

Planters' Lives – A Perspective from Colonial Coorg

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Abstract

European plantations have been seen as discrete sites of large-scale production for a wide market, and of exploitation of coerced labour. Plantations were also sites where European planters, their families and managers interacted with the indigenous labouring class – maistries, coolies and ayahs - on a daily basis. Work on plantations, planters' households and gardens were crucially dependent on plantation, house and garden coolies. In the nineteenth century the British attempted to reform, transform and assimilate Indians through law, education, free trade, and conversion to Christianity. The aim was to create a support system to cement the empire in India. However, there was another side to this process – it was not unilinear. European planters and their families were altering themselves through long stays in India and close proximity with the labouring Indians. Plantations thus became sites for mutual influence and exchange of language, ideas about the caste system, cuisine, attire and gifts. The coolies were excluded from the social circle of the European planters. However, they accompanied the master and 'missus' to parties, picnics, holidays and shikar, and looked after small children. Planters' lives - economic and social - were not complete without their coolies. Cathleen Ballantyne in 'Plenty Salaams' provides interesting insights into life on a plantation from the perspective of a Scottish planter's wife in colonial Coorg.

Key words: *European plantations, coffee, Coorg, planters, coolies*

Plantations have been seen as large units of agricultural production which came up in European colonies from the early modern period.¹ Plantations produced primarily one crop for a wider market. The required large work force consisted of coerced labour ranging from slaves to contracted or indentured labour. This could be local, but largely brought from outside or migratory. The plantation system was agro-industrial in nature

1. The British established 'plantations' in Scotland and Ireland where some men settled and started agricultural operations.

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