

MANAGERIAL PATERNALISM AND IDEALIZED FEMININITY IN THE SRI LANKAN GARMENT INDUSTRY¹

In 1992, the Sri Lankan government introduced a program to establish garment factories in villages throughout the country. The 200 Garment Factories Program was a decidedly new economic strategy that reversed previous patterns of industrialization by bringing factories to villages—far from the nation's urban Free Trade Zones. The state mandated that these factories employ a 90 percent female workforce. Ever since the economy was liberalized in 1978, anxieties have surfaced in Sri Lanka about women's roles in the new economic arrangements. One of the most central and visible roles for women in this new economy has been their employment in the garment industry, particularly in urban Free Trade Zones. Urban garment workers have been stigmatized as "Juki girls," immoral women who do not adhere to idealized Sinhala Buddhist norms for women's behaviour. Manager-worker relationships in the rural factories established under the state-led program were profoundly affected by the larger cultural discourses about women's roles in the liberalized economy. Sinhala Buddhist ideals for women's behaviour had quite tangible effects on the daily lives of people involved in these factories; they influenced how investors, managers, workers, and villagers made sense of village women's participation in industrial production.

Ethnographic research on this rural industrialization program reveals that investors and managers understood their own efforts to bring industry to villages within these wider discourses. In media coverage on the program, as well as in informal conversations and interviews, factory representatives invoked Sri Lankan idealized conceptions of the rural and the urban, tradition and modernity, and masculinity and femininity. They continually noted the particular challenges of employing a newly industrialized workforce. When factory representatives

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implemented policies that were attuned to these challenges; they created a manager-worker dynamic that was structured by paternalism and face-to-face relations and that was deeply influenced by gendered norms and expectations.

This article opens with a discussion of how gender ideals have been a key idiom through which Sri Lankans have made sense of economic liberalization. The article then moves into an analysis of the articulation of capitalist relations of production and the cultural ideologies of gender. I examine the administration of factory policies through the frame of “welfare capitalism,” a widespread managerial doctrine that mandates employers to monitor workers’ lives inside and outside factories, on the assumption that high worker morale leads to increased factory efficiency and productivity. I analyse manager-worker relationships under such a system from the perspectives of both the management and the workers at Shirtex and Serendib, two factories located in the same complex in the Kandyan village of Udakande.² The article then turns to an examination of conflicts within and around these factories in the context of paternalistic and face-to-face managerial practices. The Juki stigma and idealized norms of femininity form a potent backdrop to these relationships and conflicts. The article thus provides an on-the-ground analysis of how nationalist gender ideals have become central to Sri Lankan experiences of industrial production in the era of economic liberalization.³

² The factory names in this article are pseudonyms, as are the names of people other than national political figures. Udakande is also a pseudonym. I have done this to protect the privacy of the individuals about whom I am writing, including the industrialists who allowed me into their factories. To protect the privacy of workers, I have taken further precautions in certain sensitive situations, for example, those concerning family relations and labour relations. In some cases I have conflated the stories of two or more workers or changed certain cosmetic details of their stories, such as where they live and what job they perform at the factory.

³ The research on which this article is based consisted of intensive qualitative fieldwork in Sri Lanka from 1995 to 1996: eighteen months of participant observation and interviews in and around Shirtex and Serendib; extended tours of other garment factories throughout the island; and interviews with politicians, industry leaders, and journalists. My project also relies on a decade (1996–2006) of extensive analysis of fieldwork data, secondary sources, and developments in the status of garment workers and the 200 Garment Factories Program, as well as ongoing correspondence with close contacts in Sri Lanka.

Gender, the Nation, and Factory Labour

Garment workers in Sri Lanka are often stigmatized as “Juki girls” (*jukiyo* or *juki kellō*), “Juki pieces” (*juki kāli*), or “garment pieces” (*gāment baḍuwa*).⁴ The word “Juki” in these nicknames is derived from a Japanese industrial sewing machine brand commonly used in Sri Lankan factories.⁵ These are derogatory nicknames that originated in reference to women who work in factories in and around Colombo. Both the terms *juki kāli* and *gāment baḍuwa* objectify the women in question by making them seem like nothing more than things or pieces of dry goods. As one newspaper editorial notes, the term *juki kāli* indicates that these women “are treated like some expendable commodity” (*Daily Mirror* 2005, n.p.; cf. Hewamanne 2002, 7–8). The term *baḍuwa* has powerful sexual connotations, and all these nicknames connote sexual promiscuity. The stigma of being a garment worker is so damaging and widespread that Sinhala newspaper marriage proposals sometimes disqualify garment workers with the phrase “no garment girls” or “no Juki girls” (Tambiah 1997).

In the face of globalized economic and cultural processes, concerns about how women should behave are central to how Sri Lankans understand the effects of economic liberalization on their society. In many times and places, women have become symbols of the nation; the situation is no different in postcolonial Sri Lanka. In association with the symbolic elevation of women, daily practices have emerged to monitor and control female modesty and respectability as a measure of national status and prestige. The Juki girl stigma must be understood in this national context.

The Juki stigma is just one recent expression of cultural concerns with women’s behaviour. At two distinct times in Sri Lanka’s history the demarcation of women’s appropriate behaviour was central to how people made sense of economic and cultural transformations accompanying capitalism. During both periods, the strength of the national project relied on how closely real women followed the

⁴ In this article I have used established conventions for transliterating Sinhala words, and in particular I have followed the system employed by anthropologist David Scott (1994, xiii), who writes: “The vowels *a*, *ā*, *ā*, *ā*, *e*, *ē*, *i*, *ī*, are pronounced like the first vowels in *sun*, *salt*, *nay*, *bad*, *end*, *made*, *in*, and *fecl*, respectively. Among the consonants, *c* is pronounced *ch*; the *ṣ* gives a *sh* sound; *ṭ* and *ḍ* are palatals pronounced with the tongue far back; and *g* is always hard.” The letter *ṇ* produces a nasal sound.

⁵ The Juki Corporation, a Japanese company, is the world’s largest manufacturer of industrial sewing machines, and it has been selling sewing machines in Sri Lanka since 1976 (V. Perera 1998). The Juki girl nickname emerged by 1979, the year after the nation’s first free trade zone for export-oriented manufacturing opened.

feminine ideal. The first period took place during the anticolonial movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when there was great importance attached to differences between Sri Lankan and Western traditions, technologies, and practices. The other period began in the late 1970s and continues to this day. This is the era of economic liberalization, when the economy was opened to foreign investment and there was a massive increase in industrialization. The contemporary period has been characterized by intense debate about how much foreign and Western influence is suitable for the country, and how women are situated within these changing social relations. At both of the times in question, the meanings of modernity, tradition, and gender in the construction of the nation were at the forefront of societal concern.⁶ The latter period coincided with the escalation of ethnic conflict into a separatist civil war, beginning in 1983. The assumed moral perils of economic liberalization and globalization have thus been interpreted against the spectre of the nation's disintegration.

Beginning in the sixteenth century, Sri Lanka became successively a colony of the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British. In the decades prior to independence in 1948, a specifically Sinhala Buddhist national identity was created and consolidated, with the effect of directly excluding members of the island's minority ethnic groups. The efforts of the nationalist reformer Anagarika Dharmapala were central to the creation of this Sinhala Buddhist identity. Gender has been key to the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist imagination over the past one hundred years—from the period of anticolonial nationalism, through independence in 1948, to the postcolonial ethnonationalism of today.

During the anticolonial campaign, questions of how to define the modern Sinhala Buddhist woman became salient. Bourgeois women were the main object of concern here, for Sinhala nationalist ideologues were focused on the creation of a class of indigenous elites who could bring the country forward to independence by embodying the correct mix of tradition and modernity. Theatre and gender studies scholar Neloufer de Mel argues that in the early twentieth century the ideal Sinhala woman was to be modern, but only as far as was necessary to be a good mate for the ideal new man, who was English-educated and cosmopolitan. De Mel (2001, 59) writes: "Women were disallowed the cosmopolitanness permitted to men, and their duty to nurture future generations in Sinhala culture, language and the Buddhist religion was reiterated with great vigour."

⁶ It is beyond the scope of this project to investigate a third historically significant period: the period between independence in 1948 and economic liberalization in 1977. Such an analysis would be fruitful in elucidating the work put in by contemporary subjects to create a distinctively postcolonial way of being Sri Lankan.

The twinned concerns about nationalism and sexuality were at the heart of Dharmapala's project, which elaborated specific rules for a new kind of moral behaviour for respectable, bourgeois Sinhala Buddhist women (whom he often contrasted with immoral European women). Under Dharmapala's new social ethic, regulation of women's morality and sexuality became important for the nation's future. As anthropologist Malathi de Alwis (1996, 106) has written in regard to Dharmapala's characterizations, "While the 'western' woman was portrayed as being sexually free, the Sri Lankan woman epitomised submission, chastity and restraint." This was in part an attempt at ensuring cultural purity through policing genetic purity. Political scientist Kumari Jayawardena (1994, 113) has argued that the gender roles developed under Dharmapala's Sinhala Buddhist revivalism were consistent with the results in many Asian countries where an interest in women's sexual purity was directed at ensuring that women "reproduce the ethnic group and socialize children into their ethnic roles." Contemporary Sri Lankans value sexual chastity and virginity at marriage as Sinhala Buddhist norms, when these are in fact derived from Victorian norms, for precolonial Sinhals did not have such restrictions on women's sexuality.⁷

During the anticolonial period, bourgeois women—not the urban or rural poor—were the foci of nationalist concern. Dharmapala's Daily Code for the Laity enumerated rules for ideal bourgeois behaviour, though women of other classes subsequently adopted his new social ethic. By contrast with the anticolonial project, since the advent of economic liberalization it is working-class women rather than bourgeois women who have become the focus of nationalist discourses about women's morality. These days Juki girls are the particular targets of concern.

Women's labour has been the basis of two leading sources of foreign exchange in the liberalized economy: women's factory employment within Sri Lanka and women's employment as housemaids or factory labourers abroad (especially in the Middle East).⁸ With large numbers of village women migrating to

⁷ See also Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, 256, 262–263; Grossholtz 1984, 125; Knox 1981 [1681], 133; Obeyesekere 1984, 449; H. E. Perera 1987, 3–5; Ranaweera 1992; Weerasinghe 1989.

⁸ Although emigration for employment overseas was not a direct feature of liberalization policies, there are two ways in which liberalization was linked to foreign migration. First, changes in emigration laws were implemented around the same time as the economy was liberalized. This meant that demand for foreign employment for working class Sri Lankans arose at the same time as demand for labourers in the export industrial sector increased. Second, with liberalization, there was a lack of state investment in the agricultural sector, and so not only was there an increased demand for workers in the Middle East, there was also a labour force eager to go (since there were few jobs in Sri Lanka).

Colombo and abroad for employment since the late 1970s, the morality of female migrant labourers has emerged as a primary target of nationalist discourse about the moral integrity of the nation (de Alwis 1998, 197–8; Gamburd 2000). As in the anticolonial movement, in this period of economic liberalization women's behaviour has been the locus of considerable anxiety about how much foreign influence is detrimental to the nation. A salient characteristic of this anxiety stems from the historical convergence of social and economic changes with the escalation of the campaign for independence by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. In the context of today's civil war, the image of the chaste mother of the nation has taken on new importance. Nationalist discourses call on women to mother the nation. In turn, great importance is attached to preserving women's chastity: "The chastity of a woman, like the so-called purity of language, becomes a code for the nation's honour in nationalist discourse" (de Mel 2001, 214).

This intense concern with women's moral behaviour today forms one half of the ideologies of male heroism and female moral purity that pervade war-torn Sri Lanka. While men are encouraged to be aggressive and fight for the country, women are valorized both as mothers who heroically sacrifice their sons for the nation without complaint and as traditional women who maintain ethnic purity through their heightened morality even as the nation around them falls into disarray.⁹ Consider, for example, the following image: "A poster promoting breastfeeding...was issued by the Ministry of Women's Affairs. The poster, which was displayed during the height of one of the first major government offensives against the Tamil militants in the north, in 1986–7, depicted a woman dressed in cloth and jacket—a marker of Sinhala-ness—breastfeeding her baby while dreaming of a man in army fatigues. The Sinhala caption below exhorted: 'Give your [breast milk] (*lē kiri*) to nourish our future soldiers.'" (de Alwis 1998, 206).

This notion of women's responsibility to produce future soldiers can be traced to Dharmapala's intense concern with women's chaste behaviour. However, his rules for women's behaviour were not just about sexuality. They included prescriptions regarding quotidian practices such as clothing and hairstyles, alcohol use, and other visible markers of cultural authenticity (Jayawardena 1994; de Alwis 1998, 110–112). Even at the turn of the century there were intense accusations that Westernized and Burgher (denoting descendants of the Dutch, Portuguese, or British) women had betrayed their culture. It was in this context that Dharmapala advocated the sari as modest clothing for Sinhala women in opposition to Western dresses. Although they were introduced from India, saris are today considered

⁹ See de Alwis 1998; de Mel 1998; Jayawardena 1994; S. Perera 1996; S. Tennekoon 1986.

traditional Sinhala clothing. Even today, women who have short hair, wear skimpy clothing, or use alcohol are assumed to be sexually loose (Gunasekera 1996, 10).

In this context of the moral policing of women's appearance and behaviour, imagine how people might read the presence of thousands of factory women on the outskirts of Colombo, living in boarding houses without their families.¹⁰ Since the 1977 economic reforms, Juki girls have been key targets for anxieties related to modernization. Unlike urban garment workers, village garment workers were not automatically stigmatized as Juki girls. In the face of the Juki stigma, Shirtex and Serendib women struggled daily to show everyone around them that they were "Good girls." Sinhala speakers use the English term or the Sinhala equivalent: *honda lamay* or *honda kellō*. Good girls are respectable women who embody cultural expectations for women's behaviour. And Good girls at Shirtex and Serendib were not only respectable women, they were also good industrial workers. Managers and workers alike used the term *Good girls* to refer to women who possessed good character and who were productive factory labourers (everyone expected that these categories would map onto each other).

Shirtex and Serendib women's presence in villages, rather than in urban Free Trade Zones, was an important component in how they perceived themselves and were perceived by others. "Good girls" were necessarily village girls. In contemporary Sri Lanka, villages are generally associated with discipline, tradition, and morality. All these characteristics are said to be absent from cities (especially Colombo—by far the largest city—and its surrounding urban areas) because of the presence of foreign influences in urban areas. Nationalist responses to economic liberalization have not only attempted to protect women from foreign corruption, they have also elevated village Sri Lanka as the locus of much that is good and distinctive about the nation. As with all social constructs, the urban-rural construct is complex and, in some ways, contradictory. Although nationalists generally consider the urban to be corrupt, some of them also value it positively for its modernity. Furthermore, although rural people are equally invested as urbanites in thinking about their world in rural-urban contrasts, these contrasts are continually complicated in everyday social practices.

With managers and workers converging in their concerns about women's morality, and with many Sri Lankans invested in preserving rural "traditions" in the

¹⁰ For studies of Sri Lankan FTZ workers see Fine 1995; Gunatilaka 2001; Hettiarachchy 1991; Hewamanne 2002 and 2003; Joint Association of Workers Councils of Free Trade Zones 2001; Labor Video Project 1993; Rosa 1991; R. Tennekoon 2000; Voice of Women 1983; Weerasinghe 1989; Weerasuriya 2000. See Heward 1997 on the 200 GFP and Ryan and Fernando 1951 on Colombo factories in the 1940s.

face of modernization, day-to-day managerial paternalism at Shirtex and Serendib had deep cultural roots.¹¹

Social Service, Welfare Capitalism, and Village Factories

As the architect of the 200 Garment Factories Program, President Ranasinghe Premadasa spoke at numerous venues in 1992 and 1993 about the program's aims and policies (Lynch forthcoming, Chap. 2). The program was most explicitly designed to prevent a recurrence of the late 1980s Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) revolt by providing jobs to rural youth. This job generation program was accompanied by elaborate arguments about the importance of rural industrialization to the nation's future. Premadasa offered numerous economic incentives for investors such as tax breaks, access to importation of duty free vehicles, and priority on quotas for exporting to the United States.¹² Over and above the economic incentives, Premadasa offered less tangible incentives: He hoped to attract business owners to invest in the 200 Garment Factories Program (henceforth, 200 GFP) out of "social conscience." The investors could understand their profits in terms of "traditional" values. In the 200 GFP inaugural speech, Premadasa forecast that the rural workers will "respect and honour the people who invest, realising that it is because of them that they are earning a livelihood" (Fernando 1992a, 14). In various speeches, he described uplifting the poor and reviving the dormant but innate value of discipline as program goals. He quoted one investor who addressed the simultaneous economic and social incentives for investing:

A certain investor participating in the two hundred garment factories program said at the opening of his factory recently that the capitalists in the country were today becoming philanthropists because of the economic policy of the government. That investor by that statement aptly and succinctly summed up the economic vision of our government. (Fernando and Fernandopulle 1992, n.p.)

¹¹ I place "tradition" in quotation marks to indicate that beliefs and practices that are constructed as "traditional" today (and, earlier, for instance in anticolonial movements) are often quite new and may have been newly created or adopted from elsewhere.

¹² The Sri Lankan government allocated quotas to garment manufacturers in line with the Multifibre Arrangement (MFA), a system that regulated global trade balances by placing trade restrictions and allotments on exporting countries between 1974 and 2005.

Premadasa was quite careful to describe the attendant values as native to Sri Lanka. By invoking notions such as the "open economy with a human face" and "capitalists-as-philanthropists" he worked to make economic liberalization and capitalist development consistent with Sinhala Buddhist values.

Investors were told that they were performing a public service by providing greatly needed jobs to poor villagers. Investors were also strongly encouraged to treat their workers charitably in order "to bring about a meaningful relationship between the rich and the poor for their mutual benefit" (Fernando 1992b, 15). Reporters described the "social conscience" required for investors to participate:

The President said the rich, the haves—would not think that the wealth they had acquired or inherited was their own for their own enjoyment—for them to do anything with.

"On the contrary, they should think their wealth is something they had in trust, for the benefit of the entire society. This type of social conscience is a must for any success of any system of government," he pointed out.

Even in the society in the time of our ancient kings, economic activity was guided by social conscience and collective effort. (Fernando 1992c, 17)

All the Sri Lankan investors whom I interviewed cited economic incentives to invest; most also said they were motivated in large part by the ability to provide a social service to the rural poor. Some of these investors interviewed had also been quoted to this effect in the newspapers when the 200 GFP began. For instance, one article quoted the then chairman of the Sri Lanka Apparel Exporters' Association, a prominent industrialist whom other investors looked to for leadership. The chairman invoked the notion that participating in this program is a social service, and he also implied that investors were true patriots. He said:

Our entrepreneurs should have a worthy intention and aim. What is that? It is the desire to build up our motherland. There is no use for entrepreneurs who have no feeling for the country. Only those who really feel for the country should join this garment industry program. The most important thing that they should realize is that the development that is gained through this program cannot be achieved even in a hundred years without such a program. (Amararatne 1992, n.p.)

Another article noted that a managing director “said that his company decided to participate in the garment factories program as they wished to contribute towards the efforts to provide employment to rural youth and upgrade the quality of living of the country’s peasantry” (Fernando 1992d, n.p.).

For many 200 GFP investors, it was a logical step from establishing factories out of social conscience to implementing paternalistic factory policies. Factory paternalism has a long history, but has been especially associated with American industrialist Henry Ford. Ford famously adopted a “welfare capitalist” system where the employer focused on worker morale to increase efficiency and productivity (Meyer 1981). With productivity and workplace loyalty as his ultimate goals, he instituted various methods to ensure that his autoworkers were healthy, satisfied with their jobs, but also internally competitive and divided. Bonuses became linked to production rates, and his “Sociological Department” monitored outside-of-work behaviour (clothes styles, household cleanliness, spending habits) to ensure that the employer had total control over the workers. As other American corporations adopted the Fordist model in subsequent decades, the period from the 1920s to the 1960s witnessed the height of welfare capitalism and its built-in paternalism: “Companies built cafeterias and health clinics, sponsored baseball and bowling leagues, and granted days off for the opening of deer season” (Gross 2004, n.p.).

The paternalistic monitoring of workers’ lives was key to the Fordist model and has been adopted in other places in the world in industrial as well as nonindustrial work settings. In her study of early- to mid-twentieth-century Colombian industrialization, historian Ann Farnsworth-Alvear (2000, 17) describes adoption of a model of welfare capitalism. Although much in the Colombian methods was similar to the Fordist model, Farnsworth-Alvear uses the term “welfare capitalism” in a more general sense “to describe employers’ interest in combining an older paternalistic tradition with the progressive adoption of imported technology, as well as their self-positioning as social engineers.” Wherever they have been implemented, capitalist relations of production have been invested with local meaning and incorporated into local cultural practices (Lynch forthcoming, Chap. 1). Therefore the specific practices of welfare capitalism that were implemented in the 200 GFP need to be understood in the context of local histories and norms.

Research about women workers in factories and on plantations elsewhere has demonstrated that often “company self-interest is disguised as benevolent paternalism” (Wolf 1992, 123). Managers deploy local social hierarchies (including gender norms) to create a disciplined workforce (Farnsworth-Alvear 2000, 115). Paternalistic practices have included management calling female workers “our girls” and using familial pronouns, keeping track of women’s after work behaviour, or offering classes in nutrition, mothering, and domestic education. The company

philosophy at one electronics factory in Malaysia is posted throughout the building: "to create one big family, to train workers, to increase loyalty to company, country and fellow workers" (Ong 1987, 170). At this same factory, parents are given tours in order to be reassured that their daughters work in a protected environment.¹³

The managing directors and primary investors in Shirtex and Serendib were two Sri Lankan men who were strong advocates of the social service orientation of the 200 GFP. In newspaper articles as well as in interviews and discussions with me, they both said that they invested in the program at least in part because it allowed them to help poor villagers. They endeavoured to create a work environment that was intensely personal, paternalistic, community-related, and localized. They frequently discussed with their managers the importance of personal connections to workers and the area villages, and they implemented various policies that encouraged personal connections between the factory representatives and the workforce, their families, and other villagers.

Factory production and discipline revolved around face-to-face, personal relationships. A dominant theme I heard from managers was the sense of their duty to help workers lead proper lives. When I discussed manager-worker relations with workers, the themes that most often arose were their personal connections to managers, their respect for managers, and the complicated effects of status hierarchies within the factories. I turn now to examine managerial perspectives on paternalism, and then workers' perspectives on personal connections and status.

Managerial Perspectives on Paternalism

Factory representatives considered their interest in workers' personal lives to be a natural part of their job duties. Managers frequently contributed to workers' family funeral costs, awarded time off for exams or classes, hired workers' relatives, and advised women workers on proper relationships with men. One of the main forces behind these informal arrangements at Serendib was Ralph Sir, the production manager, who hailed from an English-speaking Colombo family. Ralph Sir took his job seriously and was intensely concerned with factory productivity, which he considered to be related to workers' lives outside of work. In our frequent conversations about the factories, he continually came back to women workers' personal lives.¹⁴ Ralph Sir's sisters and fiancée were roughly the same age as the

¹³ Cf. Cairolì 1998, 1999; Fernández-Kelly 1983; Fuentes and Ehrenreich 1983; Hall 1992; Kondo 1990; Nash and Fernández-Kelly 1983; Prieto 1997 [1985]; Siddiqi 1996.

¹⁴ Ninety percent of the workers at both factories were women ranging in age from eighteen to 36, both married and unmarried. The people I refer to as "workers" were the production

Serendib workers. He often compared his strategies for looking after Serendib women's welfare to how he would watch out for his sister and fiancée.

One afternoon, as we stood at the head of the production lines having a conversation in English about production, discipline, Good girls, and so forth, Ralph Sir told me the following story. That morning a machine operator arrived for work after a two-week unexcused absence. Ralph Sir was very angry with her and he called her into his office for an explanation. He said he spoke to her very "lovingly" and asked her why she was absent. She immediately began to cry and so he sent her back to her machine. Her line supervisor then came and told him that the truant worker had been raped. Ralph Sir called the woman back to his office and told her that she could not have her job back unless she married the man who had raped her and returned to show him the marriage certificate. He told me he did this because Sri Lankan women cannot be unwed mothers—she would be kicked out of her house and become a beggar in the street. I assume here that the implication was that this woman had been raped some time ago, but had missed work upon finding out she was pregnant. Ralph Sir argued that the only solution for this woman's future would be for her to marry the rapist.

I remember being shocked that not only was Ralph Sir policing this woman's personal life, but also that he would require her to marry a man who raped her. He considered it his role to teach women and to protect them. Women in various parts of the world have been expected to marry their rapist in order to recoup the woman's honour.¹⁵ Although it is not a widespread and legally sanctioned practice in Sri Lanka, it certainly is conceivable that some Sri Lankan parents might force their daughter to marry a man who raped her.¹⁶ The assumption here would be

workers: sewing and cutting machine operators, quality checkers, ironers, mechanics, and so forth. They were clearly differentiated from staff members (office staff and supervisors) and managers. These women most often referred to themselves and were referred to by supervisors and managers as *lamay*, literally "children," but perhaps best translated as "girls." (Using *lamay* in this way is common in other situations in Sri Lanka among peers, and by bosses or teachers in structured hierarchical situations.) When managers referred to the "workers" in English they would usually refer to them as "the girls." The majority—about 80 percent—were eighteen- to 24-year-old single women.

¹⁵ For instance, according to Italian law from the 1930s to 1996, criminal charges would be dropped against a rapist if he agreed to marry the woman he raped—all for the sake of the woman's future (Stanley 1999, A6).

¹⁶ I thank anthropologist Michele Gamburd for her thoughts on this situation with Ralph Sir, which have helped me immensely with my analysis. Gamburd noted that she has heard rumor and innuendo that suggest that it is possible that some Sri Lankan parents might force their daughter to marry her rapist. (Personal communication, August 2005.)

that if a woman loses her virginity before marriage and does not marry the man to whom she lost it, she will either become a prostitute or will at least be considered one. Better than the stigma of unwed motherhood is marriage to a man with poor character.

So, why would Ralph Sir require her to marry her rapist? Perhaps he had a complicated interpretation of what the woman meant by "rape." Although this may have been a case of what one might call "stranger rape" or "date rape," Ralph Sir may have assumed that the man who raped this woman was her boyfriend, and that what the woman was calling *rape* was consensual sex. Ultimately, I do not know whether the woman was raped or engaged in consensual sex, nor do I know whether or not the woman would have wanted to marry the man. I regret that the woman's perspective on this story is absent from my analysis, since Ralph Sir, appropriately, never told me who she was.

It would be extremely unlikely for an unmarried woman to admit to having gotten pregnant after engaging in consensual sex. To protect her honour, it would be more respectable for a woman to say she was raped—though in both cases her reputation would be negatively affected since she had lost her virginity. Since morally it is simply unacceptable for a woman to have premarital sex, and since the woman will not be accepted by society afterward, her reputation and morality can only be recovered through marrying the boyfriend. In this conception, then, Ralph Sir may have been trying to help the woman by telling her to marry her boyfriend—and as her manager, he felt he could essentially hold her job hostage until she complied. Even if Ralph Sir thought the woman was raped, either by her boyfriend or by someone else, he might have been ultimately concerned to make sure she was not an unwed mother.

Regardless of what Ralph Sir thought the woman meant when she said she had been raped, he may have been motivated both by concerns about the woman's future and concerns about factory productivity: Why lose a good worker to the strictures of moral purity and reputation? Moreover, if there had been an unwed mother working at Serendib, that would have affected the image of the factory as a whole, as well as the reputations of the other women who worked there and other perspective employees. His strict action of requiring her to marry her rapist or leave the factory may have reflected his concern about keeping and attracting a productive workforce in the future—and about preserving his own reputation as a protective manager.

Ralph Sir habitually brought women's moral behaviour into our discussions about factory productivity. Many workers spoke of the relationship between themselves and the managers in terms of a student-teacher model, and Ralph Sir took the model to heart, adopting the role of the teacher who imparts moral instruction in addition to instructions on operating a sewing machine. On another

occasion, Ralph Sir told me that he once saw a worker's boyfriend waiting for her eagerly outside the factory on payday. Workers were paid in cash, which meant the boyfriend would have gotten instant gratification by dipping into his girlfriend's wage. The next day Ralph Sir called the worker in and talked to her about "protecting her wage for herself."

He and his colleagues generally considered the workers at the two factories Good girls, respectable women who embody cultural expectations for women's behaviour. However, when factory productivity was at stake accusations of being bad girls surfaced, and female sexual morality was central to this anxiety. Typical of his consistent concern with policing women's morality, Ralph Sir told me that he once fired three bad girls who had worked in Free Trade Zone (FTZ) factories before Serendib was built near their villages. These girls, he explained in English, had become "corrupted" in the FTZ and after returning home to work at Serendib they tried to teach "stunts" to the other workers. He recalled how these women would lie to their parents about their hours of employment. They had become accustomed to having boyfriends in the FTZ, so they misreported the factory work schedule in order to have time for illicit liaisons in the village. They would leave work at 5:30, meet their boyfriends for an hour, and go home at seven, telling their parents that they had worked until 6:30. The three also pulled other stunts. They did not report for work on days required for overtime and they took unexcused absences on normal workdays. Ralph Sir eventually fired them by referring to violations of factory rules.

Although some of these "stunts" would not directly affect productivity, by eroding parents' trust in management's ability to control and protect their daughters such behaviour could lead to parents prohibiting their daughters from working at the factory, thus diminishing the available workforce. Often parents allowed their daughters to work because they trusted the management to act *in loco parentis*. Ralph Sir was exemplary—but not alone—in his concern with women's morality and factory productivity. Similarly, Serendib's Chanaka Sir, an assistant production manager, told me in an interview in English that he had once "chased off" a worker named Champi after he found out she was "going here and there" with a boy. He told her supervisor to tell her not to work for a day because of this behaviour. Instead Champi came to him and apologized, which Chanaka Sir took to mean she would change her ways. He let her resume work. He told me he did this "to guide her properly, in life." He said that by doing this he tells girls, "Don't do this kind of thing, you will get lost and you will lose your family life, everything."

Ralph Sir told me many times in English that he preferred to hire women straight out of school who had not yet become "spoiled." He especially did not like to hire women who had previously worked in the FTZs, although he sometimes did so because of labour shortages or for other reasons. He and other managers

frequently used the term *Good girl* in conversations with me and amongst themselves about specific workers and factory production. Decisions about discipline in certain instances were influenced by whether or not the managers considered the worker a Good girl. For instance, almost every day after lunch one Good girl named Mallika returned to the Shirtex production floor late but was never punished, whereas a worker who was not considered a Good girl would be reprimanded for returning late just once. Productivity was key: Mallika could come late because she always worked at or above the target rate. Likewise, managers did not stop me if I sat down to chat with a Good girl at her machine. Yet Yohan Sir, the Shirtex production manager, often called me away from speaking with (and hence distracting) certain workers who he would then tell me were sewing under target or producing damaged garments. For managers, productivity was the main determinant of whether or not a woman was a Good girl—but that did not prevent managers from concerning themselves with women's moral behaviour outside the factories.

Workers' Perspectives: Personal Connections and Status

Workers' responses to managerial discipline, particularly to the scolding of workers, were quite varied. These distinct responses illustrate the breadth of the issues involved as the women worked to make sense of the inequalities of economic liberalization that were so pronounced inside the factories.

Workers considered their relationships to supervisors, managers, and investors in personal terms, and frequently expressed their thankfulness for their jobs in conversations with me. As if to demonstrate their personal connections with the owners, workers often recounted to me personal conversations they had with the two factory investors. They referred to these men as Asanka Sir and Tissa Sir; the use of their first names (rather than last names) with "Sir" indicates relative familiarity. They would often tell me that the owners really cared about the workers, and they would cite the following as a demonstration of their care: Whenever they visited the factories (about once a month) these men walked through the production area and stopped to talk to workers. Workers told me in many ways that they felt that they owed them their loyalty because they provided them with jobs.

Workers frequently offered the investors, managers, and supervisors gestures of thanks and respect appropriate in circumstances outside the factory setting. For instance, around the time of the Sinhala and Tamil New Year's holiday in April, individuals brought managers the sweets that are typically exchanged to celebrate the new year, like *kavun* (a deep-fried oil cake, made with rice flour and treacle) and *kokis* (a crisp cake made of rice flour and coconut milk). When Yohan Sir got married, Shirtex workers pooled their money and presented him with wedding gifts. Upon the death of the father of Shirtex's assistant production

manager, Samarakoon Sir, more than half the Shirtex workforce visited the funeral home and presented him with an envelope full of money for funeral expenses. When a Serendib manager broke his leg in a motorcycle accident, workers in his section visited his home where they gave him sweets and he offered them tea with sugar (sugar in tea being a relative luxury). Workers also tried to leverage these personal connections for specific advantages. One woman wrote a letter to Asanka Sir, Shirtex's owner, asking him to hire her sister. Another wrote to Serendib's owner, Tissa Sir, asking for money for a sick child's medical treatment. On one of my first days at Shirtex, I was talking to Asanka Sir just outside the factory entryway when a woman entered the grounds, dropped to her knees and prostrated before him (a traditional gesture of respect), and asked him for a job. Her husband had been killed by the JVP, and a local Buddhist monk who knew Asanka Sir had sent her to the factory to seek employment.

Serendib's Chanaka Sir once organized a day trip with workers from his production lines to Nuwara Eliya, a popular hill resort. Although this happened before my field research period, I often heard about this trip when workers told me about how much their managers cared about them. Some workers told me that they normally were not allowed to go on trips but their parents allowed them to go on this one since a manager was leading it. One worker described the outing as follows,

The trip really removes the workers as much as possible from their lives that are full of difficulty. The garment factory is a bit tiring for the body, and when you have to work in the night as well it's uncomfortable. So at a time like that, we went on a trip to Nuwara Eliya, and from going on a trip like that Chanaka Sir showed us that life in the garment factory is very important.

That is, by taking them on an outing like this, Chanaka Sir showed them that what they did in the factory was very important and that they should be rewarded for working so hard.

The same worker said that through this effort Chanaka Sir had gained a lot of respect from the workers. In fact, workers constantly spoke about Chanaka Sir and other managers in terms of their respect (*gauravaya*) and love (*ādaraya*) for these managers. One worker who had been quite ill for months, and eventually had to stop working, told me how Chanaka Sir had made specialist doctors' appointments for her and driven her home when she was too ill to work. Others—including pleased parents—told me that he would sometimes drive them home when they had to work after dark.

A worker named Kamala spoke eloquently about the relationships between workers and managers. She explained that when Samarakoon Sir's father died, all the workers wanted to show a unified face and go to the funeral.

Because a lot of workers love Samarakoon Sir, they went to share Samarakoon Sir's sadness among the workers. And, Yohan Sir gave us cake for his marriage ceremony. So, because he didn't forget us, we can't forget him either. We got together and said that we must also give him a present that will make him remember us.... Even on his birthday, Yohan Sir gives us each a piece of cake on his birthday.... All of us thought about it, about the fact that he doesn't forget us, and we thought we mustn't forget him either and we fulfilled our duty. Sir's duty gets fulfilled by Sir.

Kamala was one of many workers who invoked the concepts of duty (*yutukam*) and respect (*gauravaya*) in reference to how they treat managers ("we fulfilled our duty") and how managers treat workers (Sir fulfills his duties). By raising these principles, which structure many Sinhala Buddhist social relationships, she showed the terms in which she and her co-workers tried to accommodate the inequalities that were so apparent in the manager-worker relationship.

In addition to participating in their managers' funerals and weddings, workers also offered help at times of illness. The first day I was at Serendib, I went to a *bodhipūja* with hundreds of workers to benefit the factory manager's ill daughter. Teja later told me in an interview that during that period, she and her co-workers all prayed frequently to the gods and the Buddha to heal the daughter. Teja was also among the group that went to the manager's house when he broke his leg. When she told me about this, I asked her what now, on reflection, seems a decidedly leading question (I found this sometimes to be a useful fieldwork tactic). Her lengthy reply is a wonderful articulation of the reasoning by which workers made sense of the social inequality that was so apparent in the factories.

Caitrin: Isn't there a danger that when workers do that kind of thing they will think they're good friends with the manager once they get back to the factory?

Teja: No, no. We're not so foolish to think that.... The workers are not so dumb as to think, "I helped him like that, I am connected to him like that." There is respect when they go to see him and after they return to the factory there is also the same kind of respect. The way I see it, there is a great respect between manager and employee.... There is a saying that if there is a high-low status

difference, it should be kept at that level. If the status is levelled, the work won't be accomplished. There must be a certain gap between the employee and the manager.... If they try to work as friends, then there would be a lot of sacrifices that would take place. If the worker weren't producing at a sufficient level, the managers wouldn't be able to scold [if they had close bonds with the workers]. When they scold, that means we develop. Both groups develop. If Sir thinks the way we work is good, if Sir doesn't say anything, thinking, "These workers are good, they helped me in a time of trouble," and he doesn't do anything about low production, then he'd have to accept our production level even if we only gave him ten items. That's really the death of the factory. They can't do that. We're not angry. They determine the target amount required for that order. There's nothing to get angry for if they tell us that target amount.... There must be inequality. It won't be right if there is equality. If both parties come to the same level, if the state arises where I don't listen to what Sir says, there is no development there.... I'll be compelled to work the way I want to. Though we do our work by using our brains, Sirs do their work by using their business intelligence. We must respect that and we must get used to their business method. It's then that the business will prosper.

Workers often told me that they wanted the factories to prosper so that they will continue to be employed. They were keenly aware of competition from other countries and other firms within Sri Lanka and they did not want their factory to shut down in the face of competition. Teja and her co-workers rarely questioned the hierarchy that structured factory social relations. More commonly they called on the obligations and responsibilities that accompany hierarchical relationships as a means to make the factory a place that was consistent with the norms they had grown accustomed to outside the work place. A few of the factory managers were also fellow villagers; in those cases, workers consistently integrated village and factory obligations in their evaluations of specific instances of managerial paternalism.

Although Teja referred to the importance of managers scolding workers, and Kamala stated that workers loved Samarakoon Sir, there was also a prominent sense at both factories that, in scolding, managers sometimes overstepped the line of what was appropriate. Workers often told that rather than reforming, they simply got angry when they were harshly scolded. Sita, who was a mother of small children, said the following, pointing out an inherent problem with the use of the term *lamay* (children) to refer to workers. "When shouted at, the workers are even more disobedient. They won't do any work at all. They get angry. Though they are

workers/children [*lamay*] they are not simply children [*lamay*]. Though we are workers/children, we are mothers too. There are times when after being scolded we don't feel like doing what we are told to do." Another worker said that after they were scolded sometimes they ended up damaging the garments because they were upset. Many workers said that after scolding, managers would often approach them later and speak nicely, not actually apologizing but, as one woman said, "setting things right by being kind."

Many workers said that the managers showed compassion and love towards the workers and that they only scolded when it was absolutely necessary. They argued that the managers were only doing their jobs, and that the managers themselves risked being scolded by their own bosses. Some echoed Teja in arguing that scolding was good for the workers to improve, and one said that it was being scolded that had allowed them to develop into such good workers over the past three years (since the factory first opened). Susila explained that in the same way that parents must act lovingly to their kids, "if managers act lovingly toward the workers, the girls will feel like working." However, she conceded that "a certain amount of shouting is needed by the managers, or the girls will try to climb onto their shoulders." But another woman explained that the managers should scold "with control," rather than speaking to the workers as if they are slaves.

I saw many cases of harsh scolding, but also many where managers spoke about problems to workers gently, quietly and, it seemed, kindly. Workers frequently explained to me that the latter approach was much more effective than the former. One said, "If they speak nicely and ask for the target amount, then the worker, feeling good about it, will somehow try to give her amount. If they speak in an unpleasant manner, frequently the target lessens even more." One worker explained that because there was a close relationship between the mind and body, when a worker's "feelings are pounded" it became difficult to work. From being insulted the worker becomes physically uncomfortable, ailments increase, and she becomes less productive. "But if the sirs and supervisors speak well and lovingly, no matter how difficult it is to work, it is not a big deal. We can do the job happily."

Grievances, Paternalism, and Factory Conflicts

These were new factories where managers and workers alike negotiated the workplace division of labour in relation to hierarchical models familiar from outside the factories. There were many instances where the correct relationship between managers and workers was debated and discussed. Disagreements over suitable modes of behaviour often were expressed in conflicts, many of which came down to the question of the displacement of expected social hierarchies. An analysis of factory conflicts illuminates how Sri Lankans involved in the garment industry

wrestled to make sense of and live comfortably in a social world that had changed considerably since the country's 1977 economic reforms. Conflicts inside and outside the factories were occasions on which village women struggled to forge positive identities in the face of conflicting messages they received about the value of their labour and their new lives as female factory workers.

When new cultural practices emerge, conflicts are arenas in which people test shared assumptions and in which values are negotiated and made explicit. Here I am following Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 168–69), whose work is used so aptly by Jane Collier in her analysis of disagreements among Spanish villagers. Collier (1997, 12) writes that “it is through constant and recurring arguments that a people establish and perpetuate the shared, usually implicit assumptions that constitute their tradition and make it possible for them to understand how they disagree with each other.” Explicitly raising concerns helps people identify their desires and realize where they are similar despite disparities of experience or expectation.

Disagreements, grievances, and conflicts at these factories arose among women workers, between workers and supervisors or managers, and among managers and supervisors. Some conflicts were directly related to work, like those about unjust managerial preference or promotions, cruel treatment by managers, unfair wage calculations, the quality of the factory's medical facilities, inability to get required leave, or poor work habits. Other conflicts referred to issues outside of work, like family or village enmities, caste divisions, electoral politics, or love affairs. Even what looked like internal factory conflicts cannot be understood out of the wider social context: people were making sense of the world around them, and much of what happened within the factories was interpreted in the context of the larger social discourses about economic liberalization and social change. Many conflicts invoked gendered concerns about Good girls, Juki girls, and appropriate femininity.

I offer one small example of how non-factory issues were brought to bear on factory productivity. A small group at Shirtex once complained to me about a worker named Shirani who was allegedly having a sexual relationship with a married male co-worker. Arguing that Shirani was a bad girl and that she was giving the rest of them a bad name, they requested that I report Shirani's behaviour to Yohan Sir in order to get her fired. I was thrust into an uncomfortable situation. These women were calling attention to my position of relative power, which they were trying to use for their own ends. But I could not comply. I still do not really know what had been going on, but clearly the women assumed that management would want to eliminate such a bad element from the otherwise productive workforce. If indeed Shirani had been having an illicit affair, since they obtained social and work advantages from being considered as Good girls by management and the wider society, her co-workers may have been fearful of being tainted by her

bad behaviour. Note that the cheating husband did not concern the women—they did not try to get him fired. This was one of many cases in which it became evident that women were defining themselves in reference to other women more than in reference to men (Farnsworth-Alvear 2000, 27).

At least two types of conflict arose between workers because the *complicated question of how to be a Good girl and a factory worker at the same time* was of great significance to them and because there were different ways of negotiating this new subject position. Both could be said to have aided management. First, there were conflicts between workers within a factory. Second, there was competition between workers at the two factories, which was often articulated in terms of differences between the factories at the level of tradition and modernity. Differences in the layout and atmosphere of Shirtex and Serendib were frequently read alongside supposed differences between the women of the two factories. Noting these differences and conflicts between the two factories helps to bring into focus the contradictions, complexity, and strain that characterized the cultural work of learning to be Good girls.

Workers, managers, and the two owners alike often asked me to compare the factories. I cannot count the number of times workers at each place asked me questions such as “What is Serendib like? Our sirs are good, aren’t they?” or “Do you think we are different from the workers at Shirtex?” Serendib managers would often ask me if I thought they were better managers than those at Shirtex; at least were they kinder? Shirtex workers and managers often cast Shirtex workers as unequivocal traditional Good girls, and therefore better workers; whereas Serendib managers and workers made comments that conveyed a pride in being more modern than the workers across the wall, still insisting they were Good girls and good workers.

Shirtex managers who professed to know the production figures (which I did not corroborate) said that compared to Serendib their factory was much more efficient, produced higher quality garments, and had a lower employee turnover rate. Several Shirtex managers and their predecessors told me that when the original 200 GFP hiring was conducted in 1992, Serendib managers selected women based on appearance—they only wanted pretty girls. But at Shirtex they chose workers strictly on the basis of poverty, that is, on whether or not they were Janasaviya recipients.¹⁷ These Shirtex managers contended that because they did not hire on

¹⁷ Premadasa’s 200 GFP was to target the “abject poor.” All potential workers for the original hiring cycle were to be selected by managers from a pool of recipients of Premadasa’s Janasaviya Program, a poverty alleviation program begun in 1989 (Stokke 1995). Once an individual received a 200 GFP job, his or her family’s Janasaviya benefits were discontinued.

personal caprice, Shirtex was a more productive factory. By highlighting Janasaviya status when speaking of why Shirtex was more productive, Shirtex managers *but also workers* correlated poverty with cultural authenticity: It was not just that “Good girls make good workers,” but that “poor girls make Good girls make good workers.”

Serendib Janasaviya workers also correlated poverty with authenticity, but at the expense of co-workers who had come from a previous non-200 GFP Serendib factory. I sometimes heard intrafactory criticisms from the two different batches of women within Serendib that paralleled the interfactory comments I heard from Shirtex and Serendib workers about the other factory’s workers as a body. These comments paralleled an ambivalence I describe as the simultaneous attraction and repulsion of the urban and modern. A young village woman imagines at least two Colombos, and imagines them with ambivalence. There is Colombo as the elite power centre—the Colombo of Royal College, Majestic City shopping mall, Mercedes-Benz cars, and Parliament. But there is also Colombo as the magnet for the landless rural poor—the Colombo of the shantytown dwellers by the Kelaniya River and low-paid workers in the Katunayake FTZ. Both these Colombos symbolize the polluting or corrupting power of wealth. Urban elites are maligned for economic, political, and cultural corruption, and the urban poor are maligned for succumbing to such evil influences. But both Colombos also hold some appeal for some villagers: the former for the world of money, fashion, and modernity, the latter for a chance at accessing this world. These ambivalent estimations about modernity meant that the non-Janasaviya women took pride in being positioned as (and positioning themselves as) more modern, yet they no doubt worried about the Juki reputation; the Janasaviya women took pride in being positioned as (and positioning themselves as) more traditional, yet they surely enjoyed a certain new style and social life that garment work enabled (Lynch forthcoming, Chap. 5).

How do these points of criticism, comparison, and competitiveness affect the “Good girls make good workers” formulation? Together, they indicate that although all the 200 GFP dramatis personae were working with the same cultural models about Good girl conduct in the context of the shared construct of the rural-urban divide, there was no easy solution for any of the parties concerned to the question of whether a garment worker could be a Good girl. The women in the two factories were working with the same sets of experiences and desires to carve out new subjectivities—but it was only through highlighting what they saw from afar as contrasts that they were able to articulate their own desires. The refashioning of subjectivity is a difficult project; there was no simple, functional solution to the contradictions the women encountered and the conflicting messages they received about how to be a good woman and a garment worker from the different people in their lives—their brothers, parents, boyfriends, managers, and co-workers.

Paternalism and the focus on face-to-face relationships meant that workers did not have a comfortable forum for lodging their many grievances. The vast majority of workers at both factories were afraid to complain about anything. I heard a variety of reasons for this fear. Some were afraid that managers might take complaints as a personal affront. As Farnsworth-Alvear (2000, 124) corroborates in another context, "in workplaces marked by face-to-face relationships of power, joining a strike involved a personal kind of insubordination." Some cited the fear of losing their jobs. Women would frequently state that there would always be ten or more people waiting outside the factory gates for their jobs. (Though the specter of an infinite labour pool haunted these women, managers often expressed concern to me about the dearth of people applying for jobs.) Another problem was that they were afraid to speak up: They have been raised as *läjja-baya* women to not speak with persons of authority unless spoken to, and they were also generally afraid of speaking with managers.¹⁸ These women also did not want themselves and the village to get a bad name. They said they were *läjjay* to raise issues when their relatives would hear about them. Finally, they did not want the factories to close down. I often heard this latter point from workers and other villagers: many were concerned that people not protest working conditions simply because they wanted to keep the factories in Udakande, but they mused that there had to be some effective way to get problems addressed without scaring off investors. These last two points raise the important complication posed by the factories' location in a village. While some people said that the surveillance of the factories by villagers prevented abuse from occurring at the factories, others said that the kinds of deep connections forged with managers also meant that there was no arena for lodging legitimate protest.¹⁹

The workers had no formal mechanism for lodging complaints that avoided face-to-face confrontation. There was no trade union at either factory. Managers believed there would be few complaints, and they often told me that workers should simply come to them with any concerns. They also sometimes told me that the company's Workers' Committees could deal with problems, but during my field research, there was no formal committee at either factory. Workers' Committees (often called Workers' Councils) are a common alternative to unions in many Sri Lankan factories. According to Premadasa's 200 GFP rules, there was supposed to be a Workers' Committee at each factory. Serendib held a committee election by

¹⁸ *Läjja-baya* literally means "shame-fear." It is a concept that applies to men as well as women, but it is frequently invoked with special reference to women's behaviour. Restraint, respectability, and shame-fear are all involved in what it means to have *läjja-baya*.

¹⁹ I devote an entire chapter of my forthcoming book to understanding the effects of their location in villages on workers' lives. See Lynch forthcoming, Chap. 4.

secret ballot near the end of my field research, but the results had still not been announced two months later—a delay that many workers attributed to vote rigging by management. In lieu of a committee, about once a month a dozen or so Shirtex workers selected by Yohan Sir would meet with senior Colombo-based administrators to discuss concerns. Obviously this was a fraught procedure, and I often heard complaints that Yohan Sir only selected women who would never speak against him or who were too shy to speak at all. At times, anonymous letters of complaint were sent to the owners of both factories, but anonymity often prevented the factory owners from taking the concerns seriously. Furthermore, some people were so afraid of losing their jobs that they would not write letters because they feared that their identity could be found out through their handwriting. And filing official complaints with the Ministry of Labour was a complicated process that workers told me was confusing and intimidating and offered no hope of easy resolution of grievances.

It was in this context that anonymous posters critical of Yohan Sir appeared at Shirtex. Before dawn on a Tuesday morning in February 1996, white posters with red painted lettering were pasted on the walls, buildings, and pavement along the roads within a one-mile radius of the factories.²⁰ The largest occupied a wall near the turn-off to the factory: four feet long by one foot high, its huge letters proclaimed in Sinhala “Chase Out Yohan Sir.” All the posters expressed similar sentiments, and all were directed against Yohan Sir, Shirtex’s production manager. The posters, most signed “from the workers,” variously proclaimed Yohan Sir a demon, arrogant, and inhuman. Others read as follows: “At the factory they get work not from workers but from slaves”; “Protect the factory from Yohan Sir who is arrogant”; “We don’t want Yohan Sir, fire him”; “We’re not slaves”; “Yohan Sir demands labour that is too much for the workers’ bodies” (this is a Sinhala expression for exploitative labour conditions); “Factory directors, why aren’t you taking steps to fire Yohan Sir?”

Workers and staff members from both factories encountered these posters as they arrived at work that morning. Yohan Sir did not come to work that day, nor the next two, for he had gone to Colombo the previous afternoon for his wedding. He was from Colombo, but lived during the week in a rented house down the lane from the factories. I also was in Colombo that day, conducting research at some urban factories. When I walked to the factories from a nearby junction two days later, I

²⁰ Posters are a popular medium of mass communication in Sri Lanka. They are used particularly in politics, covering walls throughout Kandy and Colombo, and even appearing in smaller towns and villages during elections and strikes. See Moore 1993, 627 n. 92; Ratnapala 1991, 179.

immediately wondered what I had missed. I found scraps of posters littering the roads and some large, legible poster remnants still in place—despite villagers' efforts to remove them, some were still hanging because of the powerful adhesive.

On that Tuesday morning, after they entered Shirtex, a number of workers, led by three women who usually acted as leaders, announced that they disagreed with the sentiments of the posters. They then refused to work until they could leave the factory to hang posters of their own and march in support of Yohan Sir. Shirtex's owner, Asanka Sir, was immediately contacted by telephone at the home office in Colombo. A worker named Kumari spoke with Asanka Sir. She apparently expressed the workers' shame (*läjja*) about the incident, and asked for permission to counter-demonstrate.²¹ Permission was granted for Kumari and five others to leave the factory. But about one hundred women rushed out before the guards managed to close the gates and prevent others from leaving. Evidently most of the total of 350 workers had been ready to depart, but there was a small number (I heard estimates of around thirty) still inside the factory, for various reasons unwilling to leave. Not aware that Yohan Sir was in Colombo, the workers marched around the village and then down a lane to Yohan Sir's house. Assuming he was at home and afraid to come to work, they hoped they could change his mind. Numerous villagers came out of their houses to watch the procession. It was only after the police arrived and forced the workers back into the factory that production began. By then it was noon.

This was thus an unusual walkout: the workers refused to work to support management, not to oppose it. Violet, one of the walkout leaders, later told me that if they had been silent the villagers would have assumed they had hung the posters. She said that in order to prove that Yohan Sir was innocent of these charges and that they supported him, they wanted to march through the village and post new signs proclaiming the truth. This second batch of posters was made that morning in the factory's cutting room with the markers and paper normally used for patternmaking. Two succinct posters were generated at this time: one said "Sir for us and us for Sir" and the other said "We want Sir." During the procession, workers also used the factory markers to alter some of the original posters. For instance on a poster that had originally declared in red paint "Yohan Sir, are you a demon?" there was writing added in blue marker that read "No, who says?"

In addition to these rather straightforward rebuttals written on the original posters, there was also written on some posters another rejoinder of which I heard two versions. (These posters were removed before I saw them.) They said either "The bed is ready, come at night" or "The bed is ready, bathe and come." The

²¹ I learned this in an interview with Asanka Sir after the incident. He spoke in English, but said he was reporting what the workers had said in Sinhala: "*apiṭa läjjay*"—we're ashamed.

numerous people with whom I discussed these retorts were uniform in their interpretations: they were a clear sexual invitation that challenged the authors of the original posters to prove the integrity of their accusations against Yohan Sir by demonstrating their sexual prowess. There was a correlation drawn here between honesty and masculine sexual power. These sexual retorts—and not the accusations against Yohan Sir—became the major focus of village discussion about the day's events. The villagers thought the women must have written the sexual phrases, which was not appropriate feminine behaviour. By the end of that same day, the workers who marched in the procession were being accused of sexual impropriety. With the focus switched to the sexuality of the women workers, the critiques of management that had been raised in the posters were instantly forgotten.

Starting on my very first day at Shirtex, I often heard and saw Yohan Sir shouting at workers. As some workers noted to me, even his normal tone of voice and facial expressions were harsh and seemed to express disgust, so when he raised his voice people cowered. He would sometimes call workers idiots and fools. Workers complained to me about these epithets. They noted that he would call them "cattle" and would sometimes address them with the degrading and disrespectful Sinhala pronoun "*tamuse*."²² I knew of a number of women who quit their jobs because of his harsh treatment, one explained to me that she left because "there is no need to be insulted for 2,000 rupees" (a reference to the monthly wage). There was no formal mechanism for registering concerns about this ill treatment. It was in this context that the posters appeared.

The posters were signed "the workers," yet no workers took responsibility for the action once they arrived at work that day. Perhaps the anonymity of the original posters was related to the various concerns women had about agitating for change in their paternalistic and face-to-face work environment. The grievances in the posters were largely about Yohan Sir's treatment of workers. They focused on emotional and interpersonal relationships, not on objective criteria such as wages, health care, or target rates. This focus is consistent with the approach taken in factories elsewhere where management policies are structured by paternalism and face-to-face power dynamics. Farnsworth-Alvear (2000, 140–01) notes that disputes in Colombian factories centered on the interpersonal world, and were "about workers' control over the tone of workplace interactions involving specific persons." Regardless of who really penned the posters, their approach is significant. When

²² *Tamuse* is one of several forms of the pronoun *you* in Sinhala. Colonial era Sinhala-English dictionaries indicate that it is polite and civil, like *thou*. However, the contemporary valence is the diametrical opposite of polite and civil, unless it is used in an affectionate and joking manner with close friends or relatives.

they wrote that Yohan Sir was “arrogant” they seemed to be flagging his violation of accepted rules of hierarchy and subordination, and they may have expected that agitating about that claim would have been effective in a factory where interpersonal relations were so important to everyday factory productivity and discipline.

In the days following the walkout there was intense speculation by workers, managers, and villagers as to who might have hung the original posters and why. I spent considerable time discussing what had occurred with all these people, who were themselves busy with their own speculations, queries, and analyses. I certainly never uncovered any one story about the incident that I could call “the truth.” In fact, I was not seeking out “the truth,” because I knew full well that individuals remember and experience an event according to their own subjective biases and perspectives. I sought instead to learn what people were saying about this incident, how they were making sense of it, what their discussions told me about how they made sense of the wider social world. Even if it could be discovered, I would not be particularly interested in “what really happened.” Instead, my analysis focuses on how people remembered and made sense of this event (cf. Roy 1994; Israeli 2002, 1).

My inquiries yielded a number of explanations about who hung the original posters and why—that is, the agents and their motivations. Agents included the following, all placed in very different stories: the brothers, husbands, or boyfriends of workers; the women workers themselves, led by a sewing machine operator named Sunila, who joined Kumari in the efforts to counter-demonstrate; disgruntled area van drivers; and a prominent local Buddhist monk. Motivations focused on three main areas: actual managerial abuse, national party politics, and competition between managerial factions.

A few explanations focused on Yohan Sir’s managerial techniques—the posters, I was told, were put up by the boyfriends, husbands, or brothers of women who had quit their jobs because they believed Yohan Sir had been too harsh. According to this story, because women would not have been able to go out in the night or early morning to hang posters (Good girls must stay inside when it’s dark), their male associates would have hung the posters. Yet explanations focusing on managerial abuse were in some sense the least prevalent. It was as if most people seemed to be looking for another, more “real” motivation.

Many of the explanations stated or implied that the posted comments on Yohan Sir’s managerial style were not necessarily true; they were just intended to try to get him fired. For instance, a significant portion of rumours focused on party politics, particularly the opposition between supporters of the opposition UNP and

the ruling PA (the coalition led by the SLFP that was elected in 1994).²³ There were rumours that Yohan Sir was a supporter of the UNP and that workers loyal to the PA had hung the posters in order to have him fired and replaced by a PA production manager. In one version of this story, a prominent PA monk from Udakande provided the paper and paint to workers or their male relatives. Given how party politics in Sri Lanka have been another means of discussing tradition and modernity, these arguments could be interpreted as referring to an effort by PA workers to make the factory more traditional (the PA/SLFP is considered Kandyan and, hence, close to tradition) and not run by crass materialists (the UNP, Low Country-associated party).²⁴

Others said the posters were hung by van owners and drivers who were angry that Yohan Sir did not employ them to drive workers home at night after overtime shifts. Another explanation focused on internal managerial disputes, arguing that lower-level supervisors and managers who opposed Yohan Sir hung the posters. Others said Yohan Sir himself orchestrated both the poster campaign and the walkout to take place on a day he would be away—his absence had thus not been coincidence—in order to show his superiors that the workers supported him over the rival managers. Even these explanations referring to management rivalries were cast as a Kandyan-Low Country (traditional/modern-local/foreign) dispute, with the Kandyan managers trying to oust the outsider who, some said, they opposed precisely because he was an outsider.

A number of people said that those who wrote the posters also participated in the walkout. While there were several people involved, the leaders in both activities were said to be Kumari and Sunila. According to this story, Kumari and Sunila orchestrated the posters and the walkout to elicit support for Yohan Sir, whose position was being threatened by rival managers and by a few disgruntled former workers. Some said they were asked to do this by Yohan Sir; others said they

²³ These acronyms refer to the United National Party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, and the People's Alliance.

²⁴ An important cultural and political distinction is commonly drawn between the areas around the central hill city of Kandy and the areas around Colombo (the "Low Country"). A Kandyan-Low Country contrast has been important in national politics since the late nineteenth century, and since that time it has been used as a way of spatially mapping a dichotomy between tradition and Westernization. "Kandyan" (also "Up Country," *uḍa raṭa*) describes the people and area of the precolonial Kandyan kingdom, today roughly delineated by the Central Province. It is usually contrasted to the "Low Country" (*pahata raṭa*), the southwest coastal region that is so dominated by the capital city that when people refer to it they often just mean Colombo.

did this on their own. In any event, according to this story, Kumari and Sunila (with the help of others) hung the posters, and then led the walkout in order to show that the workers supported Yohan Sir.

Many people told me that Sunila had penned the sexual rebuttals. Kumari, Sunila, and their co-workers denied it and said that the authors were the local unemployed young men who loitered on the village streets and on the cricket pitch located immediately outside the factory. But not only the young men but also other villagers and the Shirtex workers who did not go on the procession told me that the culprits had been the factory women with Sunila in the lead. Serendib workers, who only saw the procession through their factory windows as they continued to work, also generally told me that the sexual rebuttals were Sunila's doing.

It was easy for everyone to imagine that Sunila would have led the workers in the original poster campaign and in writing these sexual rebuttals. Sunila was a 27-year-old married mother of two young daughters who lived with her widowed mother. Her husband worked in a textile factory in Colombo and returned home for two days each month. Along with Kumari, Sunila was an unofficial factory leader who played a large role in organizing trips, parties, and other social events. Sunila also was a vocal UNP supporter. In this case rather than her leadership qualities, her sexuality was at issue. I was told that with no man to watch over her, Sunila could have easily made and hung posters *in the dark*, despite being a woman—the assumption here was that no respectable woman would be out in the dark.

Some observers seem to have considered Sunila a woman who was *läjja-baya näti* (unrespectable, loose and immoral, literally without shame and fear). In this formulation, Sunila talked too loudly, was too forward with the managers, and carried her body in an anything but demure fashion. There was no man around to control her behaviour. One other woman whom I heard described in similar ways was a young widowed childless woman whom workers characterized as *social*, using the English word to describe behaviour that is inappropriately modelled after foreign ways of behaving and thinking. Several workers told me that this woman's outgoing and unsubmissive behaviour was characteristic of a woman who is not proper and complete because she has not endured the pain of childbirth. In his study of violence as an object of anthropological study in Sri Lanka, anthropologist Pradeep Jeganathan (1997) describes a woman who inhabits the cusp between being *läjja näti* (without shame) and *baya näti* (without fear). He argues that the identification of a woman as being without *läjja* produces a social space for her to be sexualized. Similarly, her lack of *baya* produces a space for violence. Sunila seems to be situated in a similar manner.

Though I heard all of the above interpretations of the posters and walkout from workers and villagers in Udakande and the surrounding villages more generally, key members of Shirtex management conveyed a different, unified

interpretation of the event to me and to the workers. They all refused to use the word *strike* to describe the events, and would reprimand anyone—including me—who used the word in English or Sinhala. Unequivocally attributing the sexual phrases to the boys on the street and explaining the poster content as a means of ousting Yohan Sir for other reasons, these managers interpreted the walkout as a sign of the strength of the factory. Yohan Sir told me he was proud that the “girls” supported him. I also heard him tell the women this directly when he called a factory meeting on his first day back and thanked the workers for their support. He was staunchly confident in his comments to me that the posters had not come from the workers, and he argued that it reflected well on the girls that they had demonstrated to show the villagers what they thought of him.

Asanka Sir told me he had given permission for the small group to leave the factory premises in order to “let off steam.” When I reminded him that more workers than he had intended departed and that the entire morning’s production had been lost as a result he said, “That doesn’t matter. There must have been some frustration to get so worked up. It’s good for people to shout like this.” A month later, in a conversation in which he argued that their attendance at his father’s funeral demonstrated how good the village girls were, Samarakoon Sir added the following point: “If those posters had been put up in Colombo, the workers would have said nothing about it.” Samarakoon Sir saw the walkout as a way to protect Shirtex and Yohan Sir. And many workers (as seen in Violet’s comments about wanting to make sure villagers did not think they hung the posters) spoke of it this way too. They were also concerned to protect their own reputations. The Shirtex Sirs were able to sidestep the sexuality questions to use the walkout as an affirmation of their workers’ status as good, respectable girls—an affirmation in which parents and the workers themselves would have taken comfort.

In comments to me, Serendib managers used the walkout and the sexual aspersions as clear evidence of the superiority of their factory and its workers to Shirtex’s. They would have wanted to distance themselves from the event in order for their factory and its workers to avoid getting a bad reputation. This would have been especially important for Serendib’s management because it was already their company, and not Shirtex, that worried some locals for perhaps being exploitative. Serendib workers consistently worked overtime, which was paid, and technically optional, but in practice was extremely difficult to refuse to do. They often were informed of required overtime moments before the end-of-day bell rang, and they had no way to inform their families that they would be home late. Serendib workers often did not even get a holiday on Poya days, the monthly national full moon holidays (holy in the Sinhala Buddhist calendar). Workers in the embroidery room sometimes worked overnight.

Serendib workers joined in this comparison between the factories: I heard from many that the Shirtex workers were simply “naughty” (in English) or *honda nā*. Some said that if there were actually problems as stated with Yohan Sir, the workers should have just “kept their mouths shut.” Others conceded that something would have had to be done, but in a unified fashion—with some workers refusing to walk out it made all the workers look ridiculous.

Villagers whom I surveyed about the day’s events (including parents of workers at both factories, the boys who loitered at the cricket field, and nearby shop owners and neighbours) immediately dismissed the possibility of true worker grievances and focused instead on the bad character of the women—epitomized by Sunila—who presumably wrote the sexual phrases. Jayasuriya Sir, Shirtex’s personnel manager, told me that on the afternoon of the walkout a group of fifteen villagers (members of the village “civic order committee”) came to the factory to speak with him. With the sexually suggestive altered posters in hand, they complained that the language was inappropriate for women and that it gave the village a bad name. They did not discuss the posted accusations of exploitation, inhumanity, slavery, and so on. The mother of a worker at Shirtex whom I asked about the entire day’s events (and not just about the altered posters) responded instantly with the run-together words “*Ci, kāte wāda, sauttuy*”—“Yuck, filthy, rotten.” She then explained that Good girls shouldn’t do such things: They should neither complain about their work conditions nor write bad words on posters. Others used the same phrases, mostly the words *naughty girls* (in English), *ci*, and *sauttuy*.

Conclusion: Capital, Labour, and Gender

The story of the Shirtex walkout reveals complex relationships between capital, labour, and gender. With the focus directed toward Sunila, the significance of the event was minimized—an explanation could be found in the idiosyncrasies of one actor. Likewise, the political arguments and the complex stories about management rivalries eclipsed the arguments about true worker grievances. The accusations about Yohan Sir’s managerial techniques were being read as *about* something else. The sense seemed to have quickly emerged that the posters could not really point to labour issues. The sexual retorts turned the conversation into a means of talking about something other than the dynamics of capital and labour.

What mattered was that women were acting up, not being proper and traditional, displaying bad character, and giving themselves and the village a bad name. This worker protest, and especially the walkout, were unworthy of good, traditional, village girls. Because the poster hanging and the walkout raised the possibility that the women workers were not ideal factory workers—not a compliant

labour force, that is—it was as if villagers had then begun to wonder, “Well, if they are not good workers, can we still assume they are Good girls?” Underlying this question would have been widespread concerns about the effect on the nation of women’s central roles in the liberalized economy. So when sexuality was broached, it created an easy scapegoat. In the end, the women who had marched around the village in a walkout became the objects of public scorn. Posting critiques of management was rendered a profoundly ineffective form of protest.

The story of the walkout and of the paternalistic manager-worker dynamics at Shirtex and Serendib clearly demonstrate the importance of understanding how local histories and meanings affect people’s experiences of industrial production. Under the 200 Garment Factories Program, the recruitment, retention, and control of labour—as well as people’s responses to it—were implemented and made meaningful in the context of Sinhala Buddhist discourses and practices about gender and the nation.

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