Nira Wickramasinghe has published an important work that moves readers’ attention towards an aspect of Sri Lanka’s history that is often neglected in historical works on Sri Lanka, namely how modernity was experienced at an everyday level under colonialism.


Metallic Modern is written in a pleasant and playful manner. Yet it is a dense and serious book that touches upon the very nature of history writing and reworks our notions of time and place, of what makes an event important and what needs to be recorded for posterity. The richness and originality of this publication should not come as a surprise for those who are familiar with the author’s earlier works, all written in a style reminiscent of French social historians, where theory is never overbearing but insummates itself in the narrative. Furthermore, in a period where Sri Lanka’s history is often assumed to be one single national narrative this book is a timely intervention to help our thinking into a perspective where the everyday matters.

Metallic Modern departs from conventional writings on the colonial history of Sri Lanka. By digging into new archives, visual, personal, such as the police entry of a tailor called Pietrez in 1912, the Singer Papers in Wisconsin (USA), colonial records in Britain and newspaper advertisements in Sri Lanka, Wickramasinghe has beautifully captured the intersections of many histories; social, cultural, political and economic, criss-crossed by considerations of gender and religion, and most materially, cultural and ideological histories, all in a single, small book. The style of writing and the way the materials are organized and presented, the way themes and objects reappear in chapters inadvertently, constantly challenge readers (in a positive way) to draw lines and connections.

In this book, the author has very successfully painted a picture of how non-elite groups in Sri Lanka encountered modernity most directly through their use and adoption of machines, “seeing them as a sort of tool, a sewing machine, a bicycle, and a sewing machine (and) created out of the mould of consumerism and commodification”[5]. The story that is being told through the use of machines is multi-scalar: it moves seamlessly from the self, to the streets of the city where in 1915 rioters began to use trams and bicycles, the Buddhist world and the world at large under the sway of a first global modernity.

Metallic Modern is composed of an introduction, 8 short chapters and a conclusion. The beautiful illustrations used in the book, some of which are original sketches obtained from private collections, tell us a unique story as we sift through the pages. In the introduction, the author provides a dense theoretical and methodological discussion to place her chosen approach in the wider field of history writing. She situates the book in a wide terrain and engages with scholarship on empire, the Indian Ocean and global history. By doing so, the author intentionally snaps readers out of their familiar mental boundaries of the ‘island’ Ceylon and its history. Chapter 1 tells the story of the invention of the Singer sewing machine and investigates how it encompassed a market imaginary in the British Crown colony of Ceylon. This chapter offers a different take from that of economics and economic historians, who tend to dominate the history of industrial capitalism and consumption, and shows how and why ordinary colonized people consumed global products in the age of industrial capitalism. While lamenting about the lack of sufficient data to write a history of consumption in South Asia, the author deftly extracts anecdotes from the Singer archive in the USA to illuminate the story of colonized people as consumers.

Chapter 3 of the book, entitled Paths to Buddhist Modern: From Siam to America, discusses how in colonial Sri Lanka, first a few men from Buddhist monastic communities and then larger and more diverse groups used ritual performances, language and travel to subvert the authors’ constructions of the colonial state and in chapter 5, how Japan became the model of an Asian modern for people in colonial Sri Lanka. Using the gramophone (chapter 4), and trams, cars and bicycles (chapter 6) the author compares and contrasts how in the crown colony of Ceylon, and in other colonized territories, modernity was practiced through machines. Chapter 7, entitled Tailor’s tale, machines in the home, provides an interesting account as to how material modernity emerged in ordinary homes. Although not explicitly stated, one of the main strengths of this chapter is the insights it offers into the gendered nature of modernity experienced and established in the home after the tailoring machines first made entry into homes.

Villagers and the market

However, the mid 1990s, argues Labbé, form a real watershed in the time-line of the transformations that took place in Hòa Mùc (and for that matter, in quite similar villages adjacent to Hà Nội). The peri-urban space was reorganized by the inclusion of several rural districts within the urban administrative realm. The former village in a rural district thus became a ward in an urban district in 1997. At the same time the “State and People’s Work Together” approach was abandoned and replaced by a new model of urbanization, that of the ‘New Urban Areas’. These areas were to become the shop window of what HÀ NỘI’s urban planners and politicians were to convey to the world: a modern city with a “global image of order” (108). An essential aspect of the creation of the ‘New Urban Areas’ was that agricultural land was expropriated and handed over to the state (for the construction of infrastructural projects) and state-owned and foreign real estate developers. This changed the life of the villagers completely. Land got a commercial value, could be marketed and turned into a gold mine for many villagers. Of course, the villagers complained about the financial compensation for the expropriated land, but also moral issues were voiced and described by Labbé, such as social justice, corruption and greed. She quotes an elderly villager: “In the past, Uncle Hô [Hochi Minh] took the land of the rich to share it with the poor. Nowadays, it’s the opposite: the people’s land is taken and shared between officials and developers without any measure to ensure that the inhabitants have a future after they are gone” (104). Thereby Labbé states, a “moral-territorial order”, shared feelings about social justice in the village community, for which the villagers fought since independence and shared as well by both the villagers and political elites. The new logic of urban development has violated this order as private economic gains have replaced the well-being of a community.

Even though Labbé mentions protest movements in Hòa Múc and indeed the land grab may have corrupted the regime, a sad conclusion suggests itself after reading her fascinating and detailed book: that villagers could cope with the state, a colonial administration and a socialist regime, use it and make the best of it. They were, however, less able to cope with the coalition of business and state officials: the ‘market’. Comparative research may be useful to see if, and to what extent, HÀ NÔI has become just another South- and Southeast Asia metropolis regarding its growth and expansion into its urban periphery.

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