “Given the near absolute nature of management control in plantations, overt violence was rare and occurred only under extreme conditions of oppression. Passive resistance in the form of foot-dragging, not reporting to work on the pretext of being sick, running away from the workplace, and the like, was very common on plantations” (ibid.). There was no major resistance, violence or strikes from the isolated and dependent plantation coolies until 1941, a period that overlaps with Datta’s study. The notorious 1941 Klang Labour Strike involving thousands of South Indian coolies against the persistently oppressive nature of white planters was unprecedented in British Malaya’s colonial plantation history (Wilson 1981).

Yet in spite of this, Datta does not address both the inward and outward link between the “superstructure” of the colonial state, colonial and racial capitalism’s rigid race-cum-class hierarchy, as well as the subsistence wages within the plantations. The ideology of racial, social and economic inequality was justified by the huge profit-motivated power structure of colonial capitalism, buttressed by the colonial state’s judicial and extra-judicial legal system.

They were tied together to operate a coercive and exploitative mode of production to minimise cost and maximise profits (Selvaratnam 1976; 1988; Ramasamy 1992; Saha 2003). This was combined with a ruthless work discipline that regulated and monitored every movement of their work lives and even the ideology of both Indian coolie women and men (Selvaratnam 1976; 1988). There are a number of empirical studies on British Malaya's plantation economy and labour to show that the governance of European-owned and managed plantations was characterised by systematic violence and sexual abuse to coerce and control labour (Selvaratnam 1976; 1988; Ramasamy 1992; Brandon and Sarkar 2019).

Further, the system infused the colonial state's coercive judicial-cum-extra-judicial and repressive ideology into the material, social, political and domestic lives and the stifling hegemonic-cum-Hindu patriarchal system, which loomed large in the lives of coolie women. Within such a multi-faceted hierarchical and hegemonic structure, how was it possible, in Datta's terms for "many coolie women" to have "a clear understanding of their rules and rights as labourers in different context and use this knowledge" (p. 48) to "carve out channels within which they could negotiate for their own interests" (p. 1)? Datta obviously assumes to speak for the subaltern coolie women, though Gayathri Spivak in her seminal article, "Can the subaltern speak?" has cautioned scholars on the pitfall of speaking on behalf of the subaltern (Spivak 1988). Furthermore, how did coolie women play a vital role both in the colonial economy and the transnational nationalist movements unless the brutal system had coerced them into it? Additionally, how was this strategy wielded in a plantation system in which social as well as feminist inequalities were woven into its very fabric and thus, muted their voices?

Under both the indentured and "kangany" system, coolie men and women on their recruitment were in debt-bondage and therefore in servitude and consigned to arbitrary authority in both their in- and out-work lives (Selvaratnam 1976, 203; Jain 1984, 171).

Datta claims that her study is the first to portray, interrogate and articulate the vibrant role played by the South Indian coolie women, in the development of British Malaya's plantation economy and in nationalist efforts. However, Sharon M. Lee's study "Female Immigrants and Labour in Colonial Malaya: 1860–1947" published in 1989 was an early attempt to redress the neglect of the contribution of Chinese and Indian female coolie labour immigrants to the colonial economy's labour force in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In reference to the 1931 census, Lee points out that coolie women comprised one-fifth of the colonial economy's labour force. Lee's study discusses the implications of their analysis for future research on both Chinese and Indian female migration and their economic

contribution to colonial capitalism. According to Lee, most Indian coolie women recruited to British Malaya played a crucial role primarily in the development of the plantation economy and in government public works. They were involved in building construction, maintenance of roads, railways and in the provision of municipal services.

Apart from this, an ever increasing body of anthropological, sociological, political and historical scholarship, as well as historical fiction from the global North and South, including by Malaysians, have for the last several decades moved away from a state-centred framework towards a wider contextualised and globally-embedded historical framework emphasising imperialism, colonial and racial capitalism's mode of production and the accumulation of capital as factors which gave shape and direction to coolie life (Beckford 1972; Saha 2003; Selvaratnam 1976; 1988).

Such studies have highlighted that plantation workers were completely prohibited from forming collective labour organisations till the late 1930s, and that the coolies entrapped into a coercive and paternalistic labour system were driven into a strong feeling of gratitude and dependency. In other words, the Indian labourer was dependent on a form of coercive paternalism by the plantation ownership for both economic security and mediation with their immediate community (Jain 1970).

Much of the resurgent literature, by scholars both of the North and South, and by writers of historical fiction, have also used a decolonial feminist approach. Their approaches have sought to primarily map out the realities experienced by coolie women on a day-to-day basis in an ingrained patriarchal system that was solidly entangled by both the Western imperial hegemonic capitalist system and postcolonial regimes (Uyangoda 1995; Jayawardena and Kurian 2015; Maniam 1981; Pillai 2004; 2007; 2008; Nagarajan and Arumugam 2012; Jeganthesan 2019). These works have already laid the foundation for the resistant framework for decolonising colonial frameworks of docility decades earlier.

In addition to these omissions, Datta asserts that her study is the first to excavate an important untold history of coolie women's engagement in the Rani of Jhansi Regiment. This "untold history" of the "Ranis", approximately 60% of whom were recruits from the plantations, was researched by the Swedish academic Vera Hildebrand (2016) in the late 2000s and published in 2016 as *Women at War: Subhas Chandra Bose and the Rani of Jhansi Regiment*. These overlooked literary works and academic studies would have provided Datta with valuable ethnographic raw material for her research as well as allowed her to revise, narrow or modify her overarching arguments and overwrought claims. Ignoring such sources has

enabled Datta to push her own theoretical framework and selective arguments at the expense of academic rigour and lived history.

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