

# Revisiting Sugarlandia

In the historiography of the late colonial period issues concerning the interaction between colony and metropolis, and the complex relationship between the colonial bourgeoisie and indigenous people, have been central to the scholarship. This relationship was long understood through largely constructed racial, ethnic, and cultural binaries. Only recently, scholars have begun to question these and challenge the assumptions of the imperial mindset.

Ghulam A. Nadri

**Bosma, Ulbe, Juan A. Giusti-Cordero and Roger G. Knight. eds. 2007.**

*Sugarlandia Revisited: Sugar and Colonialism in Asia and the Americas, 1800-1940.*  
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SUGARLANDIA REVISITED is the result of similar scholarly efforts to appraise the dynamics of the interaction between colonisers and colonised and between metropolis and local in the 19th and early 20th century sugar-based economies of Asia and the Hispanic Caribbean. The contributors analyse this relationship through the matrices of the sugar industry, its organisation, production technology, capital investment, and labour in Southeast Asia and the Caribbean. Separated by thousands of miles from each other and having different historical trajectories, the two groups of sugar economies nevertheless demonstrate similarities and common historical experience in the period of high imperialism.

The choice of regions such as Java, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Philippines as the subject of study is determined by the fact that they were all sugar-based economies and the commodity played a crucial role in the politics of colonialism, local resistance, and nationalism. The book is an invaluable contribution to the study of the political economies of these regions and offers fresh perspectives on metropolis-colony interactions. It challenges the Euro/US-centric historiography that emphasises the all-pervasive capitalist system making inroads into the colonies overthrowing the local modes of economic enterprise.

**European capital and sugar production in Java**

Sidney W. Mintz's foreword points out the inadequacies of what, according to him, has been the 'New World-centred history of sugar'. He emphasises the importance of studies that bring 'Asia into the world sugar system', link the 'Old World and New World sugar economies', and re-examine the 'mechanics of colonial imperial rule'. In a detailed introduction, the editors outline the historiographical context and illuminate the ways in which this study re-visits the history of sugar and its imperial implications. The authors, each focussing on a specific colony or a part of it, question some of the assumptions and conclusions of previous studies and approach the subject from a non-Western/metropolitan perspective. They derecognise the binary, constructed by earlier scholars, between the pre- and post-1900 political economy of sugar production and trade throughout Sugar-landia. Their studies show a degree of continuity between the two periods and they argue that if there was a rupture it must have occurred in the early 19th century. To substantiate their arguments, they redefine key concepts like 'plantation', 'centrals', and 'bourgeoisie' and thus discredit the oft-repeated dichotomies such as coloniser-colonised, metropolis-colony, and industrial-plantation.

The next five contributions discuss the socio-economic and political aspects of the sugar industry in Java, and the subsequent three chapters examine the dynamics of the sugar industry in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines respectively. Each contribution is unique in its choice of region and issues but the comparative approach and the authors' common concern to 'revisit' the late-colonial history of Sugarlandia knit the one with the other. In chapter three, Roger Knight engages in the issues of early and mid-19th century technological progression in the sugar manufacturing industry in Java and the role of the colonial (Indies) bourgeoisie in it. The author tracks the professional career of Thomas J. Edwards, an Englishman who was appointed by the Dutch authorities as *administrateur* of the sugar factory at Wonopringo in Pekalongan Residency on Java's north coast. By so doing, Knight refutes the idea that industrialisation in Java represents a sudden and complete break from the past processes of sugar manufacture. Instead, he emphasises a long evolutionary process spanning several



ABOVE: Slaves on a sugar plantation in Jamaica, West Indies. Date and artist unknown. Courtesy of National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.

decades around the mid-19th century in which the industry was equipped with technology imported from Europe. He also questions the assumption that the diffusion of technical skills was entirely from the metropolitan and contends that the skilled Chinese and Javanese workers played a crucial role in sustaining the industrialisation process.

In chapter four, Arthur van Schaik and Roger Knight delve into the dynamics of the colonial European/Dutch community in Java, which was rather stratified (Caucasian, Creole, and *mestizo*) and perpetually in flux. This was more so since the introduction of the 'cultivation system' (*cultuurstelsel*) in the 1830s which brought a large number of fresh Europeans to the region. They argue that this created apprehension and anxiety in the community, especially among the elites, but these tensions soon dissipated as the newcomers integrated with the community via matrimonial connections. The male-female disproportion and marriages across communities rendered the racial or ethnic identities fuzzy. Those in lower echelons, however, suffered more because of the limited job opportunities in the highly mechanised sugar manufacturing. In tune with other contributors, Ulbe Bosma (chapter five) questions the assumptions that after the 1884 crisis in the world sugar market the metropolitan capital appropriated the sugar industry in Java and that the careless lifestyle of the 'orientalised landed gentry' was supplanted by 'white efficiency'. He argues that the impact of the crisis and the role of 'white European and overseas capital' have been overstated and shows that several families of the Indies bourgeoisie in Yogyakarta remained in control of their factories and that the locally accumulated capital was quite instrumental in sustaining the industry in the subsequent decades.

In chapter six, Sri Margana maps the changing agrarian relationships in Java as a consequence of the large-scale colonial plantation system in the 19th century. The author approaches this relationship through peasant resistance that occurred in various forms. Such occurrences were the results of the government regulations that affected the role and positions of rural peasant elites, and the differences in the perception of relationship between the colonial authorities (land leaseholders) and peasants. Joost Coté examines

(in chapter seven) the late 19th and early 20th century discourse on metropolitan capitalist ambitions that was at variance with the local political and economic aspirations. Sugar was central to this discourse because the rapid expansion of colonial capital in the industry seemingly precipitated the crisis of relationship among the differentiated colonial bourgeoisie on the one hand and between them and the indigenous society on the other. He underscores the racial, ethnic, and class dichotomies that characterised the colonial society in the East Indies and the contestations within the colonial modernity. He argues that the discourse failed to influence the policy makers and the colonial critique soon dissipated as imperialism entered a different phase in the early 20th century.

**Slaves, US capital and the sugar industry**

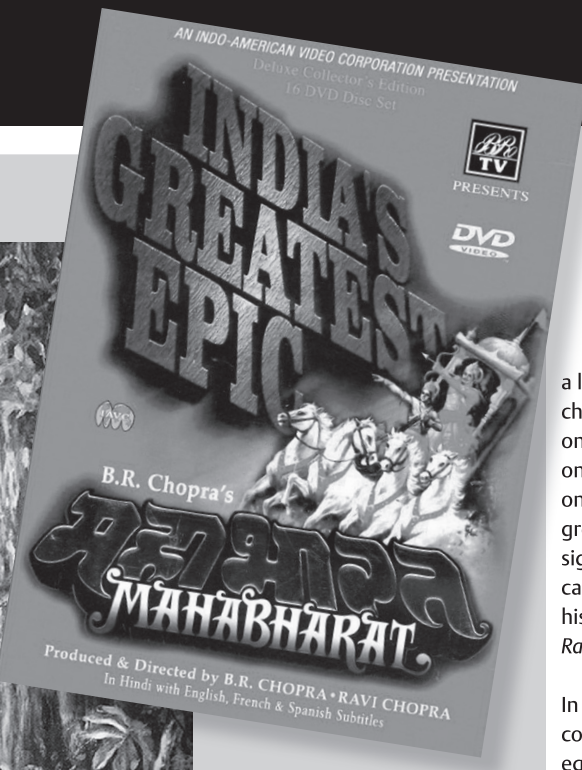
The revisionist endeavour in the study of Sugarlandia's Atlantic and Pacific segments (the Caribbean and Philippines respectively) has yielded interpretations that remarkably correspond with those of the East Indies. In chapter eight, Manel Barcia examines the role of slaves in the sugar industry of Cuba in the 19th century. He shows that despite prohibitions the slave trade between Cuba and Africa continued on a massive scale during the middle decades of the century and that most sugar mills hosted a large number of slaves until slavery was abolished in the 1880s. The study demonstrates fairly explicitly that the incompatibility of machine-based production and slave labour is a myth. Cuba emerged as the largest producer-exporter of cane sugar with the most advanced sugar manufacturing technology in the world at a time when slavery was the dominant form of labour. The author dismisses the assumption that technological advancement is contingent on wage workers. In many parts of Sugarlandia, slaves and semi-servile labourers comprised the industrial workforce. He also underscores the dominant position of the Havana bourgeoisie in the sugar industry even after 1898 when Cuba was colonised by the US. The role of the bourgeoisie in Cuba's resistance against US colonial occupation is discussed in the next article by Jorge Ibarra (chapter nine) and compared with their counterparts in Puerto Rico. The author argues that in their perception of nationalism the Spanish immigrant elites of Cuba were in sharp contrast with those of Puerto Rico. Several factors, including their numerical strength, religious affiliation, acculturation, and the economic opportunities contributed to the distinct identities they came to form in the two US colonies. At both the places, they dominated the sugar industry in the early decades of the 20th century. The author argues that the US colonial capital did not pervade the sugar industry and reinforces the revisionist view of a fundamental continuity in the colonial bourgeoisie's control over the sugar industry between the pre and post 1898 periods. That the US occupation of the Philippines and Puerto Rico, formerly Spanish colonies, in 1898 was not a cataclysmic event or a radical rupture is also underscored by Juan Giusti-Cordero in the final chapter. Based on his analysis of Philippino and Puerto Rican sugar planters, the author argues that significant capitalistic development had taken place and they were already connected with world market much before 1898. Like the bourgeoisie in Cuba and Java, ethnically and culturally diverse and complex sugar planters of the Philippines and Puerto Rico retained their dominant position in the industry and inhibited US capital from permeating this domain.

Editing a book that contains research papers from scholars so diverse in expertise, area of interest and intellectual orientation is not such an easy task. The editors of this volume have done a great job by outlining the major issues and interpretations the contributors address in their papers. The authors revisit the history of Sugarlandia and approach it with an intellectual package that is informed by their own experiences and worldviews. The studies offer a new perspective on the metropolitan-colony interactions in different parts of Asia and the Americas in the 19th and 20th centuries. This revisionist perspective aside, the focus of the papers, with the exception of Sri Margana's and Juan Giusti-Cordero's, is nevertheless on the colonial European bourgeoisie. The authors raise many issues requiring further investigation. Indeed, the readers' thirst remains unquenched because the narrative of local indigenous agency is limited to some occasional references. A fuller appreciation of the native involvement in the industry awaits scholarly attention.

The book is a valuable addition to the literature on the colonial history of this period and introduces the reader to a variety of archival sources. A map showing Sugarlandia and a glossary of non-English terms would have made the book more reader-friendly. There are some typos and grammatical inconsistencies in the texts and tables. The total in table 4.1 on page 62 should be 102 instead of 107 and in table 4.2 on page 66 it should be 30 instead of 32. These are minor errors and omissions and do not at all affect the value of the book.

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# Model mythical women



Heidi Pauwels' new book focuses on the early life of two major women figures in the mythic landscape of India, building not only on her wide knowledge of the North Indian devotional traditions, but on the awareness of their performative power and potential. She reviews the goddesses' initial meeting with their respective consorts, courtship, marriage, and their handling of the problems with other women, for the changes in their model building role through the centuries.

Vasudha Dalmia

**Pauwels, Heidi Rika Maria. 2008.**

*The Goddess as Role Model: Sita and Radha in Scripture and on Screen.*

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IN CONSIDERING THE LONG TRAJECTORY of the goddesses, and of 'myth as palimpsest' (Wendy Doniger), Pauwels takes on all three periods: the ancient, medieval and modern, to show the radical shifts in the understanding of what is often regarded as 'fixed'. Of Sanskrit texts, she considers the two that would become foundational for the medieval Ramaite and Krishnaitic devotional traditions: the *Valmiki Ramayana* and the *Bhagavata Purana*, taking into account both the commentarial and the modern historical-critical literature on the two works. For the medieval, she considers the 16th century vernacular devotional texts which have come to signify 'tradition' for the modern: Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas*, Nanddas's *Dasham Grantha* and *Rukmini Mangal*, the enormous number of padas attributed to Surdas, and the works of Hariram Vyas. For the modern period, she turns to a vast corpus of films produced in Bombay and three lengthy TV serials still in circulation in India and the Diaspora – Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayana* (1987-88), Chopra's *Mahabharat*, which gripped the nation for two years (1988-90), and Sagar's *Shri Krishna* (1995-1996). All three explicitly invoke as their sources not only the Sanskrit but also several of the vernacular works mentioned above. Of films, she considers the vastly popular work of the 1990's – such as *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), *Hum apke hain kaun* (1994) but also many other earlier and later films, not ignoring the counter-message of box office failures such as *Lajja* (2001). There is careful selection of passages and scenes presented in the course of the discussion as well as a careful translation and analysis of them.

Though not explicitly social or political in the goals she sets herself, Pauwels writes with an awareness of both, showing her mastery of considerable literature on gender issues in South Asia, and the Bombay film industry, in addition to the secondary sources on the older material with which she has long been familiar. This is no mean feat.

Sita and Radha are two figures with an enormous, almost all-permeating presence in the Indian social and cultural imagination today. Their long history in text and performance suggests what could be seen as two antithetical social positions. Sita is the model daughter and wife, who remains within the bounds of convention. Radha is 'sensuality incarnate', the eternal lover, moving almost entirely outside convention, though in some later versions of her tale, there is a record of her marriage to Krishna. Their consorts, Rama and Krishna, are divine heroes who could also be seen as representing two opposing positions – the one is the very model of kingship and a princely upbringing, the other is pastoral, unruly and promiscuous. Though the 19th century reevaluation of tradition would elevate Rama to national status, as warrior, model ruler, and king, Krishna, sought to be similarly elevated as monarch and godly philosopher of the battle field, could never be entirely shorn of his wild past.

It follows that the positions of Sita and Radha would also come to be modified in the 19th and 20th centuries. Though Radha would be gradually domesticated, she would remain an awkward companion on the road to modernity, while Sita, held up as exemplary, would suffer a contrary fate, at least in some quarters. The 1970s feminist movement in India would seek to distance itself precisely from her domestic virtues and the stranglehold that they could exercise on the lives of women of all ages and at all times. Yet later, there would be some exemplary efforts to rehabilitate Sita and to project her as a potential ally in the fight for more equality and justice.

**Empowering strands of tradition**

Conventional wisdom today would see tradition as oppressive, with little awareness of the fluidity it once had and the liberating, empowering, potential of its varied strands. Pauwels accomplishes the rare feat of showing, in a nuanced and deliberately underemphasised way, how medieval *bhakti* or devotional tradition, with its loving, sympathetic description of women in a range of situations, actually privileged emotion, thus offering much space for women's subjectivity. The figures of the *gopis*, the cowherd-women, and Radha with their passionate outpouring of love for Krishna, with

ABOVE LEFT:  
The goddesses Sita and Rama.  
ABOVE RIGHT:  
B.R. Chopra's television series Mahabharat (1988-90) gripped the Indian nation for two years.

**Tailored tradition**

And with this we come to the second major insight of the study, that tradition in TV and film has almost always been tailored to suit a more conservative position. As Pauwels shows, there is a steady progression to a narrower conception of tradition from the medieval/early modern period to the modern. For all her frolicking on the screen, Radha is always coerced into submission, subjected to a new, constricting deification, as love comes to be subordinated to duty: 'The more Radha grows in stature as goddess, the more she starts to resemble Sita' (p.147). Correspondingly, and not surprisingly, in the films where both Rama and Krishna are invoked, Rama with his dominant moral stance and stature comes to prevail over the morally more precariously balanced figure of Krishna.

It is seldom that someone with as deep, fine, and differentiated knowledge of medieval devotional literature turns to film studies. Pauwels displays enormous erudition, which is always lightly carried. I have only one complaint about this admirable study - it is too long. It should have been pared down yet more, and the results of its investigations formulated yet more boldly, so that it reach those who have most need to acquire knowledge of it. For, I know of no other analysis which has taken 'tradition', Sanskrit, medieval, early modern, more seriously and traced the relationship with the present in such nuanced detail. Pauwels' work is of immense importance for gender and film studies.

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a later consort, Rukmini, going so far as to insist on her own choice for partner, are a far cry from the manipulated figures on the big and small screen today, where adultery is tolerated only in the case of men. Even Tulsidas with his constant stress on propriety, often decried as conventional, can present with great openness and sympathy the romance of Sita's first sighting of Ram, allowing her a voice then and later, as she carries out her intention of accompanying her husband into his forest exile. The figure of Sita is stronger still in Valmiki's *Ramayana*.

In the modern mass media, Sita is depicted as yet more conservative and Radha, when she turns up, comes to be equated with Sita, behaving with due propriety 'under the spunky veneer of Western emancipation'. Pauwels shows not only the enormous vitality of tradition but also its enormous manipulation in the modern. But she does not simply juxtapose the ancient and medieval with the modern to bring out stark contrasts. She approaches 'tradition with respect – with a listening, empathetic, yet critical ear – paying attention to multiplicity of voices, seeing each in its own context' (p.501). As she points out at some length, dating the Sanskrit and *bhakti* material remains problematic. We have then, at best, a mixed picture of the older periods. But as her detailed analysis shows, there is little doubt that the TV/film representations of women's emotionality, subjectivity, and freedom to choose, are more conservative than the older material; 'under the glossy mixture of *masala*, we find iron *maryada*.'

The depth of her scholarship makes possible not only a nuanced reading of individual scenes and an inter-textuality of which most TV viewers and film-goers are not explicitly aware, but also the wider social context. She shows both where TV and film explicitly cite the older texts and where they only mirror them in whole episodes, which are almost a replay, albeit in ultra-modern garb, of situations first accosted in the epics and in devotional verses. Two major insights emerge from this detailed study. One, the deviations in the modern versions have a larger social significance, even if at first sight they seem minor. Thus in the wedding scene in the TV *Ramayana*, Sagar glosses over the fact that Sita brings dowry with her. Tulsidas shows no self-consciousness in dwelling briefly on dowry. But precisely because it has become such a major issue in feminist debate and in the wider public sphere – given the almost constant reports of bride-burning and dowry deaths – Sagar, for all his vaunted adherence to tradition, elides it, to maintain at least the façade of a politically correct position, while at the same time doing everything else to undermine it. Thus it is that in the modern media, modernity and tradition are shown to be in harmony with each other, doing violence to both, even as the one is used to support the other in ways both problematic and politically regressive.

Though not explicitly social or political in the goals she sets herself, Pauwels writes with an awareness of both, showing her mastery of considerable literature on gender issues in South Asia, and the Bombay film industry... This is no mean feat.