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Tea Pluckers Dilemma: How Female Labourers in Hatton, Sri Lanka Navigate and Resist the Gender Expectations in the Tea Plantations to Generate Greater Autonomy

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Introduction

Ceylon, now known as the nation of Sri Lanka, is composed of many cultures and identities, including the Sinhalese, which is the Indo-Aryan majority ethnicity, and a large Tamil minority. British colonizers established large tea crop plantations on the island, which required intensive labour. Plantation owners recruited low caste, labouring Tamils from South India for the job. This research investigates the contemporary conditions of the Indian Tamils who work in these tea plantations, focusing on the resistance and empowerment of female labourers in the tea plantation industry. It demonstrates the ways in which Tamil women achieved greater autonomy in their work environment and home, through their persistent fight for better working conditions. Using both ethnographic and historical research, this paper examines the ways in which Tamil women in Sri Lanka have been able to gain greater autonomy, and transform the plantations to best suit their needs. They created a sense of place for themselves, despite not legally owning any land. These women were able to adapt the tea plantations on which they lived and worked, into a space that was uniquely theirs, by dedicating themselves to that land. They vocalized their issues and concerns to the male-dominated tea plantation administration in an attempt to better their standards of living. By advocating for themselves and their families, these women have been able to navigate their expected gendered roles, resist gender-based inequities, and have greater freedom in their lives.

Background

Ceylon achieved independence from Britain in 1948, and the new state created the Ceylon Citizenship Act, which outlined the criteria for citizenship in Sri Lanka. The act disqualified a majority of Indian Tamil plantation workers as citizens (Shastri 1999, 77). A year later, the Ceylon Amendment Act specified that in order to vote, a person needed to be a citizen, which completely disenfranchised the Indian Tamil Population.

In 1983 the surmounting tension between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority eventually climaxed with a civil war between the two groups. The civil war made the government of Sri Lanka suspicious of the Indian Tamils. There was a fear that they would secretly seek help from Sri Lankan Tamils, and go against the Sri Lankan government as a greater force. However, the Sri Lankan Tamils did not consider themselves separatists. In 1986, the Grant of Citizenship to Stateless Persons Act was created, which provided citizenship to the remaining stateless plantation labourers in Ceylon. It provided citizenship to those who hadn't received it, without documentation. Although the Indian Tamils eventually attained citizenship, they were victims of the prejudices held against them for a long time. They were controlled by the state, and by plantation owners. The Indian Tamils have suffered not only as a result of the stereotypes surrounding them, but also because of their lack of land ownership. Despite the war ending close to a decade ago, their community continues to experience harsh conditions: they are neglected by both the Sinhalese and the Sri Lankan Tamil community, because they were not originally from Sri Lanka, and were a low caste community with little education.

Discussion

Acts of Discrimination

The tea industry in Ceylon is reliant on women's labour, but female labourers are considered lowest in the workplace hierarchy, and are subjected to many forms of discrimination. The surveillance of this population allows plantation owners to acquire a large amount of information about them, which can be used to determine their efficiency, assessing how hard they work, and how much wealth they generate.

Plantation workers have expressed concern over the unstable nature of their occupation. When women try to return to work after taking time off due to illness, their positions are replaced. This is especially common for women who do not have an identification card. The card recognises them as registered labour, and guarantees them stable hours and benefits. Temporary workers without identification are not given the same respect, hours, or benefits as permanent workers, which makes it difficult for them to support their families.

Most women are objectified by plantation owners. According to Neubert (2015), female plantation workers are aware of their objectified role in plantations, and its hierarchy, that continues to “undermine the expressions of control over their bodies” (371). These women constantly face discrimination from their team leaders, known as Kanganies. Many of them undergo verbal abuse: they are yelled at for talking amongst each other, taking a break, or not collecting the expected amount of tea leaves. If they do not pluck the daily minimum, their wages for the day are cut either in half or entirely. Labourers are paid at the end of the month, which makes families reliant on living “paycheck to paycheck”.

The community continues to struggle with exclusion from the greater society due to their “poor caste” and lack of education. Welfare officers at plantations encouraged young women to work in the tea plantations. However, they refused to do so for a variety of reasons: they have other jobs, and are often forbidden by their parents to work in plantations. Many of their mothers explained that while the additional income would be beneficial, they were afraid of sending their daughters to work, not only due to its back-breaking nature, but also because of the stigma associated with plantation labour. Mothers were afraid that by working in the tea plantations, their daughters would have a harder time getting married, because their “value” as women would decrease due to their occupation. Due to this, many of the them have found work in other places, such as vegetable gardens or the garment industry. These jobs pay weekly, which allows them to better support their families and repay their loans. The expectations surrounding women are deeply embedded in the culture, and it is important for these women to ensure that their daughters have a happy marriage and family life.

Discrimination is also seen in the residences of the labourers. The line rooms the workers and their families live in are “material evidence of the unevenness and precarity of landlessness for marginalized agricultural and migrant labourers” (Jegathesan 2018, 640). Line houses are “barrack-style buildings, in single or double rows” (Philips 2005,112). Few improvements have been made since its first construction by the British. Furthermore, temporary workers’ areas of

residence, and cultural practices act as ethnic markers, identifying them as “Indian Tamils” or “Estate Tamils”. They are considered different the rest of the people of Sri Lanka.

Poor working conditions

During the colonial period, women were preferred over men to pluck tea because of their "nimble fingers."¹ While women were the majority, men were hired to work at the tea plantations to trim the branches of the bushes, and help with the overall upkeep of the plantation. Men generally start working at the plantation at the same time as the women, but finish around 1 pm, while women work till 4 pm. Moreover, female labourers working in the tea estates have to balance the triple role of “mother, housewife and waged worker; walking down to the crèche with her children, working in and around the house, plucking tea leaves in the field—from sun up to sun down” (Seneviratne 2018, 1075). According to Dishanka and Ikemoto, "As far as the tea estate sector in Sri Lanka is concerned, women are responsible for all kind of household activities in addition to their full day work in the tea estate whilst the male workers are working half a day" (2018, 7). A majority of women are not recognized for the work they do at home, such as cook and clean. In the mornings they are expected to prepare breakfast and lunch for their families, and drop their children at the CDC before going to the fields. Once work is over, they collect their children from the CDC, come home and prepare dinner. After everyone has eaten, they are responsible for cleaning before going to bed. This means women are the first to wake up in their households, and the last to sleep. Seneviratne (2018) observed a female tea-plucker, Lakshmini, throughout the day. As a tea plucker, her role was to pluck the tea from the bushes, which would later be processed into tea dust, and sold to various tea companies at an auction. Seneviratne argues that Lakshmini, and many women like her, struggle to maintain their dual roles of both waged labour at the plantation, and unwaged labour at home. This unrecognized labour is known as social reproduction and is essential to everyday life.

Women tea workers have expressed their concerns with poor working conditions in ethnographic interviews. The work they perform at plantations, is backbreaking, and occurs with few breaks. When discussing poor working conditions, women specifically mentioned how the cold weather and low salary made it difficult for them to continue working at the tea plantation. They complained about having to climb up and down the hills in the brutal cold weather, multiple times a day. They described various attacks on their bodies while in the tea fields, such as "wasp bites, snake bites, leech bites...neck strain from carrying leaf-filled bags, dry, cracking skin on fingers and thumbs, breast pains caused by constant friction against tea bushes, skin rashes from fertilizers, pesticides, or insecticides” (Neubert 2015, 367). Additionally, most plantations do not have proper medical clinics for the workers to visit when in an emergency. These clinics have basic supplies, but are inferior to the facilities outside the plantation grounds. These are run by “estate medical assistants”, who neither have the required education, nor training to deliver health care services in a standardized manner.

¹ Nimble fingers refer to the assumption that women had slender fingers and thus would be faster at plucking tea leaves.

Solutions Posed by the Women

The Indian Tamils take pride in their identity, and have regularly repeated that the “Up-country Tamil identity is unique, different, and yet still fully Sri Lankan because of the attachment to the Up-country as a home or homeland” (Neubert 2015, 364). Despite being landless, tea plantation workers are able to create and build homes out of the spaces that are available to them. Although they are not able to own the land they live on, “Malaiyaha Tamils still consider the line room a space worth investing in, and such a condition—investing without purchase or ownership” (Jegathesan 2015, 270). Many of the workers have a close relationship with the land. “Ūr”, which can be translated to “one's real home”. For many tea labourers, this refers to the estates they live and work on. Officially, hill country Tamils live and work on land that is not owned by them, but “they consider the plantations in Sri Lanka to be their ūr, and their existence on, and claim to plantation soil, challenge[s] us to reconsider former criteria for ūr and ideas of belonging and investment” (Jegathesan 2018, 649). Labourers lay claim to the land by using it to pursue a better life. The women have become experts of the land. For example, Jegathesan (2018) explains how the women can tell what time of day it is without a watch: “I can tell what time of day it is by looking at the light of the sun on the tea bushes” (645). It was a skill the woman developed in her years as a tea-plucker. It tells her when to go home to breastfeed her child, take a tea break with other workers on the road, and walk back to her line room at the end of a day’s work (Jegathesan 2018, 651). Jegathesan argues that “ūr is not always found in words or in the plantation landscape, but in human interactions with the soil and natural elements that make the plantations a place of being in the world” (652). It is an act of resistance for women tea workers to transform the plantation from a space of economic exploitation into a space with personal significance.

Although routinely faced with problems, many women explain that they are willing to continue working at the tea plantations if changes were to be made. This resolution is a stark contrast to how workers previously acted. In the past, it was common for Indian Tamils to actively resist against the estate owners. Covert resistance was used in situations of unequal power, and was “used by people without the power to directly challenge those in authority” (Duncan 2002, 326). Workers “would lighten their load by cutting open and pouring out a small portion from the heavy bag they were carrying” (Duncan 2002, 327). This reduced the burden of carrying tea, despite having a lesser load at the end of the day. By using space and time, the labourers were able to escape, and take advantage of being away from the estate owners temporarily. Many women felt more confident if they were given the identification cards, which recognized them as permanent workers. As many women voiced this specific concern when performing home visits, welfare officers were able to have a meeting with estate managers, and provide the women with the identification cards. Women were also able to address many other concerns, including their lack of communication with estate managers. As this concern was brought up numerous times, group meetings between the workers and managers were organized in communal spaces, through a collaborative effort between Welfare Officers and plantation administrators. At these meetings, workshops were curated to help build capacity amongst women. Concerns regarding better housing facilities were also brought up, which led to funding from NGOs, such as ‘Save the Children’ to build and rehabilitate their houses. By creating a dialogue with those in higher positions in the hierarchy, their voices are heard and their demands for better living conditions are met. The women have shifted how they approach the problems that are present in their lives.

Typically neglected in the country due to their gender, ethnicity and caste, these women have often been reduced to the social stigma that surrounds them. However, they have been able to create their own ecosystem, which benefits them, their families and their communities. They also recognize how vital the tea industry is to Lanka's economy, and understand that without their hard work, there would be no tea. Ethnographic research on the Indian Tamils has helped break the stigma against their community, as well as the assumption that female labourers are a population with no autonomy. It has represented Indian Tamils in a better light by highlighting their struggles for citizenship, and their pursuit of better living conditions. By sustaining their desire to belong, through acts of resistance, the female plantation workers were able to create a site of autonomy for themselves on plantations.

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