

Kerala's cashew workers

Lindberg, Anna. 2005. *Modernization and Effeminization in India: Kerala Cashew Workers since 1930*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press. 200 pages, ISBN 87 91114 21 7

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In this richly documented study, Anna Lindberg uses history and anthropology to analyse the lives of female factory workers in Kerala: their working conditions and the changing power and gender relations within the industry and society. In the introduction Lindberg explains how she aspires to bridge the gap between the historian's focus on colonial times and sociologists' and development workers' interest in contemporary society. Bridging this gap is not this study's only contribution. By covering a span of 60 years while maintaining a keen eye for details and subtleties, it dissects processes of transformation such as 'effeminisation' and indicates precisely how gender identities have been influenced over time by changing power relations. This helps us understand the origin of social phenomena that may hitherto have been accepted as simply 'traditional' or 'western'.

The Indian state of Kerala is known for its demographic and social achievements and vibrant civil society. It is therefore particularly interesting that Lindberg has situated her study here, among the largest group of factory hands in the state: the cashew workers, over 90% of whom are female. Her purposes are twofold: to shed light on

forms of domination based on gender, caste and class; and to show that people, however suppressed or marginalised, have the ability to think, describe and analyse their own situations.

For these purposes the combination of techniques such as observation, in-depth interviews, questionnaires and the investigation of historical sources is very beneficial. For instance, when comparing the written records of political discussions on labour laws with current observations in the factories, one can understand policy makers' motives and the implications of their decisions. For example, Lindberg describes how the 'male breadwinner model' that originated from a 'western' context was strategically applied to lower minimum wages for women, even though many female employees were the main providers for their families.

'Women's jobs': revisionist history

Comparing historical documents and oral history provides insight into the influence of a hegemonic discourse on the 'different versions' of history. For example, while employers, civil servants and trade union leaders now claim that the male participation rate in cashew factories was never over 5%, written records from the 1930s show that almost

30% of the total workforce was male. Later years, however, have seen a transformation in the status of factory jobs and their 'gender coding'. Some of the most detrimental and strenuous tasks became 'women's jobs', Lindberg finds, to the extent that current employers and trade union leaders find it difficult to believe that men had performed these tasks in the past. Industry power-holders have jointly developed a hegemonic gendered language defining women as housewives who are helpless, weak, unskilled and dependent – and therefore legitimately underpaid and otherwise ignored. In this respect Lindberg uses the term 'effeminisation' to indicate the 'way a woman's dressing, behaving, and acting in different spaces (ie, at the factory, in union participation, in the household, and in society at large) are perceived as differing from a man's'.

To elicit the perspectives of female workers, the author's in-depth interviews are extremely helpful. For those who are aware of the Malayalee's political consciousness and participation rate, the detailed explanations women provide about factory history, unions and their overall work situation do not come as a surprise. Sadly enough, this book demonstrates how comprehension alone does not always lead to the amelioration of working conditions. The profit

motive, structures of domination, lack of female worker representation and recourse (for instance, through a union) and the process of 'effeminisation' mean that female factory workers are losing some of the authority and independence they enjoyed in earlier decades. Lindberg's last chapter on 'Marriage, Money, and Identity' illustrates how the increasing practice of dowry-giving in Kerala is not only characteristic but also exacerbates this process. Dowry is one of the most important and difficult issues that Malayalees will face in the near future; Lindberg shows courage and finesse in the way she has included this delicate topic in her study.

For lay reader and academic alike

While the author's use of the term 'effeminisation' helps to describe a significant process, 'modernisation' is a more problematic term. While Lindberg avoids major problems by not offering a prior definition, almost everything that has happened since the 1930s becomes part of a holistic process of 'modernisation'. The question remains whether using the term in this way provides any additional insight. Even though I would have appreciated more elaboration on the theoretical issues involved in this concept choice – such as on the relationship between ideology and discourse



Shelling cashew nuts takes place in dirty and unhealthy places. The majority of women working here belong to the lowest castes. Anna Lindberg

mentioned in the introduction but not pursued anywhere in the study – this is probably (and understandably) the first material sacrificed when an academic study is published for a larger public.

Indeed, the wealth of information analysed makes the book exceptionally interesting for a varied public: from a broad readership interested in Kerala, the cashew industry, gender or class dynamics to academics from the fields of anthropology, economics and history. The time and compassion the author has invested should convince those in power to look at the many ways in which the lives of Kerala's female cashew workers could be improved. Lindberg's book could serve as their guide. ◀

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