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Planters' Raj or British Raj? Coffee Capitalism and the Imperial State in South India

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Planters' Raj or British Raj? Coffee Capitalism and the Imperial State in South India

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Abstract

Planters' Raj or British Raj? Coffee Capitalism and the Imperial State in South India

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Between the mid-18th century and the early 19th century, British capitalists, South Indian Dalit labourers, and the British colonial state engaged in a struggle over the availability and docility of labour for a sprawling landscape of coffee plantations. What emerged was the "system of advances," a technique of labour recruitment marked by debt contracts between *maistris* and labourers from the plains. In this paper, I explore this "system of advances" from the late 19th century to the 1930s, focusing on two key documents regarding plantation production in South India: Edmund C.P. Hull's guide to operating a plantation, *Coffee: Its physiology, history, and cultivation*, published in 1865, and the *Report of the Planters' Enquiry Committee of South India*, published in 1896. Reading these documents as commentaries on the structure of the migrant-labour market of South India in this period, I suggest that they shed light on the nature of the colonial state as a collection of agencies with differing interests with regards to capital and labour. More specifically, the history of plantation labour recruitment and treatment highlights

the incompatibility of the state's mission to promote the interests of British capital as well as uphold the liberal mission of the empire that received purchase across the colonial bureaucracy and elite.

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A Cup of coffee

"Which of us does not know the grateful fragrance of a cup of good Coffee, whether on the midnight railway journey in the melting heat of India, or before a skating expedition on a frosty morning in England?"[1]

– Edmund C.P. Hull, Madras, 1865

"If, as it has been computed, there are now consumed annually a thousand million pounds of the precious bean, Coffee can no longer be said to hold an insignificant place among the stapes of the trade. On the contrary, its importance as such can hardly be over-estimated, when it is remembered to what vast multitudes of persons its cultivation, transportation, and preparation for use afford profitable means of support."[2]

– Robert G. Hewitt, Jr., New York, 1872

"I never tire of writing about coffee. It seems to me an inexhaustible, monumental theme. I sometimes feel that it is a subject which may well occupy the space of a whole saga, if we may define a saga as a worthy theme expanded to a worthy length."[3]

– R.K. Narayan, *Story-Tellers World,* 1989

In the 1940s, my great-grandfather, agent for a philanthropic estate in

Mannargudi, woke up every morning at 4 a.m. to freshly roast coffee beans over a wood-

fire stove, grind them finely with a hand mill, and draw a thick black decoction, which he

added to steamed cow's milk with the correct amount of sugar. While he enjoyed this

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[1] Hull, Edmund C.P. *Coffee: Its physiology, history, and cultivation: adapted as a work of reference for Ceylon, Wynaad, Coorg and the Neilgherries*. Madras: Gantz Brothers, 1865. P. 4

[2] Hewitt, Robert G. *Coffee: its history, cultivation, and uses*. New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1872. P. 40

[3] Narayan, R.K. *Story-teller's World*. New Delhi, 1989. Quoted in A.R. Venkatachalapathy, "'In those days there was no coffee': Coffee-drinking and middle-class culture in colonial Tamilnadu." *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 39, 2&3 (2002). New Delhi: SAGE. P. 316

delectable preparation, the rest of the family would wake up and prepare the 2nd

decoction for their own morning coffee. Their morning routine was by no means unique

in late colonial Thanjavur district, especially among middle-class Brahmin families, who

prided themselves on the correct preparation of coffee: freshly roasted and ground, using

fresh cow's milk in the "Kumbakonam degree coffee" style. Strikingly, they were only

one generation removed from a fierce public debate amongst intellectuals in the Madras

Presidency over the propriety of drinking coffee, then considered a drink for Europeans

alone. A.R. Venkatachalapathy notes that "most of the produce" from the numerous

plantations running up the length of the Western Ghats "found its way to the market in

London, while a small part of it was consumed by Europeans" in the Presidency at the

turn of the 20th century.[4] Within the next two decades, the practice of beginning the day

with a cup of filter coffee began to displace the traditional morning drink of

neeragaram,[5] troubling the intellectual class of the Madras Presidency, who feared "the

West transgressing into the sovereign realm of culture, especially the supposedly

blemishless, pristine and untainted countryside."[6] In his investigation of the cultural

politics of coffee consumption in late colonial South India, Venkatachalapathy finds that

middle-class anxiety over coffee gave way in the 1930s to belief in the beverage as a

"cultural marker which distinguished the 'high' and the 'low,'" that became "tied to a

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[4] Ibid.
[5] A drink made by "fermenting water drained after cooking rice, and adding water and salt to taste." See, Venkatachalapathy, p. 303
[6] Venkatachalapathy, p. 304

whole range of other cultural practices" such as hospitality.[7] As Venkatachalapathy writes, "Just to say, 'Let's have some coffee' was a way of welcoming a guest and the ultimate insult to a person was to say that he would not even offer a cup of coffee to visitors."[8]

While middle-class intellectuals, largely Brahmins, interrogated the place of coffee in urban and rural life, coffee planters, state officials, and labour activists took part in a very different discourse about the production of the "precious bean." This was the discourse about the insecurity and abuse of plantation labour. In 1930, members of the Royal Commission on Labour in India (RCL) made a series of stops in the Madras Presidency on their colony wide tour, with the aim of gathering information about the regime and conditions of labour in the plantation districts. Responding to a questionnaire from the RCL, Coimbatore Labour Union President N.S. Ramaswamy Ayyangar wrote about the conditions of labour on the plantations of the Annamalai Hills:

> The conditions of life are so poor, the attacks of disease so constant, the climate and living, the food taken, the absence of all recreations, the non-participation in any festivities, all these contribute to lower the physique and reduce average life to 10 to 15 years of stay. To save his life the coolie runs away after 2 or 3 years of service on the hills. If he becomes ill and not useful he is sent away and thrown as a beggar, on the plains.[9]

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[7] Ibid, p. 306
[8] Ibid, p. 307
[9] *RCL Evidence Vol. VII (Written),* N.S. Ramaswamy Ayyangar, "Note on Annamalai Plantations." P. 253

Ramaswamy Ayyangar's account is markedly different from those of the planters and their representatives who state plainly to the commission that workers are treated and paid well and provided with every amenity. They do agree on one point: that "the employment of middlemen, maistries, kanganies or labour suppliers should be abolished."[10] In particular, they agree that the "system of advances," that is, the practice by which coolies were advanced a certain sum of money by middlemen to induce them to leave their villages, as far away as Tanjore district, to come work on the coffee and tea plantations of the Western Ghats, constituted a problem for both planters and labourers and required government action.

In this paper, I explore this "system of advances" from the late 19th century to the 1930s, focusing on two key documents regarding plantation production in South India: Edmund C.P. Hull's guide to operating a plantation, *Coffee: Its physiology, history, and cultivation*, published by the Gantz Brothers in Madras in 1865, and the *Report of the Planters' Enquiry Committee of South India*, published in 1896. Reading these documents as commentaries on the structure of the migrant-labour market of South India in this period, I suggest that they shed light on the nature of the colonial state as a collection of agencies with differing interests with regards to capital and labour. More specifically, the history of plantation labour recruitment and treatment highlights the incompatibility of the state's mission to promote the interests of British capital *and*

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[10] Ibid., p. 251

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uphold the liberal mission of the empire that received purchase across the colonial
bureaucracy and elite.

Here, I hope to make an intervention in both the historiography of labour in South
Asia and the particular historiography of plantation capitalism in South India. In
particular, I endeavor to show that the debate over the "cultural" baggage of the South
Asian worker masks structural conditions of the labour market in both the rural plains and
the industrial centers. That is, by focusing on whether the worker's embodied culture
forecloses their ability to organize like their European counterparts, we may miss their
implication in networks of indebtedness and obligation. Additionally, I take up Ravi
Raman's theoretical category of the "periphery within periphery," through which he
seeks to broaden the World Systems approach, arguing that such categorization
subordinates the state entirely to the planter class, eliding the contradictions in state
discourse and policy with regards to plantation labour. In aid of these arguments, I study
Dipesh Chakrabarty's formulation of History I and History II as a system by which we
can understand the history of capitalist production in South Asia.

The paper is organized into four sections. In the first section, Primitive
Accumulation, I discuss the history of coffee as a commodity of interest in Britain and
the establishment of the first coffee plantations in South Asia. In the second section, the
Labour Question, I examine Edmund C.P. Hull's guide to plantation operations, focusing
on his claims about the labour market, labourers, and the state. In the third section, I
examine the *Report of the South of India Planters' Enquiry Committee*, showing how the
document expresses various tensions in state policy and connecting the report to the

consequent Planters' Labour Act. In the final section, I connect these moments in the history of labour in the plantations to broader debates about labour and plantation historiography.

Primitive Accumulation

The coffee plantation, as a profit-seeking enterprise, took its impetus from a variety of cultural and economic conditions. The first of these is English demand for coffee. Coffee was introduced to the high society of London by a merchant in the Turkey Company returning from a voyage to the Levant during the reign of Oliver Cromwell.[11] This merchant, Daniell Edwards, "founded a coffee-house in London, which prospered so exceedingly, that it is said, in twelve months there were as many Coffee-houses in London as in Constantinople."[12] John Burnett ties the rapid increase in coffee consumption in the 1650s to the lively political situation in London noting that "the Civil War had ended with the victory of the Parliamentarians and the execution of Charles I in 1649: for the next 11 years Britain was governed as a Republic against a background of intense political interest and debate."[13] By the 1670s, "it was reported that more coffee was drunk in London than in any other city in the world, and that in 1708 there were nearly 3,000 coffee-houses in the capital."[14] British consumers and traders faced a problem however in that they relied entirely on the trade in coffee at the Port of al-Mukha in Yemen, where "prices varied greatly with crop yields and the monopoly power of the local merchants."[15]

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[11] Hull, p. 6
[12] Ibid.
[13] Burnett, John. "Coffee: 'I like coffee, I like tea…'" from *Liquid Pleasures: a Social History of Drinks in Modern Britain* (pp. 70-92). London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2001. P. 73
[14] Ibid., p. 74
[15] Ibid., p. 79

Following the lead of other coffee-craving colonial powers like the Dutch and the

French, British merchants opened coffee estates in the Blue Mountains of Jamaica,

relying on the steady supply of slave labour to the West Indian colony.[16] The West

Indies, particularly the French West Indies, which held 75% of the market share, would

be the "main source of world supplies for the rest of the century."[17] In the early 19th

century, two developments in the coffee market pushed both the state and the emerging

capitalist class to seek alternatives for coffee production. On the supply-side, the

abolition of slavery in British colonies in 1833 and the subsequent shortages in labour led

to a fall in British West Indian coffee production and therefore higher prices for British

coffee compared to French, Dutch, and Brazilian production.[18] At the same time, the

"lowering of duty to 6d a pound in 1825 resulted in a strong revival of coffee-drinking in

public and the emergence of a new type of coffee-house..."[19] This was the "coffee room"

a place "at which working men are served at a low price," with the backing of the

temperance movement.[20]

It is certainly no coincidence that it is in 1825 that "Sir Edward Barnes, that

energetic Governor to whom belongs the credit of uniting Kandy and the Western Coast

of Ceylon at Colombo, by one of the finest roads in the world, was the first European

who brought English energy and capital to bear upon to the pursuit now under discussion

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[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid., p. 82
[19] Ibid., p. 83
[20] G.R. Porter, quoted in Burnett, p. 83

in Ceylon."[21] Further north, the Kolli Hills region of Salem and Baramahal had recently (1792) been brought under the control of the East India Company following its victory over Tipu Sultan in the Mysore Wars. The seizure of these tropical hill tracts in peninsular and island South Asia opened the door to well-connected British individuals willing to invest in an untested endeavor. In *A Planting Century: The First Hundred Years of the United Planters' Association of Southern India, 1893-1993*, Muthiah presents the reader with the planters' view of themselves, that is, the idea of the planter as an adventurer who transforms the natural world at great personal risk: "It is a story of adventure and courage, determination and progress, all of which have been shepherded first by some outstanding individuals…"[22] In the introduction, Muthiah provides an extensive and striking summary of the planting endeavor.

> several hardy Englishmen, wild Irishmen, and dour Scots thought there was both adventure and money… These pioneering individuals, trekked miles every day, hacked their way through jungles, followed the elephant trails, dared tigers, leopards and snakes, suffered the plague of leeches, shivered in the almost year-round damp and cold, shook with the perennial malaria, went down with numerous other fevers, illnesses and injuries with none to treat them, and carved clearings in the forest that no man but the jungle dwellers had trod before – or, if they had, of which there was no record. From these clearings and the rude huts of

[21] Hull, p. 16
[22] Muthiah, S. *A Planting Century: The First Hundred Years of the United Planters' Association of Southern India, 1893-1993*. Affiliated East-West Press, 1993.

thatch and branches they built in them, the pioneers cleared more and more of the

jungle, felling branches and burning stumps and trunks. And in acres of cleared

jungle, miles from the next clearance and jungle home of a fellow pioneer, they

planted coffee and, as it flourished, some pepper or cardamom too.[23]

This is a history of great men, made great by their proclivity to adventure and their

transformation of the violent jungle into a highly productive element of the colonial state

and economy. This vision is highly masculine and premised on a concept of the human as

the tamer of the natural world. Indeed, this was the basis of planters' claims for unique

privileges vis a vis the domination and discipline of labour, beyond the limitations of the

bourgeois norms that nominally governed decision-making in the colonial bureaucracy.

Paul Erik Baak's study of the plantation sector in Travancore State modulates Muthiah's

description of the planters as pioneers held back by the British Government of India's

refusal to further strengthen contract enforcement, giving an account of the plantation

industry as a development with both European and "native" origins. [24] Baak argues that

the European planters "did not simply *act*" and in fact responded to "local forms of

labour recruitment, regional rights to land, and indigenous forms of power, sometimes

trying to change these elements, occasionally attempting to fit in with their

surroundings…"[25] While Baak also stresses that many planters were in fact "adventurous

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[23] Ibid, p. 8
[24] Baak, Paul Erik. *Plantation Production and Political Power: Plantation Development in South-West India in a long-term historical perspective, 1743-1963*. New York City, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997. P. 16
[25] Ibid.

individuals" who "dared to take great financial risks and took social isolation from family and fellow countryman for granted," he is sure to note that these planters "were well-off in a socio-political sense," able to capitalize on marriage networks that linked them to "influential officials" in both Travancore and the Madras Presidency.[26]

The power of social capital is evident in the work of Saravanan Velayutham, who finds that the Company, using a mix of strategies such as the hiking of land revenue demands and refusing to recognize tribal modes of land ownership such as the *guruship* system, expropriated tribal lands for the benefit of district-level administrators like M.D. Cockburn and W.A. Neave, as well as British settlers who, following a government order on 7 April 1833, could obtain land rent free for five years, and subsequently assessed at Re. 1 per acre per annum for up to 21 years for the purpose of coffee cultivation.[27] At the same time, the state was reluctant to prosecute planters for illegal seizures of land. Velayutham notes the example of a planter named Hunter, who in 1864, harassed tribal villages with the help of colonial officers to appropriate hill tracts for the purpose of opening a plantation.[28] Ravi Raman argues that forest plunder, both in Travancore and Wayanad, "was virtually legalized consequent on such stipulations and land encroachments continued on a mounting scale; cases of encroachment of villages in part or even wholly by the planters were not uncommon, often sparking off conflicts between

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[26] Ibid, p. 68
[27] Saravanan, Velayutham. *Colonialism, Environment and Tribals in South India, 1792-1947*. London: Routledge, 2017. Pp. 60-74, 146-7, 170.
[28] Ibid., p. 147

the planters and the local populace."[29] This phenomenon has multiple potential implications with regards to our understanding of the British state and its connection to the planter class. A straightforward Marxist account would argue that the retroactive justification of land expropriation by British planters constituted a local version of primitive accumulation, whereby planters, using their influence over the state, arrogated lands formerly held in common. On the other hand, we could consider the planter class an extension of the larger state apparatus, deputized by the state to tame the wild frontier and turn non-revenue producing lands into productive lands that could one day provide revenue. Here, we should recall the use of plantations by the British state as an instrument of governance beyond the pale of Dublin during the rule of Charles II in the early 17th century.[30] Synthesizing these perspectives complicates our understanding of the extent of the state as an apparatus of territorial control and the history of capitalist production, by pointing to the fuzzy boundary between state officials and the planter class as unique socioeconomic communities in the Madras Presidency.

[29] Raman, K. Ravi. *Global Capital and Peripheral Labour: The History and Political Economy of Plantation Workers in India*. New York: Routledge, 2010. p. 29
[30] McVeigh, Robbie and Rolston, Bill. "Civilising the Irish." *Race & Class*, Vol. 51(1): pp. 2-28. London: SAGE, 2009. P. 14

The Labour Question

Writing in the 1860s, veteran planter with experience in Ceylon and Wayanad, Edmund C.P. Hull, opens his guide to "any person, who having a small capital which he desires to increase, and deciding on doing so by means of the produce of the coffee tree" with a striking message:

> At this present time, when the scarcity of labour in India presents so alarming an aspect, it will, unfortunately, be in most cases barely possible to cultivate an estate in the exact method here described…
>
> Like all questions of supply and demand, however, that of labour will eventually right itself, and I have no doubt that the first symptom of improvement will be when our Government begins to regard the interests and welfare of the Peninsula as of greater importance than that of the West Indies, Mauritius, Natal, and countries the property of other nations, to which, year after year, they permit the exportation of the thews and sinews of the land: it being worthy of notice that a very small proportion of the labour so exported ever returns.[31]

Introducing his work with this note, Hull frames the planters' understanding of the state, free markets, labour and nationality. Hull's first statement is that the "scarcity of labour in India" is "alarming" with respect to the point of view of "any person… having a small capital." Here, we get a clue towards the nature of the labour market in South India, particularly with respect to the desire of working people to migrate to the hills to work on

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[31] Hull, p. iv-v

plantations. Explicitly, planters in the Western Ghats found it exceedingly difficult to induce workers from the plains to migrate to the hill forests for a wage low enough to secure profit on capital investments. Hull's second statement presents the planters view, or perhaps the view of capital, regarding the role of the state in the market. On the one hand, Hull, being a good British man of capital, is committed to an idea of market equilibrium: "Like all questions of supply and demand, however, that of labour will eventually right itself." At the same time, embedded within the phrase "eventually right itself" is Government action to "regard the interests and welfare of the Peninsula as of greater importance than that of the West Indies…" This reveals to some degree, planters' expectations vis a vis the state's role in promoting and protecting the interests of capital in the colonies. Indeed, Hull points to the "many a smiling plantation on their slopes [the Western Ghats], which spreading industry and comfort into many a previously impoverished village" in describing the coffee planter as "a benefactor of his species, well worthy of the protection and encouragement of the Government, which his energy tends to enrich."[32] This statement explicates the symbiotic relationship between the planter class and various departments of the Presidency government with portfolios covering the management of revenue, land settlement, and forestry. It also recalls the Irish case discussed by McVeigh and Rolston, wherein the plantation serves as both a means to extend the territorial authority of the state and its "civilising mission" through a deputized planter class.

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[32] Ibid., p. 17

Hull has more to say about the labour problem in the late 19th century. Specifically, he makes an argument about labourers' nature and three suggestions about planters' strategy with regards to the procurement and discipline of labourers. He argues that South Indian labourers are difficult to procure, a fact "doubtless… ascribable to the lethargic and slothful character of the Asiatic of the lower orders, and to the cheapness of food."[33] To Hull, the Asiatic's "slothful character" emerges partly from the "excessive cheapness of food in their native country, which enables them to subsist for many months, on the savings of a few weeks' wages, earned in Wynaad," and which induces labourers to "remain idle."[34] The result, in Hull's view, is that "they have no ambition, as a rule no desire for wealth, so that their wants from day to day are satisfied, they desire no more."[35] In order to think through this claim of workers' idleness, we need some context regarding the treatment of workers on the plantations. Ravi Raman writes:

> The European planters were generally 'inhuman and cruel' in their treatment of the workers. Even tying the workers up and brutally thrashing them, a practice akin to the punishment meted out in the Assam Plantations and in other colonies was not beyond them. When one worker died, another would appear in the same name… Offending workers were punished by lowering them into shallow, muddy water while they choked and struggled for breath… Even children were not

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[33] Ibid., p. 54
[34] Ibid., p. 22
[35] Ibid., p. 54-5

spared and were often subjected to 'corporal punishment' in this drive to extract

maximum work.[36]

Given the regime of punishment and the difficulty of the work, typically on empty

stomachs, we should interpret workers' lack of "ambition" as a refusal to contribute to

the enrichment of the planter by working more than is necessary to reproduce

themselves.[37] At the same time, it highlights the space for worker agency opened by their

position of strength in the labour-market, evidenced by the relatively high wage,

compared to the wage-rate for agricultural labourers in the plains, that planters needed to

offer to induce workers to leave their villages for the malaria infested forests of the

Western Ghats. The planters' difficulties in procuring a surplus of low-wage labour gives

workers a source of power, the power of refusing to work on the belief that they cannot

be so simply replaced.

Hull offers planters three strategies for combating the relative strength of workers

in the seasonal, migratory labour market: he advocates for planters to "combine," to make

workers dependent on employers, and to gain a stronger legal disciplinary mechanism

through legislation in Madras. Describing the potential of Wayanad district, Hull writes:

I am still, however, of the opinion, that labour will eventually have to be procured

from this or some other sources… in order to render coffee planting in Wynaad on

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[36] Raman, p. 89

[37] See, Marx, Karl. *Capital, Vol. 1: A Critique of Political Economy (1867)*. Translated by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1887. Marxists Internet Archive, 2015. p. 152, for a discussion of the distinction between "necessary labour-time" and "surplus labour-time," which Marx identifies as the source of profit for the owner of capital.

a large scale successful. This cannot be done by one proprietor, or even by one

Company however; *the planters must combine,* and strengthen their object by

their *unanimous exertions*, before this or any great and important undertaking like

this, can be successfully carried out.[38]

It was said the other day, in a report on the condition of India, 'the natives

combine, the Europeans *compete*,' everyone knows how true that remark is; if it

were not so with planters, there is no undertaking, however, at present apparently

impossible, which could not be accomplished, either as regards the improvement

of their own interests and prospects, or the welfare of the masses. This will apply

to a community as fully as to a nation.[39]

Hull's note on the need for planters to "combine" is essentially a call for employers to

form a cartel in pursuit of monopsony power over labour. He specifically targets the

practice by which small and large-scale planters enticed labour from neighboring

plantations through promises of a higher wage or a higher advance. The role of a

combination would thus be to set a price ceiling on labour-power and trap workers on

particular plantations.

Hull's then suggests that planters should work to "induce the immigrants to

depend on their new employer, and at once to reconcile themselves to settle down

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[38] Hull, p. 24
[39] Hull, p. 25

contentedly."[40] He makes this suggestion for Wayanad, based on his experience on plantations in Ceylon:

> One of the causes to which I attribute the success of Tamil labour in Ceylon, is, that from the great difficulty of the coolies find in returning to their own country, they are compelled to be more dependent on their employer, who finds it his interest to take as good care of them as possible. A march of 150 miles by the one route, and some 80 or 90 by the other, followed by a sea voyage, lies between them and their home.[41]

The act of drawing labour from great distances to the plantation works to isolate them particularly from their villages, where they may draw on social ties to enable their escape from the conditions of the plantation. In essence, Hull calls for the alienation of labour from its social context, reducing the strength of workers in the labour-market with regards to a potential employers' combination. The next step for capital, Hull argues, is "to ascertain what assistance the Government would give, to render such agreements actually binding, what punishment would be inflicted on deserters if apprehended, and what steps the authorities would take to apprehend such." Such "steps" would constitute an expansion of the existing Workman's Breach of Contract provision of Madras Act XIII of 1859. That is, to demand that the statute, which treated breaches of contract by workmen as a criminal action with a short penalty of imprisonment, be amended to compel the worker to finish the contract term.

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[40] Ibid., p. 26
[41] Ibid., p. 25

THE SYSTEM OF ADVANCES

      Hall makes one final claim about the labour question in his guide before moving to discuss various technical requirements for a functioning plantation. He writes:

> Although surprising, it is no less true that almost any native will agree, and bind himself to perform any sort of work, under whatever penalty, without the slightest hesitation or compunction, provided the amount of the advance, which by law *must* be given, be sufficient to gratify a momentary desire, or stave off a present difficulty.[42]

There are a few structural implications to Hull's claim about the necessity of advance payments. On the legal side, it is only through the provision of an advance that the worker, under the Workman's Breach of Contract law, could be punished by the state for a violation of a contract to provide labour for a contractually stipulated term. In terms of political economy, we learn from the "native's" agreeability to "perform any sort of work, under whatever penalty" that the class of labourers attracted to plantation labour were to a great degree indigent, with little recourse to refuse work "provided the amount of the advance."

      Though Hull writes that the advance goes to "gratify a momentary desire, or stave off a present difficulty," scholarship on the political economy of the plains regions of the Madras Presidency in the 19ᵗʰ and 20ᵗʰ century indicate that these "desires" and "difficulties" tended to comprise debt payments owed to landlords. Indeed, the abolition of agrestic slavery in 1843 was followed by a conversion of the relationship of the

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[42] Hull, p. 58

agrarian labourer and landowner from de jure enslavement to one of debt peonage. Srinivasa Raghavaiyangar, a senior civil servant in Madras Presidency tasked with producing a memorandum on the progress of the presidency from the 1850s to the 1890s, wrote in 1893 that:

> In several cases, advances are made by landholders to agricultural labourers on the condition that they are not to pay interest so long as they work under them for the customary wages, and that, on default, the amount advanced should be repaid with interests at 18 to 24 percent.[43]

Rupa Viswanath, in *The Pariah Problem*, explains that this relationship emerged from the "prevailing land surplus in the Tamil south that persisted through the end of the nineteenth century, as well as the fact that the most profitable crops – primarily rice, and in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, cash crops such as cotton – were highly labour intensive."[44] As a result, "control over labour was not merely an adjunct to but *fundamentally determined* the productive capacity of land."[45] After the abolition of slavery by the government in Fort St. George, the system was replaced by one of debt bondage in which, "repayment was not part of the design."[46] N.S. Ramaswamy Ayyangar describes it as follows in his testimony to the RCL:

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[43] Srinivasa Raghavaiyangar, S. *Memorandum on the progress of the Madras Presidency during the last forty years of British administration*. Madras: Government Press, 1893. P. 256

[44] Viswanath, Rupa. *The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion, and the Social in Modern India*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014. P. 24

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid., p. 29

Though legal slavery has been abolished there is real slavery amongst the lower ranks of labourers… The agricultural labourers are always indebted to the landlords of the village… In the plantation areas like the Anamallais and Nilgiris the whole outlook is the estate itself. They have no local interests, no houses, no property and they are in a state of semi-slavery.[47]

Thus, the advances demanded by labourers in the plains of the Tamil south thus could help labourers pay off part of their contractual debts as well as pay for ritual costs such as weddings and in some cases, enabled them to purchase land in their villages.[48] What we may interpret as a "cultural" phenomenon, that of demanding an advance for the performance of labour, could then also be interpreted as both a precondition for the structural availability of the worker as well as a wage demand made by the worker on the basis of their strength in the labour market with respect to the planters.

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[47] *RCL Evidence Vol. VII (Written)*, p. 239
[48] See, *RCL Evidence Vol. VII (Oral)*, pp. 318, 334, 374, 423, 424, 428, 445

The South of India Planters' Enquiry Committee

This need to provide advances for labour, and to compete with one another to provide adequate advances to a scarce pool of labour, quickly became the primary impetus for the formation of a range of planters' associations across the Western Ghats.[49] Muthiah describes the birth of the planters' associations as a natural phenomenon proceeding from social gatherings but notes that the main subject of "shop-talk" was the "perennial subject" of labour.[50] Within the subject of labour, planters were primarily concerned with the difficulty in procuring labour and the related problem of "crimping," that is, the enticement by planters of labour from neighboring plantations through advance payments.[51] Upon the failure of a petition to the Government of India in 1892 to strengthen Breach of Contract laws and enforcement, these planters' associations combined under the umbrella of the United Planters' Associations of South India (UPASI).[52]

In 1895, as noted by the *Report of the South of India Planters' Enquiry Committee* (1896), the UPASI presented a memorial to the Viceroy on his tour in Madras, asking for "increased protection against 'loss from willful break of contract and dishonesty with regard to advances' made to coolies and maistries," accepting that "certain proposals put forward with this object had recently been disallowed by the

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[49] Muthiah, p. 191
[50] Muthiah, p. 191
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid, p. 192

Government of India."[53] The Committee goes so far as to say that "the remedy which they had proposed," to compel labourers to fulfill their contracts, "was opposed to the whole spirit of modern legislation."[54] The "modern" spirit of the legal tradition in this moment refers to the 62 years of common law precedent emanating from Parliament's decision in 1833 to ban slavery and the slave trade in British colonies as well as the longer tradition of dealing with criminal law and civil law on a separate basis. Given that criminal law related to crimes against the state or sovereign body and civil law concerned crimes of property and contract, the planters' demand to merge the two through criminal enforcement of civil contracts threatened to make explicit the connection between planters and the state.

The Committee describes the creation of the "system of advances" as follows: When labour was required for the development of the planting industry in Mysore, the planters had to pay off the debts of these labourers in order to secure their labour. A large emancipation of serfs took place, and complaints were made to Sir L. Bowring by the Gowdas of the Malnaad in Mysore against the Europeans in the early days of the planting industry. There can be no doubt that the introduction of this industry contributed mainly to break down the system of agrestic slavery which prevailed and that that system has practically ceased in Mysore whence labour for plantations in all parts of Southern India was at first drawn. The condition of the

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[53] South of India Planters' Enquiry Committee. *Report of the South of India Planters' Enquiry Committee*. Madras: Printed by the Superintendent, Government Press, 1896. P. 1
[54] Ibid.

labourers improved; they began to buy lands of their own and by degrees the Mysore labour supply proved inadequate to meet the demand, and recruitment began in other tracts.[55]

The problem with such a system of labour procurement is that the upward pressure on wages would cut into the amount of surplus-value available as profit to the owner of capital. Indeed, one planter tells the Committee that "the advance is generally prevalent and states that it cannot be obviated by a higher rate of wage, because the cooly in that case 'would become still more independent all the sooner and would need greater inducements probably to come to work on estates.'"[56]

Here, it is important to discuss the figure of the *maistri*, who appears across the discourse on planters and labour as a maligned but integral figure in the process of labour procurement and discipline. Used by planters in Ceylon to obtain labour from the Madras Presidency since the 1820s, *maistris* were originally "spokesmen for a migrating, agricultural labour gang… a leader, either elected or simply acknowledged, who led his gang in search of work, saw to their welfare, and mediated in the case of disputes either between gang members or between the gang and the planter."[57] Barbara Evans notes that the planters adapted this system of labour migration to their own needs, appointing trusted labourers to the post with the role of recruiting new gangs of labourers using

[55] Ibid., p. 18
[56] Ibid., p. 19
[57] Evans, Barbara. "Constructing a plantation labour force: The plantation-village nexus in south India." *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 32, 2. New Delhi: SAGE, 1995. P. 169

advances given by the planters.[58] Though Evans interprets this role of the *maistri* as the bridge between the "pre-capitalist world of the rural village and the capitalist realm of the plantation,"[59] it appears on the contrary that the figure of the *maistri* shows that the village and plantation utilized the same system of debt bondage to discipline and maintain a pool of labour. The result is that the "transfer in many cases of the labourer's debt from the hereditary landholder to the planter or the planter's agent… effected a partial emancipation, but many are still held in thralldom."[60]

However, the system of advances allowed both the *maistris* and the labourers room for maneuver. They retained the ability to simply run away. The Committee points out that "the total amount of loss incurred by the planters belonging to the Associations, for which returns have been furnished, is given at no less a figure than Rs. 4,64,625 under the head of irrecoverable advances apart from indirect losses."[61] This large degree of loss, through direct loss of advances as well as the loss of timely labour, led planters to demand "nothing short of a penal law… for the protection of employers of labour who advance money for the emigration of labourers without property and with a small sense of responsibility."[62] This point is precisely where friction develops between the planters' demands and the ideological commitment of the British state to some semblance of liberal ideology, especially in the realm of law. On the one hand, the state recognized that

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[58] Ibid., p. 170-1
[59] Ibid., p. 173
[60] South of India, p. 18
[61] Ibid., p. 54
[62] Ibid., p. 58

"The planting industry in Southern India is an imperial concern... The capital has been furnished, in the first instance, by British planters who held under British guarantees." [63] The planters thus make an explicitly racial case for the subordination of the South Asian labourer to the needs of British capitalists, calling on *their* state to advance *their* interests: "British planters who held under British guarantees." On the other hand, members of the legal community such as Sir Charles Turner, Chief Justice of Madras in the 1880s, were strongly against "any amendment of the law which would have the effect of converting contracts for service into obligations amounting to a qualified form of slavery."[64] Madras was not alone in confronting this fundamental divergence in the expectations of European settlers and the legal tradition of the British empire. Indeed, we should recall Partha Chatterjee's discussion of the Ilbert Bill affair of the early 1880s, in which Calcutta's European residents and press revolted at the suggestion by the Governor's Council that senior Indian magistrates ought to be able to preside over cases involving European parties.[65] The cases are not identical. The Ilbert Bill dealt with the expectation of European residents that they should not be subject to the legal judgement of a "native," while the UPASI memorandum concerned an exception to a particular industry, which included "native" planters. However, the comparison does draw out the extent to which British settlers, in the cities or the hill tracts, believed that British common law ought not apply in the colonial context. In the colony, they expected, the legal system ought to

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[63] Ibid., p. 58-61

[64] Ibid.

[65] Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993.

function to the benefit of the British, since what was good for British settlers must be good for the British empire.

THE PLANTERS LABOUR ACT OF 1903

In trying to resolve this legal-ideological problem, the request by capital for penal enforcement of civil contracts and the legal-historical consensus that "it is against the spirit of modern legislation" to do so, the Committee took a compromise position that marked out a state of legal exception for the plantation industry.[66] The Committee suggested:

> The objects in view would be, first, to preserve to planters in British Territory the facilities they at present enjoy under Act XIII of 1859 for enforcing their contracts; second, to add to these facilities such corresponding obligations as have been deemed proper in the more recent enactments; third, to provide for the control of the recruiting agency; and fourth, to lay the foundation for the introduction of a procedure whereby planters out of British India who obtain their labour from the Madras Presidency may have reasonable control of such labour.[67]

In effect, they avoided resolving the question of penal enforcement of the civil contract of labour employment, instead offering administrative reforms that would resolve the problem of workers and *maistris* absconding across state boundaries.

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[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid., p. 60

The ultimate result of the Committee's recommendations however, was the

Planters' Labour Act of 1903, under which, "defaulting workers who acknowledged their

outstanding advances and who were willing to return to their estates had their cases

acquitted but were placed in the physical custody of their employers to ensure that they

completed the terms of their contracts."[68] Workers who refused to comply were

sentenced to "rigorous imprisonment" and remained "liable to complete their contracts

upon their release."[69] At the same time, the Act elevated the status of the plantation

maistri by regarding him legally as an employer of labourers with the same legal status as

the planter.[70] Evans writes that this elevation of the *maistri*'s status was not coupled with

legal protections for the planters against the *maistri* and made it such that the *maistris*

could not "be forced to take legal action against workers… who failed to complete the

terms of their contracts.[71] The Act also denied compensation to planters for production

losses through the criminal courts.[72] Over the course of the next two decades under the

Planters' Labour Act, the position of the *maistri* grew increasingly influential, tracking

particularly with stagnations in labourer wages and increases in the cost of grains, which

forced workers to take short term loans from their *maistris*.[73] As a result of these changes,

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[68] Evans, Barbara. "Cultural Context and Contractual Relations: The Madras Planters' Labour Law and the Rise of the Plantation Maistri, 1904-1927." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Apr., 1997), pp. 73-92. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P. 74
[69] Ibid., p. 75
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid., p. 90

Evans argues, the colonial state, "in attempting to exert more effective legal control over capitalist production… had provided a stimulus which had simultaneously bolstered and undermined the pre-capitalist realm."[74] However, it is unclear that the state intended to exert more control over the planting industry through the Planters' Labour Act. Indeed, the enquiry which provided the impetus for the act was responding to the demands of planters for legal support in order to gain more control over the labour force. As such, the state was not so much seeking to "exert more effective legal control over capitalist production" but rather, it was trying to provide planters with an additional legal mechanism to discourage both absenteeism and labour flight.

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[74] Ibid., p. 92

Notes Towards the Historiography of Labour in South Asia

While the "system of advances" and the mode of labour recruitment through *maistris* may seem like a cultural quirk of southern India's "Asiatic" mode of production, and the intervention of the British state in the plantation industry seems to cast it as an enforcer of capital interests, my study of the structural positions of plantation workers and their employers in the labour market points to two different conclusions. First, reducing the system of advances to a "pre-capitalist" cultural phenomenon elides the networks of debt that structured the labour market of the plains and the hills of southern India. Second, the role of the British imperial state cannot be reduced to that of the enforcer of the British planter class, given the deep conflict within the state over the extent to which it had to conform to planter demands, as well as the usefulness of the planter class in furthering the state's territorial goals. These two arguments directly bear upon debates in the historiography of labour in South Asia.

DEBATE OVER CULTURE AND CAPITALIST PRODUCTION

The historiography of the South Asian working classes in general, is marked by a debate about *culture.* The underlying claim is that the Indian working classes never achieved class consciousness due to cultural baggage, specifically the ties of caste and religion. In *Rethinking Working Class History* (1989) and *Provincializing Europe* (2000), Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that in the case of jute workers in Bengal, the model of inevitable proletarianization and the emergence of class consciousness was sidetracked by "pre-bourgeois culture and consciousness" evidenced in their modes of protest and

solidarity, linked to village, caste, and communal bonds.[75] Chakrabarty's history of

Calcutta jute workers works against stadial histories that require first the cultural

transformation of workers into "free-born" citizens with notions of "equality before the

law," before working-class consciousness can be ontologically possible. He signals in

this work that labour historians working with Marxist theory need to acknowledge and

work with historical difference. He extends this discussion in *Provincializing Europe*,

focusing specifically on the distinction between "Concrete" and "Abstract Labour." The

terms come from Marx's study of production in *Capital, Vol. 1*, where he argues that the

commodity form requires that labour be understood in the abstract as an employment of

labour-power as opposed to the particular skill and personality of the individual

producer[76]; it is in this relation that the "charm of the workman" is lost in the disciplining

of the worker into abstract labour. Chakrabarty takes up abstract labour as the form of

labour required by History I, the history of Capital in its becoming, and the concrete

labourer and their social and cultural networks as History II, histories outside Capital.[77]

Chakrabarty argues that histories of capital "cannot escape the politics of the diverse

ways of being human" and calls on historians of labour to pay attention to affective

narratives of human belonging where life forms do not seem exchangeable through a

third term of equivalence such as abstract labour."[78]

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[75] Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Rethinking Working Class History, Bengal 1890-1940*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989. P. 12
[76] Marx, p. 39
[77] Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000. P. 63-4
[78] Ibid, p. 70.

In *Imperial Power and Popular Politics,* Rajnarayan Chandavarkar calls on historians of labour in South Asia to pay keen attention to the materiality of worker's connections to their neighborhoods and villages in studies of their responses to the violences of capital as well as the imperial state.[79] In his extensive study of the material conditions of industrialization in Bombay and working class resistance to factory and state violence, Chandavarkar documents how "there was no clear divide between the unskilled and skilled labour, the casual poor and industrial workers, but rather numerous gradations between them… Caste, kinship and communal ties could facilitate association and solidarity…"[80] In addition, Chandavarkar advocates for attention to the masses of workers outside the traditional working class of labour historiography: "recruits to the 'working class' in India encompassed very diverse social formations, as tribals were indentured for the tea gardens or recruited for the coal mines, and Dalits and landless peasants sought work as field labourers at harvest time or migrated to nearby towns for employment in the trades or the 'service sector.'"[81] Indeed, in his study, migrant workers often emerged as the most militant and ready to strike given their "access to an alternative base" and further, their "aim of preserving their stake in rural society."[82]

Chandavarkar posits his argument about the materiality of socio-cultural networks as a critique of Chakrabarty's thinking on abstract and concrete labour. In the particular

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[79] Chandavarkar, Rajnarayan. *Imperial Power and Popular Politics: Class, Resistance, and the State in India, c. 1850-1950*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. P. 21
[80] Ibid, p. 347
[81] Ibid, p. 8
[82] Ibid, p. 347

case of labour recruitment to the Wester Ghat's however, we could productively think about the two frameworks in synthesis. That is, we could think about material networks of debt and social obligation as part of Chakrabarty's History II. Though readers have thought of History II as referring primarily to embodied "cultural" elements in the lives of workers, we should interpret the category as also comprising systems of economic organization. We would then think about the History II of plantation agriculture in South India as including the indebtedness of the Dalit agrarian labourers of the plains regions, which was itself the result of the conversion of their enslavement into a form of labour contract. The encounter between planters struggling to find low-cost labour for the coffee-fields and these indebted labourers neither fits in neatly with the transcendental history of capitalism nor the caste mode of production. Whereas the worker in the capitalist mode of production is "doubly-free" from enslavement and from social relations that formerly accounted for their social reproduction and the worker in the caste mode of production was singly-bonded to their landlord, the worker in the plantations of the Western Ghats was doubly-bonded to the plantation and the field through a system of advance payments and credit. As such, we should abandon the category of "pre-capitalist" in our discussions of plantation labour. On the one hand, such categorization contributes to a Eurocentric discourse about capitalist production, whereby an ideal version of capital originating in Europe is said to be corrupted by "pre-capitalist" systems in the colonies. On the other hand, it consigns a system of wage-labour marked by worker indebtedness to a "pre-capitalist" world when in fact it displays key characteristics of the

capitalist mode of production such as the expropriation of surplus value through wage

labour and interest.

PLANTATIONS AND THE STATE IN SOUTH INDIA

Moving from the larger debate over labour to the particular arguments in the

historiography of plantations, we take up the question of the role and nature of the state in

plantation capitalism. Ravi Raman argues that a straightforward classification of planters

as an accumulating class on the one hand, and plantation labourers as simply the

"pauperized working masses," occludes the caste and gender dimensions of the plantation

as a mode of production.[83] Most plantation workers "belonged to the historically

oppressed castes" and most were women, implicated in a system of surplus labour

accumulation that was structured along Brahminical-patriarchal lines for the benefit of

first, "metropolitan capital," and subsequently, "Indian big capital."[84] Raman critiques the

Subaltern Studies collective approach to labour historiography on this particular point. He

argues that the Subaltern Studies approach, exemplified by Dipesh Chakrabarty's

Rethinking Working-Class History, "dissociates the workers' consciousness from

material relations, situating it entirely within the confines of hierarchical relations and

primordial loyalties."[85]

Raman then extends his critique to World Systems Theory, elaborated by

Immanuel Wallerstein and others, arguing that it offers "an entry point" into the "impact

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[83] Raman, p. 1
[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid, p. 2

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of global political-economic events and world market processes on local production

relations" but ignores the "social complexities of capital-labour relations" and "the

agency of peripheral labour strategies of resistance and survival" by focusing on

metropolitan capital alone.[86] Instead, he posits, we should "situate local labour with all its

social constituent features within the larger world economy, and global capital, in its turn,

within the historically evolved local social structure."[87] This involves the creation of a

new analytical category, "the periphery within periphery," in order to develop a more

intricate picture of the social relations of places being incorporated into global capitalism,

hopefully opening up "possibilities of fresh forms of historical consciousness."[88] This

move is necessitated by the failure of World Systems theory to adequately theorize the

"composition of the peripheries, particularly in terms of class, caste, and gender, the

interaction among these constituents in relation to global capital and the manner in which

they are manipulated to suit the interests of capital."[89] With this categorical innovation,

Raman pushes back against the idea that capitalism has a universalizing tendency coupled

with bourgeois social and political revolution; instead, it seeks to "externalize part of the

cost of reproduction and also to exercise the authority of capital" through combinations

of free and unfree labour, working to hold labour "captive at work sites… made

permanently available."[90] Capitalism is thus entangled with "patriarchal forms of

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[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid, p. 4-5
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid, p. 6
[90] Ibid.

production and reproduction" forcing the labour historian to take up the history of the

labour process alongside the history of the family, as co-implicated in the "capitalist

mode of production governed by global capital."[91]

While Raman's category "periphery within periphery" broadens and deepens

World Systems theory with regards to the study of plantations as a mode of production, it

continues to center metropolitan capital in its analysis. Here, we should consider

Chakrabarty's critique of "historicism," or the tacit acceptance of historical teleology in

the European historiographical tradition. He argues that "even when 'capital' is ascribed

a 'global,' as distinct from a European, beginning, it is still seen in terms of the Hegelian

idea of a totalizing unity – howsoever internally differentiated – that undergoes a process

of development in historical time."[92] Instead, he argues that "no global (or even local, for

that matter) capital can ever represent the universal logic of capital, for any historically

available form of capital is a provisional compromise made of History I modified by

somebody's History IIs."[93] Capital, for Chakrabarty, is a "philosophical-historical

category" and "historical difference is not external to it but is rather constitutive of it"

and histories of capital "cannot escape the politics of the diverse ways of being human."[94]

I think these categories, History I and History II, better capture the historical

development of plantation capitalism in South India than the World Systems model,

particularly in its ability to capture the social and political conditions of South India that

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[91] Ibid, p. 7
[92] Chakrabarty, Dipesh. Provincializing Europe. P. 47
[93] Ibid, p. 70
[94] Ibid.

existed outside the life-process of capitalist development. In Raman's account, the British

state is reduced to an enforcer of the planter class, which in part eliminates the conflict

between planters and the state. rather than thinking of the state as a coherent agent in the

negotiations of power between planters and plantation workers, we should think of the

state as an assemblage of institutions and agents with differing responsibilities with

regards to capital and labour. This is evident in the tension between the importance of

"British capital" and the "spirit of modern legislation" emergent in the *Report of the

South of India Planters' Enquiry Committee* and in the compromises taken in the

Planters' Labour Act of 1903. As such, the state as a whole cannot be considered simply

an agent of capital. Rather, the contradictions of the state express the struggles between

labourers and capitalists from the slave plantations of the West Indies and the factories of

Manchester to the plains of Tanjore and the plantations of the Western Ghats.

Kaapi and Coolie

We return then to filter-coffee, preferably strong with milk and sugar. As Venkatachalapathy writes, "Drinking coffee, it appears, was no simple quotidian affair… coffee too was a sign of the modern."[95] While Venkatachalapathy focuses on the middle-class engagements with modernity through the consumption of coffee as a "beverage for Europeans," our encounter with the colonial production of coffee in the Western Ghats points to an additional dimension of the "modernity" of drinking coffee. This is the creation of a consumer culture based on the consumption of plantation grown stimulants that work to boost industrial production as opposed to depressants such as alcohol that work against the factory cycle. Indeed, just as coffee was promoted as an "auxiliary to temperance; since its use tends largely to supersede that of spirituous liquors,"[96] in the Anglo-American world, drinks like coffee and tea were promoted by factory-owners, the native elite, and the British colonial state as alternatives to the toddy shop in the major urban areas of the Presidency.[97] The caste element of this consumer culture is particularly dense in signification. Take the use of metal "tumblers" for drinking coffee. As Venkatachalapathy writes, the tumbler is "a Tamil (Brahmin) invention: enabling the drinking of coffee without sipping the tumbler, it facilitated the balancing of hospitality and avoiding ritual pollution."[98] The act of drinking filter coffee from a tumbler signifies

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[95] Venkatachalapathy, p. 302
[96] Hewitt, p. 41
[97] See, Menon, Nikhil. "Battling the Bottle: Experiments in regulating drink in late colonial Madras," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 52, 1, (2015).
[98] Venkatachalapathy, p. 307

the centrality of caste-capitalism in both the dimension of ritual pollution and that of a caste-based mode of production reliant on the expropriation of Dalit labour-power both in the act of production and through instruments of debt. As the Tamil middle classes accepted "kaapi," they gave the world the "coolie."

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