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Tea Plantations and Labor Movements: The Political Economy of Plantation Sri Lanka

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Introduction

This book examines the political economy of Sri Lanka's tea plantations through the intertwined lenses of working conditions, labour mobilization, and state and policy responses. Plantations have been central to the island's economic formation and social ordering since the colonial era; they are also sites where class, ethnicity, gender and the legacy of empire converge in powerful and often contradictory ways. By bringing together archival sources and oral histories, this study seeks to recover the experiences of estate workers while tracing how collective action and institutional politics have shaped — and been shaped by — efforts at estate reform.

My aim is twofold. First, to provide a rigorous historical and political-economic account of plantation life that centers labour: how work was organized, how wages and living conditions were produced and contested, and how everyday survival strategies intersected with formal politics. Second, to analyze the strategies and limits of labour mobilization — from informal resistance and everyday acts of refusal to organized unionism, strikes, and alliances with political parties and civil society — and how these influenced policy debates about estate reform. Throughout, the book situates local struggles within broader forces: the postcolonial state, global tea markets, and changing development paradigms.

Methodologically, the study combines documentary research in government and plantation archives with a program of oral history interviews conducted across several estate communities. Archival materials — administrative reports, plantation records, union files and legislative debates — provide a record of policy choices, institutional incentives, and economic constraints. Oral histories bring into view the lived textures of estate life: seasonal rhythms, kinship networks, forms of solidarity, and narratives of resistance and accommodation that are often absent from official records. I discuss the ethical considerations and interpretive methods used for conducting interviews, including consent, anonymization where requested, and reflexive attention to how memory and power shape testimony.

The book is organized thematically and historically. Early chapters reconstruct the formation of estate society and the everyday conditions of plantation workers; middle chapters focus on labour mobilization, union politics and the contested terrain of estate reform; later chapters analyze the impact of neoliberal restructuring, the pressures of global markets, and new forms of organizing — including women's movements and transnational solidarity campaigns. While the chapters can be read independently, together they aim to produce a sustained argument about the political possibilities and constraints facing estate labour in contemporary Sri Lanka.

At the heart of this study is a set of normative commitments: to make visible marginalized labour, to interrogate policy choices that have reproduced inequality, and to offer evidence-based reflections useful to students, researchers, and activists. The analysis emphasizes how class and ethnicity have been mobilized politically — sometimes to deepen divisions that weaken collective bargaining, sometimes as resources for solidarity — and how institutional reforms have often fallen short when they neglected the everyday social foundations of labour power.

I write with an eye to both scholarship and practical intervention. For students and activists, the book supplies empirical detail and analytical frameworks for understanding why certain reform strategies succeed or fail, and what alternative pathways might look like. For policymakers and civil society actors, it offers grounded recommendations that emerge from the lived experiences of estate communities. Above all, this is a labour history: a deliberate effort to listen to estate voices and to place their struggles at the center of analyses about development, democracy and social justice in Sri Lanka.

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CHAPTER ONE: Plantations and the Colonial Order

The story of Sri Lanka's tea plantations is inextricably linked to the grand, often brutal, narrative of British colonialism. Before the fragrant brew became synonymous with the island, then known as Ceylon, the landscape was dominated by dense forests and subsistence agriculture, primarily rice cultivation. The British, having seized control of the entire island from the Dutch in 1815, initially experimented with coffee. This cash crop quickly gained traction, transforming vast swathes of the central highlands into a bustling, if environmentally disruptive, enterprise. The early colonial administration saw immense potential in Ceylon's fertile lands and amenable climate, envisioning a landscape remade to serve imperial economic interests.

The expansion of coffee cultivation in the 1830s and beyond necessitated significant infrastructure development. Roads were carved through challenging terrain, linking nascent plantations to ports for export. This period marked the initial foray into systematic land alienation, as the Crown Lands Encroachment Ordinance of 1840 effectively declared all unoccupied and uncultivated land as crown property. This legal maneuver paved the way for British capitalists to acquire vast tracts of land at nominal prices, setting the stage for the plantation economy. The Kandyan peasantry, who had traditionally utilized these lands for shifting cultivation and foraging, found their access curtailed, their traditional way of life disrupted, and their economic independence threatened.

The coffee boom, however, was not without its perils. A devastating blight, *Hemileia vastatrix*, commonly known as coffee rust, swept through the plantations in the 1870s, wiping out crops and livelihoods with alarming speed. Planters, faced with ruin, desperately sought an alternative. Tea, already gaining popularity in Victorian Britain and successfully cultivated in India, presented itself as the most promising successor. The transition from coffee to tea was swift and decisive, fundamentally reshaping Ceylon's economic and social fabric for the next century and beyond. This shift solidified the plantation as the dominant mode of production and export, embedding it deeply within the colonial project.

The British colonial government actively facilitated this transformation, understanding the strategic importance of cash crop exports to the imperial economy. Policies were geared towards supporting planters, from land grants to legal frameworks that favored their operations. The concept of "waste land" was instrumental in this process, allowing the state to claim forested and uncultivated areas and then sell them off for plantation development. This often disregarded the traditional land use patterns and customary rights of the indigenous population, effectively dispossessing many and creating a landless class. The economic logic of the empire superseded local

customary practices and social structures.

The development of tea plantations required not only land but also a colossal labor force. The local Sinhalese population, largely independent and engaged in their own agricultural pursuits, proved reluctant to undertake the arduous and low-paying work on the estates. Their attachment to their traditional lands and their experience of self-sufficiency made them resistant to becoming wage laborers in a system that offered little in the way of upward mobility or autonomy. This resistance, rooted in cultural practices and economic independence, posed a significant challenge to the burgeoning plantation economy. The planters needed a steady, reliable, and controllable supply of workers.

This labor vacuum led to the systematic importation of indentured laborers from South India, primarily from the Madras Presidency. These migrants, mostly Tamil speakers, were often fleeing famine, poverty, and social oppression in their homeland, seeing the promise of work in Ceylon as a desperate chance for survival. The recruitment process, often managed by intermediaries known as *kanganies*, was fraught with deception and exploitation. Workers were enticed with promises of good wages and conditions, which rarely materialized once they arrived on the estates. This migration represented one of the largest movements of indentured labor in the British Empire, profoundly altering Ceylon's demographic landscape.

The *kangany* system played a crucial role in the establishment and perpetuation of the plantation labor force. The *kangany* acted as both recruiter and overseer, responsible for a gang of workers. They advanced money to recruits in India, managed their travel, and then held significant power over them on the estates, often through debt bondage. While seemingly an efficient system for the planters, it created a highly exploitative dynamic, where workers were tied to the *kangany* through a complex web of indebtedness and social control. The *kangany* profited from their labor, often taking a cut of their wages, and held considerable sway over their daily lives.

The colonial legal framework reinforced the power of the planters and the *kangany* system. Ordinances such as the Service Contracts Ordinance and the Masters and Servants Ordinance criminalized breaches of contract by laborers, effectively binding them to the estates and limiting their mobility. These laws were designed to ensure a stable and subservient workforce, making it difficult for workers to leave an estate, even if conditions were unbearable. Deserters faced harsh penalties, including imprisonment and fines, further entrenching their dependence on the plantation system. The legal system, therefore, served as a powerful tool for social control and the maintenance of the colonial economic order.

Life on the early tea plantations was exceptionally harsh. Workers lived in rudimentary line rooms, often overcrowded and lacking basic sanitation. Disease was rampant, and infant mortality rates were staggeringly high. Long working hours, meager wages, and

constant supervision characterized their daily existence. The hierarchical structure of the plantation meant that workers had little agency or recourse against exploitative practices. The isolation of the estates, often nestled deep in the hills, further limited their access to external support or opportunities, creating a self-contained and controlled environment. The promise of a better life often turned into a struggle for mere survival.

The colonial state's priorities were clear: to ensure the smooth functioning of the plantation economy and the efficient export of tea. Social welfare for laborers was a secondary concern, if a concern at all, often left to the discretion of individual planters, many of whom prioritized profit over the well-being of their workforce. While some paternalistic planters might have provided rudimentary medical care or schools, these were exceptions rather than the rule. The state's role was primarily regulatory, focusing on maintaining order, enforcing labor laws, and facilitating trade, rather than actively improving the living conditions of the plantation population.

The introduction of tea also had significant environmental consequences. Large-scale deforestation to make way for plantations led to soil erosion, changes in rainfall patterns, and a loss of biodiversity. The monoculture of tea plants replaced diverse ecosystems, making the land more vulnerable to pests and diseases. This ecological transformation, driven by colonial economic imperatives, had long-term impacts on the island's natural environment, the effects of which are still felt today. The pursuit of profit often overshadowed any consideration for sustainable land management or environmental protection.

The British colonial order in Ceylon was thus fundamentally shaped by the plantation economy. It created a dual society: a small, powerful European planter class and a large, dispossessed, and largely immigrant labor force, with the indigenous Sinhalese population occupying an increasingly marginalized position in the plantation regions. This economic structure also led to distinct social and political formations, with power concentrated in the hands of the colonial administration and the planter elite. The legacy of these colonial policies continues to resonate in contemporary Sri Lanka, particularly in the socio-economic conditions and political status of the plantation communities.

The very landscape of the central highlands, with its neatly manicured tea bushes stretching as far as the eye can see, stands as a testament to this colonial legacy. Each tea leaf picked, each bag of tea exported, carries with it a history of land appropriation, forced migration, and intense labor. Understanding the colonial order is therefore the foundational step in comprehending the political economy of plantation Sri Lanka, as it laid the groundwork for the social structures, power dynamics, and labor relations that would define the tea industry for generations to come. This initial phase of colonial engagement established patterns of exploitation and control that subsequent chapters will explore in greater detail.

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