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Doing and Undoing HRM in Sri Lanka

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In his article “HRM as a ‘Web of Texts’: (Re)Articulating the Identity of HRM in Sri Lanka’s Localized Global Apparel Industry,” Dhammika Jayawardena presents a rare and fascinating insight into what human resource management (HRM) looks like on a factory floor in the Global South. HRM is a set of practices, a language, and an ideological position that emerged far from this context, so its translation and adoption into this setting are interesting from both a practical and a theoretical perspective. Jayawardena’s approach is to focus on HRM as a language, and to trace how this language came to simultaneously confront, supplant, and incorporate an earlier language of personnel management that was also situated and grounded in a particular time and place.

In and of itself, Sri Lanka’s apparel industry warrants study for a host of reasons. It employs more than 300,000 people, mainly young women who have migrated from rural areas. This level of migration has created its own difficulties and there is evidence that these women were often badly treated in the past. The industry is huge, employing 15% of the country’s workforce and accounting for half of its exports, and is entwined in a wide network of global capital, instantiated in the physical entwining of the female workers with Japanese sewing machines through which they become invisible and unheard. One contribution of this article is that through careful fieldwork and analysis the author gives these workers—who might properly be considered subalterns in Spivak’s (1988) understanding of the term—a voice, albeit with the author as interlocutor. Central to Jayawardena’s analysis is the notion that the workers’ identity is framed within the patronizing term *lamai*—broadly meaning “little ones”—and much of his study explores how this identity persists and is reframed within wider discourses of personnel management, HRM, and feminist

activism. His study indicates that “personnel management” as practiced in Sri Lanka’s apparel industry during the early 1980s was characterized by physical punishments and inhuman work practices, which were not part of Western understandings of the term. He documents how, after the late 1980s, HRM was adopted and translated into this context in a complex story where different actors often had contradictory expectations. For him, “doing HRM” describes the officially endorsed way of managing labor in the apparel industry, as exemplified by the written texts in the English language, while “undoing HRM” is embedded and embodied in a multiplicity of native social discourses and narratives, most often transmitted orally in the Sinhala language. In the tradition of subaltern studies, Jayawardena’s contribution is to articulate this second set of texts and voices that draw on much longer traditions and that often implicitly and explicitly violate the core norms of “doing” HRM. His study explores how both “doing” and “undoing” HRM are implicated in one another in this context, and he skillfully uses ideas from poststructuralism to show how linguistic categories and texts from different discourses come to be substituted for one another. Distancing himself from fashionable distinctions between rhetoric and reality, Jayawardena presents a more subtle story of textual interminglement through which the language and meaning of HRM is continually reconfigured in a dynamic web of texts.

REFERENCE

- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press. (Original work published 1985)

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