

Book Review

Rana P. Behal (2014) *One Hundred Years of Servitude: Political Economy of Tea Plantations in Colonial Assam.*

New Delhi: Tulika Books.

ISBN 9789382381433. 404 pp. Hardcover \$56.00 £46.95

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In recent decades, the field of South Asian labour history has enjoyed a renaissance fuelled by several theoretical and geographical innovations. First, conceptually, the classic focus on factory proletarians has been joined by new studies on “non-classical” forms of wage labour, including informal labour, women labour and indentured labour (Carter, 1995; Kale, 1998; Sen, 1999). This move has reflected the historical reality of South Asia itself, where a formally free, male, factory proletariat has never constituted the majority of the workforce (Parthasarathi, 2012). Second, geographically, scholars have engaged in transnational dialogue with historians who focus on Europe, Africa and Latin America. Such interactions have benefited from greater institutionalisation, especially the establishment in 1996 of the Association of Indian Labour Historians (AILH) and its flagship conference held near New Delhi.

Rana P. Behal’s *One Hundred Years of Servitude: Political Economy of Tea Plantations in Colonial Assam* (2014) stands at the crossroads of these two fruitful directions of research. As a co-organiser of the AILH, Behal has been on the frontline of efforts to conceptualise a new “global labour history” (Van der Linden, 2010). And it was his breakthrough 1992 article, co-authored with Prabhu Mohapatra, that first provided a conceptually rigorous overview of the history of labour indenture in the tea plantations of Assam (Behal and Mohapatra, 1992). In hindsight, it seems difficult to imagine how the labour history of India could ever be written without Assam tea, what Samita Sen (2002: 231) has called “the most spectacularly successful colonial business enterprise”, and an industry that at the turn of the century featured a larger workforce than those of cotton and jute combined (Royal Commission, 1931: 6, 349). *One Hundred Years of Servitude* provides the first comprehensive treatment of the history of the labour indenture system in Assam while simultaneously providing an economic history of the tea industry. It is already an indispensable source for future scholarship on the topic.

The culmination of over thirty years of research, Behal’s work draws upon a wide range of sources, including government archives, company records, planter memoirs and family papers located across India and the United Kingdom. In his introduction, Behal takes issue with the “revisionist” neoclassical framework that suggests labour migration was free and voluntary. Rather, he highlights the role of the colonial state in creating an indentured labour regime that enforced contracts with tea workers through two coercive mechanisms: first, “the provision that a breach of contract resulted in criminal prosecution” and, secondly, “the widespread penal sanctions granted to the planters” (p. 4). During the period from 1860 until Indian independence, recruiters transported over three million contract workers into Assam, many from the same groups of central and eastern

India being sent to overseas colonies such as Burma, Mauritius, the Caribbean and East Africa in the service of producing sugar, rubber and coffee. Behal hints at the theoretical and comparative implications of the history of Assam indenture, drawing parallels with systems of labour discipline used on slave-based plantations, and gesturing towards older debates over whether such “unfree” workers can be accurately labelled “proletarian” and “capitalist” rather than “feudal” (p. 5).

Behal could have taken an even more forceful position on these historiographical questions. At issue is a customary interpretation of labour and capitalism, advanced most famously by the Marxist economist Maurice Dobb, which equates the latter exclusively with a “doubly-free” proletarian workforce (Van der Linden, 2010; Banaji, 2011). In recent decades, legal scholars and sociologists have demonstrated that many forms of wage labour in industrial Euro-America in fact relied upon legal constraints that would today be considered “unfree” (Steinfeld, 2001). Works such as Behal’s study could make the argument even more powerfully. In his work, we have the case of a colonial “laboratory” where concern over individual rights and freedom were easier to dispense with, and hence state-backed systems of indenture were at the heart of one of the largest industrial capitalist enterprises in modern Indian history, transparently so.

Behal fleshes out his story over the course of six chapters. The first two document how East India Company officials first conceived the idea of growing tea in Assam in the 1830s, how the Government legalised labour indenture in the 1860s, and how the system fell apart by the twentieth century. The remaining chapters are thematic in nature, covering a range of topics while shuttling back and forth through time.

Chapters three and four challenge the notion of capitalism as a system characterised by “freedom” from two different angles. Chapter three describes how the actual system of production was governed by an inhumane system of labour discipline. Planters were not merely “paternalistic”; instead, plantations were industrial operations similar to the slave plantations in the Americas (pp. 103–105). Chapter four tackles the liberal idealisation of capitalism as the separation of state from society, demonstrating that Indian tea, from the beginning, was the creation of the colonial state.

Chapter five, a statistical analysis of the “political economy” of the plantations, is the most original and valuable for other scholars. A masterful synthesis of both economic and labour history, it should be read alongside the 34-page appendix, in which Behal provides a tremendously useful set of data collected from various archives. Such data enables Behal to address several key questions about the trend of real wages over time, standards of living, workforce gender composition, and the growth of the industry in terms of output, acreage, employment and productivity. He demonstrates that the industry remained profitable throughout the “boom” years of the 1870s–1900s, even though planters consistently pressured the government for more lenient policies on the grounds that they were suffering losses. He also shows that wages were scandalously low, perhaps the worst in all of India, resulting in high rates of malnutrition and mortality.

As a synthesis of narrative and thematic investigation, Behal’s book covers a dizzying number of topics that future scholars could expand upon. For instance, the final chapter deals with the various archival fragments that provide clues into the subjective experience of workers, expressed through periodic strikes. A deeper analysis would entail zooming in on particular individuals or groups, whose stories emerge in legal proceedings, investigations and newspaper reports. Behal also provides information about the gender division of labour on the tea gardens, which could provide the basis for future research on the gender and family dynamics of life for plantation workers. A final topic that invites future exploration is the process by which labour indenture was repealed in the

early twentieth century. Behal argues that indenture collapsed under its own “inherent contradictions” – what he calls the paradoxical “high cost of cheap labour” (p. 93). His economic figures are persuasive, but further theorisation could be done on the role of ideology. To extend the analogy between indenture and slavery, historians of Atlantic slavery have in recent decades supplemented earlier work that attributed abolition to economic contradictions (the Williams thesis) with sophisticated debates on the roles of political thought and consciousness. In the context of Assam, Behal’s explanation could be strengthened by integrating it with a closer examination of the various criticisms of indenture – in the form of pamphlets, vernacular nationalist literature and legislative debates – that animated Assam’s version of abolition.

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