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Historia Agraria de América Latina

Arnab Dey, *Tea Environments and Plantation Culture: Imperial Disarray in Eastern India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, 256 pp. ISBN 9781108687034 <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108687034>.

Typically, histories of the Assam tea plantations of the 19th and 20th centuries focus on the exploitation of indentured labor that created them. Instead, *Tea Environments and Plantation Culture* addresses the intersection between capital and the environment, science, and law.¹ Arnab Dey's study provides a good complement to the existing literature. While Assam plantations did try to control nature and people, harnessing them for profits, they oftentimes failed, particularly with respect to reducing the mortality of workers or controlling the pests that attacked tea plants. Likewise, departing from the existing historiography on science in the British Empire, Dey argues that science was not much of an influence on these plantation owners at all. There were gaps between "esoteric laboratory knowledge and field experience" because profit was always much more important to the plantation owners than following or adding to accepted agricultural science (p. 10).

By combining different methodologies and theoretical frameworks from a variety of disciplines, Dey also hopes to intervene in the usual labor histories of Assam. He argues that these studies end up ascribing a certain amount of legitimacy to the agricultural practices of plantation owners, even while criticizing the violence they committed against their workers. Dey wants to "show that the inherent Whiggish 'rationality' of these large-scale monocultures was unsustainable from the very start" —for both labor and the environment. (p. 12) By moving beyond the typical Marxist historiography, he also wants to see labor exploitation as something that includes both the "visible and visceral forms of coercion" as well as "the less seen ways that workers bear the brunt of agro-environmental and medico-legal forms of management." (p. 13)

¹ While this book makes a number of valuable interventions for scholars already familiar with the history of plantations, for those unfamiliar with the topic, I would suggest Rana Behal's *One Hundred Years of Servitude* (2014), which focuses on the system of indentured labor which fed the Assam plantations.

Dey uses the concept of “imperial disarray,” rather than “improvement” (Richard Drayton) or “Edenic recovery” (Carolyn Merchant), to “highlight ideological, material, and discursive inconsistencies, consequences, and contradictions of this plantation form and its purported mandate of agrarian development in the region.” Dey cautions that any claims that plantation owners made about “improving” Assam or supporting colonial rule were also easily transgressed or jettisoned when it suited them. Dey tempers this materialist approach by invoking Bruno Latour to argue for a “double separation” in that the tea planters depended on “hybrid in-betweens of nature and society” in order to mold and shape nature, but simultaneously created a discursive separation between nature and humans (pp. 20-21). He highlights that the tea planters failed to perform the separation between human and nature, and so disorder or “disarray” better describes “the many unseen in-betweens and ideological inconsistencies of that modernist parable.” (p. 21) In short, he argues not only that the planters’ claims to be “improving” India were inaccurate, but also that the planters were imperfect and inconsistent in all their actions. In his words: “It points to the economic contrivances, the bureaucratic stratagems, the legal elasticity, and the agronomic manipulations” that kept the Assam tea plantations profitable and competitive. Dey argues that to be profitable is to be “unruly.” Any claims by plantation owners that they were bringing order or progress to Assam existed side by side with numerous “oxymorons” or “ironies” that contradicted such claims (p. 22). He refers back to these contradictions in multiple parts throughout the book. Overall, Dey wants to depict the planters as haphazard and incapable, rather than scientific individuals who transformed local and global markets.

The book begins with a chapter providing a basic history of tea in Assam. The rest of the chapters are more analytical. In chapter 2, he investigates early 20th-century debates between planters and colonial officials over whether tea plantations should be designated as agricultural (and untaxed) or industrial (and taxed) enterprises. The irony which he highlights is that when it suited them the tea planters claimed to be modernizers bringing machinery to tea production, but when they did not want to pay taxes they argued that their modernity was minimal and their machines did not change the plant.

Chapters 3 and 4 provide the most interesting stories of plantation failures. The former relates how planters tried and failed to control the many insect pests that proliferated in the tea gardens. The latter discusses how and why plantations did not reduce the extremely high rate of worker mortality. In both chapters Dey emphasizes that there was a disconnect between “esoteric laboratory knowledge” and “on the spot” or more practical knowledge. Planters tended to trust each other more than scientists writing about these problems from Calcutta. Chapter 4 also addresses colonial law, which made the system of indentured labor possible, but also tried to enact some minimal regulations to ensure the health of these workers. Nevertheless, planters often circumvented this law, and the colonial state was reluctant to pursue more rigorous regulations when it envisioned that they would threaten commerce. Neither parties were ever able to reduce the high rate of

mortality amongst the plantation workers because in Assam “western medicine had to adapt to, if not be upstaged by, the demands of capital.” (p. 132) Enforced regulations typically focused on examining workers before they arrived, rather than adding expenses to improve their living conditions once they were on the plantation.

Chapter 5 discusses the relationship between the tea planters and the Forestry Department of colonial India as an “uneasy, but expedient, co-dependency.” Tea plantations cleared forests to make their tea gardens, but needed forests to continuously supply wood for charcoal and tea boxes. The Forestry Department’s goal was to develop forests as a more sustainable resource. While they did try to save some forests from being removed by the tea industry, since there was no other significant commercial forestry or markets in Assam, the tea industry became the primary customer, limiting the Department’s willingness to restrict their actions. Lastly, Chapter 6 much more directly addresses the workers than the other chapters in a discussion of the massive walk-outs in 1920 and 1921 at the beginning of Gandhi’s non-cooperation movement. Dey argues that both contemporaries and historians of this worker unrest tend to focus on very particular causes, either the Gandhian movement or the post-WWI economic crisis that reduced wages. Dey instead argues that it was the underlying structure of the plantations—the “agrarian economics” of tea and the differential wage structure—that inevitably led to unrest.

Overall, Dey’s book provides a good example of how scholars can apply postcolonial critiques to the very oppressive nature of agricultural capitalism. It complicates narratives of colonial power and the conflict between labor and capital, while still recognizing the very real damage caused by the Assam tea industry. His repeated caution to consider the materialist aspect of this industry is also quite refreshing, as sometimes the urge for commercial profit gets lost in postcolonial critiques. As a result of this skillful combination of theoretical approaches, *Tea Environments and Plantation Culture* would be helpful for scholars who study agrarian capitalism, in its multiple guises, in Latin America. Not only would this book interest those studying indentured labor, but also historians of plantation economies or labor resistance. For example, looking at profit as a sort of unruliness that causes multiple social and ecological failures, could be a helpful theoretical lens for historians of colonial plantations, agrarian capitalism after independence, and U.S.-owned plantations.

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