

Anthropology Book Forum

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BARUA, MAAN. 2024. *Plantation Worlds*, Durham: Duke University Press, 312 pp., ISBN: 978-1478020868

The plantation is alive and kicking. Large swatches of land in the Global South are being turned into monocultural plantations of oil palm, soybean, cut flowers, and the usual tropical commodities like bananas, sugar cane, coffee, and tea. No surprise then that plantations have become a critical site of ethnographic and archival explorations as well as novel theorizing. Part of the scholarly attractiveness of plantation spaces, it seems, comes from Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway's apt conceptualizing of the current era as the Plantationocene, marked by the alienation, circulation, and slavery of people and plants.

Maan Barua's book *Plantation Worlds* (2024) is a brilliant contribution to this expanding field of plantation studies. Barua is an extraordinarily productive scholar with a knack for conceptual work and this book is no exception. He draws on the notion of the Plantationocene, but insists on it being **a** Plantationocene, stressing the particularity and specificities of the plantation landscape in Assam, in the northeastern corner of India, that he is concerned with. This is a postcolonial landscape completely transformed through the establishment of monocultural tea estates in the second part of the 19th century, with the enclosure of huge tracts of land, massive clearings of forests, dispossession of people, and the construction of roads, railways, and other infrastructure developments. Along with this, a large number of people were brought in as plantation laborers leading to a major demographic shift, both in terms of numbers as well as ethnic composition. The region, as Barua puts it, "is a South within the South"; a hinterland and a resource frontier.

The Assam tea industry has been the subject of a large number of studies, notably pioneering work by historians who have accounted for the manner in which the colonial administration granted planters access to huge land grants and facilitated the supply of laborers to the estates. Most of the laborers were recruited from impoverished parts of eastern India and kept under

the most horrible conditions in the plantation estates. Barua acknowledges the importance of the earlier research into the dark history of the indentured labor regime that developed in Assam, mentioning especially the work by scholars like Amalendu Guha and Rana Partap Behal. But, as I will outline in this review, Barua's aim and scope differ. In the *Plantation Worlds* book, we learn about Adivasi farmers, elephants, feral plants, forest reservation, oil extraction, and identity politics; stories that rarely figure in accounts of tea plantations in Assam and elsewhere. As Barua puts it, these are stories that "exceed the physical locus of the plantation."

The book opens with a telling account of a group of elephants that stray into villagers' fields, munching into farmers' hard-toiled crops. As we learn, survival in the Assam Plantationocene is hard for both people and elephants (and other non-humans) that inhabit a landscape compartmentalized into separate spaces for tea plantations, agriculture villages, forest reserves, and wildlife sanctuaries. But as life cannot thrive in isolation, people, animals, and plants constantly move out of their assigned spaces and entangle in unruly and unexpected ways. Plants brought into the plantation as cover crops to suppress weeds or for nitrogen fixation have escaped into nearby forests and fields, creating a major impediment for farmers and more-than-human survival. *Mikania micrantha*, a creeper introduced from Central America, is a case in point. The plant is highly invasive and a major cause of ecological ruination, for example, by destroying elephant habitats. Elephants are especially vulnerable in the re-configured postcolonial landscape. Their habitats are shrinking, and as they are migratory beings, they constantly trespass into the spaces assigned to humans. "Dwelling with elephants is a fraught endeavor," as Barua puts it (p. 11). In some places, villagers are forced to give up agriculture altogether, migrating elsewhere due to frequent elephant incursions and destruction of houses, crops, and eventual loss of life. At times, especially notorious elephants are killed. On the back of a poisoned, dead elephant, villagers have scribbled "paddy thief," in Assamese. For the elephants, it is a matter of navigating a complex and changing human-made landscape where their mobility is heavily restricted by railway lines, fences, and industrial estates, and when stuck in a place, they are forced to depend on cultivated crops and food grain stored in people's houses. Some elephants have become rather skilled at this, forming smaller groups that raid crops at night to avoid being detected.

Barua is a geographer by training and the book is based on a rich and captivating combination of archival sources along with ethnography and ethology. He knows Assam intimately, being born there and regularly coming back for visits and fieldwork. Infrastructure is a central node

in his analytic, and then not only in terms of material stuff like roads, railways, pipes, and energy grids, but expanded into thinking about infrastructural properties and agency of vegetal beings and non-human animals. What holds the book together, and what I read as the key concern, is the unfolding of a special plantation logic that molds both human and more-than-human worlds. This is a capitalist logic that produces cheap nature, a monoculture of tea, and extraction of natural resources like timber, coal, and oil. But it is also a colonial logic that seeks to discipline and order the landscape according to a specific administrative matrix; classifying land, establishing ownership and forms of property, and keeping nature and culture separate. And, as Barua stresses, it is a racial ordering where colonized people are rendered or reduced to cheap labor. It is both singular and plural, “the plantation logics.” Despite the formal end of British rule, the logics persist.

In working through the specificities of the Assam Plantationocene, Barua asks what “livability” means in a landscape marked by the routine violence that plantations generate. This question certainly has wider currency. It is something that many of us grapple with. Barua ends by suggesting that there are leaks and openings for other “cartographies of dwelling.” *Plantation Worlds* is a highly ambitious and complex book that is hard to summarize and, more so, to review. Here, I have only touched upon some of the issues that are covered. In reading the book I keep thinking about my own work tracing the travel of the Assam tea plant from its origin in the forest, cultivated by different indigenous communities as an agroforestry crop, then turned into a plantation crop by the British, later taken across the Indian Ocean to various locations of the Empire and beyond. What is similar and different between, say, the present Plantationocene in the Kenyan highlands and the Assam one, outlined by Barua? What significance has the crop cultivated; what does the tea plant itself bring to how the logics play out or unfolds in different locations? As with all good books, I end up with a set of new inquiries to pursue. In sum, I would highly recommend this read to all scholars concerned with precarious survival and co-becomings in places ravaged by dispossession and environmental destruction.

Bengt G. Karlsson is Professor of Social Anthropology at Stockholm University, Sweden. He is mainly working on issues relating indigenous peoples and the society-environment interface, with particular focus on the politics of ethnicity and nature in India. Karlsson has published on topics like indigeneity, forests, conservation, mining, subaltern movements, ethnicity, development and political ecology. He is presently working on two projects concerning plant-people entanglements, one on food crops in the Eastern Himalayas and another on tea plantations across the Indian Ocean. Karlsson is member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities.



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