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*Review of Women and Labour in Late Colonial India:
The Bengal Jute Industry*, by Samita Sen

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calls the “missionary zeal” of some members of the temple community. However, little analysis of the implications of this zealous nationalism and religiosity for the community’s relationship to other Indian religious groups or to other South Asian communities is given. Religious nationalism in the Indian diaspora needs to be considered more critically, especially in light of the violence spurred by Hindu fundamentalist movements in India that are funded and supported by affluent Indian Americans, a fact that Rayaprol later notes but does not examine in relation to the temple community. In general, it seems that instances of cultural contestation, internal dissent, and conflict are not given as much attention as they could have, even though the study is replete with fascinating observations and provocative interview excerpts.

One of Rayaprol’s most interesting insights is that women’s participation in the temple has involved the creation of fictive kin networks that make the temple a surrogate family” (p. 101). As immigrants who are generally bereft of the extended kin networks they had in India, these women have created for themselves alternative networks that provide supportive, sometimes exclusively, female spaces at the temple. This “feminization” of the temple, the author suggests, has led to a merging of supposedly distinct “private” and “public” spheres of family and temple, the second major argument of the study (p. 98). However, it seems that the temple has actually become yet another private sphere, a “second home” (p. 101), that in effect reinforces the traditional role of women as cultural custodians and guarantors of tradition, a point that merits greater critical attention.

The third analytic chapter addresses the discrepancies between gender ideologies and practices, disjunctures that underlie several of the findings discussed in the study. Rayaprol observes that some women espouse a “traditional” gender ideology regarding family roles while in actuality their domestic division of labor is “egalitarian,” a strategic disjuncture that allows their husbands to believe that they are still bearers of traditional authority. The discussion of gender ideology, however, is limited to issues of family chores and views about children’s education and career choices. An analysis of the implications of this perpetuation of patriarchal ideologies for the role of women as cultural custodians would have provided an important insight to link the different arguments presented by the study. Furthermore, there is quite a substantial body of literature that analyzes the association of women with “tradition” and “purity,” two assumptions that are largely left unproblematized in this study.

Rayaprol chooses to retain the classic dissertation structure for her book, a format that will make her study a useful text for graduate students in anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and women’s studies, looking for published examples of dissertation research to guide them in their own writing. Given the lack of ethnographic material on South Asian Americans, this study provides valuable documentation of gender ideologies and practices and generates important questions to be addressed in future research.

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Women and Labour in Late Colonial India. The Bengal Jute Industry. By SAMITA SEN. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. xviii, 265 pp. \$59.95 (cloth).

This book’s modest and utilitarian title does not do justice to the richness of its contents, or to the complexity of its analytical framework. *Women and Labour in Late*

Colonial India examines the ways women's roles, status, and labor shaped and were affected by the expansion and consolidation of colonial capitalism, the colonial state, and the emergent institutions of colonial civil society: unions, literature, reform, and advocacy organizations, for example. More significantly, it demonstrates how crucial and productive gender analysis can be for our understanding of colonial social and economic history—indeed, for historical practice generally.

Sen reads the mill, government, and labor organization records generated and variously deployed by contemporary managers, officials, and reformers, as well as, subsequently, by generations of social scientists (including historians) through recent feminist and postcolonial critiques of positivist epistemologies. She shows how gendered divisions of labor were produced and reproduced within the mutually constitutive domains of households (rural and urban, elite and otherwise), the jute factory and its practices (in Bengal but also in Dundee, Scotland), and in proliferating and sometimes contradictory discourses on domesticity, scientific management, caste, and class, emerging in colonial India throughout this period from a variety of sources. The organization of the book models, with considerable economy (the text occupies just over 250 pages), a compelling strategy for coherently presenting such complex analysis.

The book is divided into six overlapping chapters, each of which focuses on a particular site or nexus of gender production and its relationship to others. In the first chapter, for example, Sen examines the emergence in the Bengal jute industry of a predominantly male, migrant labor force. She considers the significance of the mills' locations and accessibility to and from rural hinterlands for this development, as well as their significance for the gender division of labor and allocation of resources and status in those rural households from which these men migrated to the jute mills. Sen shows that contemporaries and historians alike have generally attributed these developments to "precapitalist" cultural values, traditions, and preferences (*purdah*, for example) that, except under conditions considered exceptional (widowhood, abandonment, acute poverty), ensured women's containment within the characteristically multigenerational, extended Bengali family. However, viewing the problem from the perspective of mill workers' households and the gender division of labor within them, Sen suggests that the gender division of labor characteristic of the Bengal jute industry and the cultural practices associated with the rural hinterland from which its labor force was recruited were both as much *effects* of the industry's organization of production as they were some of its (pre)conditions.

Subsequent chapters focus on the implications of this male migration for the work and status (social and economic) of the women and children they left behind; on the conditions under which some women "left home" for the mills, and under which they both earned wages and reproduced their households outside it; on the genealogies and effects of mill owners', governments', unions', and reformers' responses to and interventions in these women's lives; on the mill-working women's strategies for addressing these conditions.

Sen's multiple-exposure approach to gender analysis (in each chapter, but especially cumulatively) casts into relief the profoundly gendered genealogies of some venerable, foundational assumptions about not only women but also labor in colonial India. It represents a compelling model for how gender analysis can help us productively rethink working class history in Bengal, as well as the invention of modernity and tradition.

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