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# Benevolent authoritarianism, paternalism and religious humanitarianism in Sri Lanka: a dependent or autonomous HR?

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## ABSTRACT



This article examines the cases of five Sri Lankan export-oriented companies, each situated within global production networks (GPN) with British companies at the apex. In examining their managerial practices, a strong similarity to the practices associated with Anglo-Saxon paternalism is identified. However, these observed parallels are a product of local circumstances and the particular location within the GPN rather than a consequence of any emulation of British practices. The resulting system reflects a high power-dependency relationship that employers hold over employees. In this sense, the emergent HR system is partly dependent on the position in the GPN and partly autonomous. The system is characterised by a gendered division of labour and by the proximity of managerial oversight over the issue of worker autonomy. The factory setting has lower levels of worker autonomy and dependency compared to tea harvesting. One outlying exception to the general paternalistic approach, in one of the companies studied, is where the religious and ethnic makeup of the workforce is not shared with management, leading to increased conflict with the unionised workforce. The nature of Sri Lankan paternalism is specific and endogenous, but the conditions creating this paternalism are likely to be replicated elsewhere.

## KEYWORDS

Paternalism; Sri Lanka; Global Production Networks; Benevolent Authoritarianism; Global South

## Introduction

This article examines the nature of workplace practices and managerial styles at five worksites in export-oriented companies in Sri Lanka and assesses these in terms of the HR systems of workplace management. This is important in an era where workers' welfare in all locations is subject to increased scrutiny with global measures such as the UN's

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Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG8 aims to promote ‘sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth as well as full and productive employment, and decent work for all.’<sup>1</sup> Such ambitions rely on voluntary actions by large multinational corporations (MNCs) through their corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, which have yielded mixed results (Parsa et al., 2018). Gaining a deeper understanding of the dynamics of localised managerial initiatives that fall under the category of HRM should be beneficial to these sustainability aims.

In this study, one might have expected that workplace HR practices would be influenced by a universalised ‘best practice’ HR due to the obligations placed on companies by their MNC buyers from Britain. In fact the actual observed practices bear a stronger resemblance to classical paternalism. This article aims to describe these practices and explain their prevalence. By doing so, it fills gaps in our knowledge of what drives localised forms of HRM within global production networks (GPNs). It also contributes to the broader debate about the extent to which localised HR practices should be viewed as contingent upon cultural and institutional contexts as well as the relative influence of peak organisational HR policy and practice within GPNs. Given the above, two research questions (RQs) are posed:

RQ1: What are the attributes of the Sri Lankan HR system in export-oriented companies with ties to GPNs?

RQ2: How do the HR practices in export-oriented companies within a global production network relate to more local culturally specific influences, such as religion?

The selection of Sri Lanka for workplace focus, with Britain as the source of the buyer companies thought to have influence, holds several merits. First, Sri Lanka is recognised as a developing economy in the fast-growing South Asia region in the Global South. Second, Sri Lanka shares connections to Britain and bears a legacy of colonialism, which has bequeathed legal and constitutional inheritances and contributed to ethnic divisions. Other bonds include diaspora connections and strong cultural ties between the two countries. This links to strong trading ties: Britain is Sri Lanka’s third-largest export market and the two sectors studied here, tea and garment production, represent Sri Lanka’s largest export sectors, both having Britain as being a key market.

The next section explores HR practices in organisations within the Global South that are embedded within GPNs, with the primary MNC headquartered in the Global North. Subsequent sections discuss existing literature on paternalism and religious humanitarianism in Sri Lanka. Four themes are identified: (1) the nature of localised HR systems and practices in GPNs, (2) HRM and paternalism, (3) paternalism, patriarchy

and homophily in the workplace, and (4) Sri Lanka and Buddhist paternalism. A section on the national context and methodology follows. The evidence is then presented across four emergent themes, concluding with a discussion that links these themes back to those presented in the literature review section and the emergent themes are linked back to the research questions.

### ***The nature of localised HR systems and practices in GPNs***

The power dynamics between large MNCs and their subsidiaries and suppliers result from dependency dynamics. This varies according to the product market and the nature and level of state involvement. MNCs have historically offshored due to labour cost advantages arising from workers in their home countries achieving improved wages and conditions through collective bargaining over time. This international division of labour suggests a one-way relationship and a perceived 'race to the bottom' scenario (Singh & Zammit, 2004). However, power-dependency relationships are not one-way. Existing views on MNC decisions often rely on questionable assumptions about national culture and decision-making processes, overlooking agency. Furthermore, the belief that MNCs can offshore without transactional or reputational costs is being challenged. Consumer awareness of labour rights abuses (among other ethical issues) has contributed to the growth of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and voluntary CSR reporting by MNCs (Parsa et al., 2023).

Taylor et al. (2015) argue that the conceptual framework provided in GPNs, integrating *labour process theory* (Cumbers et al., 2008), provides a superior conceptualisation compared to the framework offered in *global value chains* (Gereffi, 2005). We can further extend this with Hammer and Fishwick's (2020) argument, emphasising the localised context when applying both *labour process theory* and GPN theory to workplace locations in the Global South. In particular, local labour markets and regulatory regimes operate distinct systems that cannot be assumed to be replicable elsewhere. This is often manifested in the fragmentation of core workforces in developing countries, which often face challenges in meeting international labour standards (Thomsen et al., 2012). Within a GPN context, HR practices at the point of production will not mirror the more sophisticated HR systems found in leading MNC organisations. Therefore the viability of HR practices in smaller-scale producers at the end of the GPN will be influenced by structural factors. Management in Global South locations may therefore resort to paternalistic practices, while workforces are often fragmented along lines of gender and ethnic group (Hammer & Fishwick, 2020).

While local regulatory frameworks can influence traditional workplace norms and behaviours, avoidance may still be prevalent. Similarly, while GPNs connect local suppliers with MNCs through CSR frameworks and international labour standards, governments in the Global South are often tempted to weaken labour regulations to attract foreign direct investment (Howard-Hassmann, 2005). As a result, workers in countries like Sri Lanka are concentrated in *export processing zones* where labour rights are excluded from national standards on wages, freedom of association and health and safety regulations (Hancock et al., 2016). Paternalistic workplace practices sit within these global and national tensions.

### **HRM and paternalism**

The management of people in smaller organisations, particularly in the absence of formal HR departments or functions, has historically been associated with paternalism. In Anglo-Saxon societies, paternalism is historically ascribed to the dynamics of power relations between the aristocracy (landlords and peasants) in pre-capitalist or feudal times. Country landlords kept order among the rural population with a combination of coercion and patriarchal methods. The guild system of the Middle Ages, which supported filial relationships between masters and journeymen/apprentices, can also be described as paternalistic. Studies on the importance of paternalism (Aycan, 2006), both as a practice and an ideology, have focused on the traditions that may persist today. Emphasising historical and cultural context, Thompson's (1978) seminal work considers paternalism as 'the nature of power and of the State; about forms of property ownership; about ideology and culture; and ... too blunt to distinguish between modes of exploitation, between slave and free labour'. (p.135). Thompson confines the meaning of paternalism to institutional social relations in specific national contexts like Britain at a particular time. Paternalism in Britain emerged as a response to the hardships of the early Victorian era, aiming to restrict child and female labour and ensure minimum health and safety standards. For paternalism to remain a legitimate practice, it depended on norms of deference, which were later challenged by trade unions through joint workplace regulation *via* collective bargaining. In Victorian-era paternalism, employers provided housing, education, healthcare, savings programmes and social activities to employees, expecting loyalty, efficiency, and minimised conflicts in return (Gibbon et al., 2014).

In analysing British paternalism, Wray (1996) distinguishes three main manifestations. First, *traditional paternalism* appears as the direct

descendant of its earlier rural and Guild versions, where benevolence remains associated with authoritarianism (Martin & Fryer, 1973). Second, *welfare paternalism* consolidates traditional paternalism into larger scale organisational practices, incorporating specified benefits like long-term employment contracts and pension schemes into the employment relationship (McIvor & Wright, 2005). Third, *sophisticated paternalism* emerges from welfare paternalism as a contemporary response to post-World War II universal state provision of welfare benefits. Within employers paternalism emphasises employee *commitment* and *involvement* schemes and of consultative committee structures as opposed to collective bargaining. The community aspects of paternalism morph into contemporary awareness of CSR, employee welfare and charitable donations.

Most of the literature on Anglo-Saxon paternalism has been based on labour history retrospectives. The forms of paternalism that have survived in Britain, for example, have been hybrids, as per Wray's (1996) post-war 'sophisticated paternalism' above. Despite criticisms from the libertarian right and the radical left, interest in paternalistic approaches has been sustained by some in an era when collective bargaining and organised conflict have become increasingly marginalised (Ackers, 2001). Continuing in the contemporary context, it could be that what was previously identified as paternalism may well be replicated in various guises of HRM. Thus, Warren (1999) warns against the lack of pluralism in 'paternalistic HRM' while Fleming (2005) notes that workers may resist paternalism in seemingly modern forms due to its perceived infantilisation of workers.

### ***Paternalism, patriarchy and homophily in the workplace***

As above, Hammer and Fishwick (2020) identify that labour market segmentation, by gender and ethnicity, as being important to be aware of when studying workplace relations in Global South locations. With this in mind it is important to identify the relationship between paternalism and patriarchy historically and comparatively to identify gender divisions of labour within this system. Clearly, the two terms are etymologically linked. Yet not much direct attention has been paid to this attribute of paternalism. Indirectly, however, there are numerous cases and studies that point to very specific implications for paternalist management on the working lives of women. It might be assumed that, in the heyday of paternalism, 'Victorian values' would have railed against the idea of women working in factories. However, cases such as the Bryant and May 'match women' strike of 1888 contradict this notion. More recent studies of the lived experience of women in factory line-production (Glucksmann

& Cavendish, 1982; Pollert, 1981) identify paternalist managerial regimes in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s.

The issue of homophily—the propensity for workers to live, work and socialise with people of the same ethnic or cultural identity may have less direct equivalence in Victorian paternalism, but it does resonate with more recent variants. McDowell et al. (2012) remind us of the intersectional nature of the Grunwick dispute of 1976 and the Gate Gourmet dispute of 2005, as evidenced by their protagonists who were women of South Asian heritage. Arguably, these gendered paternalistic factory regimes have declined in Britain, and attention has shifted to offshore locations where production has been relocated.

### ***Sri Lanka and Buddhist paternalism***

For Sri Lankan companies embedded in GPNs with British connections, there are straightforward buyer-supplier power relationship issues, characterised by a colonial legacy and localised influences. Yet Sri Lankan paternalism has origins of its own which are rooted in Buddhism and/or Hinduism (Pellegrini et al., 2010). Like Western paternalism, it is based on dependency relationships linked to cultural norms. Jenkins and Blyton (2017) show how control tools such as time-indebtedness (payment in lieu) can act as regulative cultural-cognitive mechanisms that systematically ‘extract value’ from workers in the Indian garment sector. This resonates with the debates that, in a Sri Lankan context, a top-down managerial approach goes hand-in-hand with cultural-cognitive domination and the curtailment of female labour voices (Gunawardana, 2014).

Despite the presence of a number of religions, the dominant religion in Sri Lanka is Buddhism. Therefore, while Anglo-Saxon paternalism drew from duties associated with elements of ‘the Protestant work ethic’ (Weber, 1976), Buddhism, in contrast, is centred around *karma* and *reciprocation* whereby individuals are expected to make personal sacrifices for the collective good of society, as well as respecting hierarchy (Farh et al., 1997), in return for those same authorities reciprocating in the form of welfare.

Buddhism emphasises balance, self-contentment and avoidance of excessive commitments. In practice this can mean that people remain satisfied with what they have, rather than pursuing higher goals or social status. This parallels the Weberian notion that working excessively hard is a bi-product of the Protestant work ethic, which underpins the motivation of the early paternalists. The Karmic philosophical underpinning of Buddhism (the belief in previous and after lives) has the potential to have varying effects on employment relationships. Thus, treating an employee unfairly could be deterred if the employer is concerned about *bad karma*



returning this injustice in future lives. However, it may have the opposite effect. An employee who is treated unfairly could be convinced that their suffering is due to their own bad *karma* rather than any mistreatment from their employers. In Buddhism, the ‘noble truth of suffering’ is interpreted to mean that life is merely suffering and pain. Disassociation from getting what one wants is a manifestation of such suffering (Bercholz & Kohn, 1993). Such *karma* perceptions are prevalent in rural areas, where workers may be drawn into thinking that the unacceptable behaviour of managers (forcing overtime, not increasing salaries, verbal abuse, and harsh punishments for mistakes) is part of their lives and a bad merit transferred from a previous life (Keyes, 1983). This can even extend to educated Sri Lankan women in well-paid jobs (Fernando & Cohen, 2013).

Sometimes, managers who are influenced by their religious beliefs consider supporting workers’ welfare (Perry, 2012). This contrasts with Western paternalism, which seeks to help the urban proletariat to ‘find the inner light’ and ‘better’ themselves (Marques, 2012). In other words, *karma* and the ‘noble truth of suffering’ may be comparable to the Western notion of paternalism, depending on the attitudes of Sri Lankan workers in different workplace settings.

### ***The Sri Lankan national context***

During the period between the end of the 30-year civil war and the Covid-19 pandemic, Sri Lanka was considered a fast-growing middle-income country (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2017). It was the eighth fastest-growing economy in the world (Heenatigala, 2016) and a safe place to invest (Board of Investment (Sri Lanka), 2017). Despite these economic developments, social challenges remained prevalent with persisting income inequality. The Human Development Index stood at 77% (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2017), while the poverty head count index showed 4.1% (Department of Census and Statistics (Sri Lanka), 2016).

Sri Lanka’s legal labour standards are relatively high, partly because of the attention paid to ethical trading and partly as a legal legacy of British colonial rule (protective legislation for women and children, covering health and safety, and ensuring contract compliance). They are also the result of significant labour struggles in the colonial and post-colonial periods, from which advances were made for labour’s cause (Jayawardena, 1972).

The garment and tea sectors are the two key industrial export sectors, accounting for 43% and 11%, respectively (Sri Lanka Export Development Board, 2017). Garment suppliers are mostly situated in *export processing zones* in urban areas (Aggarwal, 2005), though even when situated outside these zones or in rural areas, regulatory compliance remains lax (Arunatilake, 2013).



Sri Lanka ratified the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention (C087) in 1995 and the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention (C098) in 1972 (ILO, 2018). The constitution grants the fundamental right for every person to join a trade union under the Industrial Disputes Act, 1950, while the Trade Union Ordinance permits any seven people to form a union (Department of Labour & Sri Lanka, 2018). The workforce mainly consists of women (over 80% of workers), while, in contrast, management roles are dominated by men (Lynch, 2007).

The Sri Lankan garment industry had modest beginnings in the 1960s, producing textiles for the local market. Export-oriented production of ready-made garments began in the 1970s and expanded rapidly after the liberalisation of the economy in 1977. Low labour costs drove well-established East Asian garment exporters to relocate to Sri Lanka. This encouraged domestic businesses to start their own garment enterprises to take advantage of foreign markets guaranteed by trade quotas from the US and EU (Fernandez-Stark et al., 2011). The sector found itself at the forefront of ethical trading initiatives in the 'high end' of garment production after a 5-year strategic plan developed by the Joint Apparel Association Forum in 2002. While a new initiative, labelled 'Garments without Guilt', started with an ethical emphasis (Gunawardana, 2010), management policies continued to remain rooted in traditional approaches (Lynch, 2007).

With regard to the tea sector, Sri Lanka is the world's fourth-largest producer (Sri Lanka Tea Board, 2018). Over 1 million people are involved in the sector, with about 500,000 people working in the estates (Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka, 2017). Tea production is highly labour-intensive. The workforce is disproportionately made up of Sri Lankans of Tamil heritage - a legacy of British colonialism when governors brought in migrant South Indian Tamil workers and settled them within the estates (Ahmed, 2014). Several generations later, the descendants (hill-country Tamils) are still ghettoised in the same accommodation with substandard living conditions (Alawattage & Wickramasinghe, 2009) and there is persistent evidence of ethnic tensions existing between Sinhalese and Tamil workers (Lee & Reade, 2015).

## Methodology

The research is based on a qualitative case study approach (Bryman, 2016). Its starting point was an examination of how Sri Lankan companies, which were suppliers to large British retail MNCs, would be influenced by those MNCs' expressed ethical sourcing commitments. The Sri Lankan case studies were selected on the basis that they were linked to

British MNCs through their GPNs. Furthermore, the MNCs concerned had all included CSR reporting on their adherence to enforcing labour standards in all their supply networks. Five Sri Lankan companies were selected. The principal investigator used available data sources to identify potential candidates and then gained access through gatekeepers in five organisations. The first five organisations contacted all met the criteria (links to British MNCs). At this stage the quota sample conditions were met and further organisations were not sought. Two were tea producers and three were garment producers. Two of the garment producers were within export processing zones.

Conducting fieldwork on the issue of managerial control systems in workplace environments in the Global South presents challenges of access as well as ethical dilemmas. Especially notable are issues of power asymmetry and trust when researchers are from Global North institutions. However, the principal investigator is of Sri Lankan heritage. This cultural and linguistic affinity was significant in gaining trust for accessing and conducting interviews. It also enabled initial contacts to be developed through purposive sampling and snowballed into a series of workplace-based case studies (Bryman, 2016).

Semi-structured interviews were used to allow flexibility in probing complex and sensitive aspects (Bryman, 2016), as well as capturing various aspects of the reality (and rhetoric) of the employment relationship. A total of 33 managers and workers were interviewed (Table 1). The interviews were concluded when saturation was reached (*ibid.*). Formal ethical approval was obtained at the outset from the institution of the lead author, who conducted all interviews. Some interviews took place at the workplace, while others (primarily with workers) were conducted outside the workplace. All interviews were conducted with informed consent, and apart from two managers, were recorded and transcribed. Detailed notes were taken. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, with some cases including a tour of the factory facilities.

**Table 1.** Supplying companies and interviewees.

Company				
Industry	Code	Region	Managers	Workers
Garment(G)	Garment1	Southern (export processing zone)	Human Resources Coordinator	4 Workers
			Production Executive	
			Production Manager	
Tea(T)	Garment2	Southern (EPZ)	Production Manager	3 Workers
	Garment3	Western (non-EPZ)	Assistant Production Manager	4 Workers
	Tea1	Central	Estate Manager	5 Workers
			Factory Manager	Union Leader
	Tea2	Southern	Estate Manager	2 Factory Supervisors
			Factory Manager	2 Factory Workers
			Factory Supervisor	2 Estate Workers

Questions focused on aspects of company welfare provision, relationships between employers and staff, and wages and conditions. Interviews were conducted in Sinhalese, translated by the principal investigator and transcribed into English. Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## Findings

Findings are presented across four themes. The themes were informed by the conceptual themes identified in the literature already presented, but redefined by the emergent issues raised in the interviews themselves. The emergent themes are: (1) the influence of GPN and the CSR stance of the British MNC on HR practices, (2) authoritarian dimensions of paternalism, (3) paternalism, patriarchy and homophily and (4) Buddhism, benevolence, and paternalism. For each theme, the findings are presented for the garment and tea sectors, respectively, and then discussed for each research question.

### *The influence of GPN and the CSR stance of the British MNC on HR practices*

The first level of enquiry is the relative influence of MNCs' CSR commitments on ethical labour standards and how these commitments influence the HR practices of garment and tea producers. In all cases, the British MNCs sourcing from these regions adhered to ethical standards, as evidenced by their voluntary reporting to the *Global Reporting Initiative*. However, for the Sri Lankan companies, the pressures imposed by their position in GPNs strain labour costs. Although some benefits were provided to workers and their families, specific labour rights conditions were not consistently evident. This inconsistency in MNC behaviour regarding GPN labour rights aligns with existing literature (Hammer & Fishwick, 2020; Jenkins & Blyton, 2017; Taylor et al., 2015).

Conversely, the buyer MNCs were active in funding community projects, partly as a CSR 'obligation' and partly as a PR mechanism aimed at addressing the concerns of consumers in their home countries. An example of such activity is the donation of free school uniforms to children in rural areas.

Most managers interviewed in the garment sector were aware of CSR. However, their perceptions did not cover the many facets of CSR but rather seemed to embrace the concept of working to improve the living conditions and social welfare of employees and the surrounding community:

'We do CSR, but not as a public relations tool. We do a lot to help local hospitals, schools and the education of children.' (Garment1: HR Coordinator/male)

The situation in the tea sector was different. One company (Tea1) had its own CSR policy while the other (Tea2) had neither a policy of its own nor adopted the MNC buyer company's policy. In both cases, managers believed that by serving the local community, they were also serving the workers and their families, as workers either resided within the estates or lived in nearby villages:

We have forest protection programmes near our tea estate and we provide free clinics for the villagers. The workers and their families benefit from these initiatives. (Tea2: Estate Manager/male/Sinhalese).

### *Authoritarian dimensions of paternalism*

In the garment factories opposition to unions and collective bargaining activities was evident, as is consistent with a unitarist ideology associated with paternalism. Unions were not recognised in any of the garment factories. Managers explained that meeting the strict lead times, prices and quality requirements set by MNC buyers came at the expense of not adhering to the ILO principle of freedom of association. Under this classically unitarist argument, managers view union activities as 'unnecessary' and 'disruptive' to productivity and instead promoted 'employee councils' as a means of resolving disputes between workers and managers. Indeed, the promotion of employee councils as an alternative to freedom of association through unions is a central policy of the Sri Lankan government through the BoI. Thus:

We have a Joint Council Committee and they meet once a month and issues are highlighted. We have elections to select committee members; ... one member for each three machine lines, one member for each division. (Garment1: HR Coordinator/male).

We do not allow trade unions because we need to keep the disruptions to the production processes at a minimum level ... to complete orders in time. The government has prohibited trade unions in the export processing zones. We have employee councils and are happy to discuss with them any issues. (Garment3: Assistant Production Manager/male).

However, the workers interviewed were not comfortable raising issues with the employee councils, as they perceived them as a means of declaring themselves 'troublemakers'. When asked about their willingness to communicate disputes with managers through an employee council, some workers stated that they remained silent because they feared losing their livelihood. (Garment1, worker/female).

The management prerogative was reinforced by a general lack of formal procedure. All the workers interviewed stated that they knew who to contact if they were treated unfairly with most of them mentioning that they would inform a line manager or HR manager.

In the tea sector, the relationships were more complex. Working conditions were precarious in the absence of inspection, supervision or audits from MNC buyers. Numerous health and safety issues emerged and both local and central authorities were ineffective in enforcing standard labour practices in the absence of intervention from MNCs. Interestingly, there was a significant union presence within the estates, often opposed by plantation owners and politically associated with the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC). This union had a better track record of improving wages and conditions, workers felt, than the MNCs' CSR activities.

Within Tea1, there was a 98% union density. Managers viewed this as having an adverse impact on productivity and were reluctant to discuss their reasons. The estate manager in Tea1 explained that they were always tied up in discussing/negotiating with the government and the leader of CWC over pay issues. The lead union representative, fluent in both Sinhalese and Tamil, acted as an intermediary between workers and managers. This was beneficial as most managers were Sinhalese, while almost all workers were Tamils. In contrast, Tea2 opposed unions. This may be explained by the fact that the CWC has a predominantly Tamil membership, whereas the workers of Tea2 were mainly Sinhalese originating from nearby villages. Once again, managers were reluctant to discuss why unions were not allowed, and the workers were either unaware of them or hesitant to acknowledge them. For workers at Tea1, labour rights remained a more prominent concern:

The government provide some facilities like doctors, IT centres and some household equipment. They never listen to our demands to increase salary. We do strikes and slow down work [work-to-rule] but they don't listen. (Tea1: worker, female/Tamil).

### *Paternalism, patriarchy and homophily*

As discussed above, paternalism has been associated with both patriarchy and, more recently, with homophily. In the garment factory case studies, the paternalism observed was gendered in ways not dissimilar to factory regimes observed in British studies (Glucksmann & Cavendish, 1982; McDowell et al., 2012; Pollert, 1981). In the introductory remarks on the origins of nineteenth-century British paternalism, it was noted that the continuation of rural traditions of patriarchy and deference to the industrial age was a central feature. In Sri Lanka, gender segregation seems to be more significant than class or occupation-based segregation; however, it shares similarities with the outcomes found in an industrialising society.

In the garment sector, most of the workers are young females while the management comprises young to middle-aged men. Most female workers are from rural areas and may be missing the close family and

community structures they were brought up with. In this context, the company culture reflects broader social attitudes in Sri Lankan society, where young women are assured that they are being looked after, thus encouraging them to reciprocate by acquiescence, fulfilling workloads without complaint, and avoiding being a trouble-maker. The paternalistic management style is characterised by a sense of authoritarianism and moral leadership but with outward kindness to workers, particularly related to welfare. However, workers often decline to answer questions about unfair treatment. This indicates a sense of fear among mainly female workers about reporting any issues, as doing so was thought to result in losing their jobs because they would be regarded as ‘trouble-maker females’ who were engaged in inappropriate behaviour (Garment1: worker, female).

The paternalism observed in the tea plantations was different. This may be explained by the fact that most of the estate workers on the tea plantations were older, married females with children who travel or walk daily to work (as observed in Tea2). This contrasts with the young, unmarried garment workers who stay away from their families for work, but also because the presence and strength of trade unions in these case studies play a significant role in shaping the dynamics of paternalism.

At the first tea estate (Tea1), in line with Alawattage and Wickramasinghe (2009), ethnic tensions between Tamil workers and Sinhalese managers contributed to negative and coercive paternalism. This disruption contrasts with what some consider as an important prerequisite for workplace harmony in Sri Lanka: homophily (Lee & Reade, 2015). The Indian workers who live within the estates relied heavily on the company for their existence, including accommodation, livelihood and social and community aspects. The large-scale plantation companies are obliged to provide facilities, often minimal, for them as a duty, but use them as a coercive control mechanism through hierarchical and colonial-legacy control rituals. Trade union agitation and the tendency to marginalise plantation Tamils, created a hostile environment between employees and employers, leaving little social or economic space for more harmonious paternalistic practices.

### ***Buddhism, benevolence and paternalism***

Paternalism in Sri Lanka is closely marked by its link to aspects of religious humanitarianism, particularly Buddhism, which is the commonly shared religion in all the companies investigated except in Tea1, where the Indian Tamil workers are Hindus. It is evident that Buddhist thinking has contributed to the high work ethics observed, with no ‘unnecessary’ rest periods or absenteeism. People are acclimatised to thinking that such behaviour is akin to theft, a serious misconduct according to

Buddhism. Buddhist thinking influences managers and workers in different ways, either positively or negatively.

Buddhists believe in merit transfer based on Karmic philosophy, which encapsulates the idea of 'do good, receive good; do evil, receive evil' (Keyes, 1983, p. 263). The belief in merit transfer tends to shape the mindset and value system of workers. This led many to accept personal and professional difficulties as a result of merits transferred from previous lives, rather than associating them with the current circumstances within their environments or social unfairness and injustices. Blaming such issues on *karma* and religious fatalism, rather than taking collective action against employers, is more prevalent among rurally-based Sri Lankans due to lower levels of formal education.

At the time of the study, poverty levels and lack of job opportunities were high in rural areas. The fear of unemployment, a classic economic factor suppressing dissent, is magnified where jobs are also linked to welfare, shifting the power-dependency relationship even more markedly in favour of employers.

The influence of religion could also be explained in a positive light. As most managers are Buddhists, they also believe in *karma*, although perhaps to a lesser extent due to their high education levels and fortunate lives. Giving is deemed a noble action that will result in future rewards. This type of paternalistic benevolence contrasts with the Victorian Protestant Christian motivation, where the concept of mutual benefit and the improvement of the poor is prevalent, as well as the notion (Weber, 1976) of 'predestination' being an early motivation in 'the spirit of capitalism'.

Most employers in the two sectors provided a range of welfare benefits, including sick pay, help with medical bills, funeral costs and education fees. This appeared to be a reflection of the company-based welfare regime within Sri Lanka rather than any specific company trait. However, there was evidence of other paternalistic practices being employed, which were partly a response to pressures from CSR initiatives originated by MNCs and partly autonomously initiated and inspired by Buddhist humanitarianism.

Companies had different schemes to support their workers and their families in illness, death, celebrations and education. For instance, one company organised '...annual trips and sport days for workers and their families and [had] funds to help them financially when there is a death in the family' (Garment1: HR coordinator/male). Another company had 'New Year festival and religious events, ...[and gave] loans for weddings and [provided] money for funerals.' (Garment2: worker/female).

At the tea company Teal, humanitarian projects existed and were driven by a combination of self-determined humanitarian beliefs and



partly, inspired by their own CSR policies though that policy seemed strongly influenced by those of the buyer MNC. Senior managers' perception of CSR included helping the local community and environment through various projects:

We fund projects to help the community, elder clubs, youth clubs and projects for environmental development. (Tea1: manager, male/Sinhalese).

A similar finding was noted in the garment producers where managers agreed that religious and cultural motivations (as advocated in Buddhism) provided the core grounding to engage in humanitarian activities:

The labourers are quite dependent on the company ... they expect our help and sympathy when they have problems. We always sympathise and help, even give them money, without expecting a payback. (Garment2: manager/male).

## Concluding discussion

This article examines the attributes of Sri Lankan HR practices for companies within export-oriented sectors with ties to GPNs (RQ1) and how HR practices in export-oriented companies are influenced by local culturally specific influences such as religion (RQ2). The questions are answered by conducting case studies of five workplaces in the two dominant export industries in Sri Lanka: the tea and garment sectors. The findings are presented across four emergent themes and will now be summarised before relating back to the two research questions.

For the first theme (the MNCs' influence through their CSR commitments), the impact of MNCs on labour practices was non-existent. The emphasis on labour cost and responsiveness to customer demand outweighed the commitment to providing rights such as free collective bargaining with independent unions. Regarding the second theme (authoritarian paternalism), workplace regimes appeared harsh, and unions were not recognised: outright opposition was observed in garment manufacturers, while tea producers' reactions were mixed with only one case showing reluctant acceptance. As forms of paternalism, these scenarios are comparable to 'classic conflict' (the majority) and 'standard modern' (the reluctant tea company) formulations observed in British paternalism (Fox, 1974).

In examining the third theme (patriarchy and homophily), differences were observed between paternalistic practices in garment factories and tea plantations. In the garment sector, paternalism was marked by a patriarchal gender division of labour, while in the tea sector the divisions were based on religious, cultural and ethnic lines. Finally, the importance of Buddhism as a key mobilising influence on the attitudes and behaviour of managers (the fourth theme) emerges as a key attribute of Sri Lankan

paternalism. Its importance in harnessing the consent of workers is as significant as the importance of Protestant philanthropic paternalism in Victorian Britain.

Regarding the links back to RQ1, it is evident that the influence of the British MNC, though the logic of its positioning in the GPN, influences HR practices at the Sri Lankan tea and garment producers negatively, in that the source of competitive advantage is labour cost. Arguably, a greater degree of autonomy exists in the tea sector, given that the specific branding of 'Ceylon tea' is not directly substitutable by tea from other locations. The interventions aimed at offsetting these negative HR outcomes through the claimed CSR interventions did not materialise. Adherence to 'freedom of association' (union recognition) would be a core value here. While some reported benefits from CSR were reported, these were predominantly community-related projects and not related to the workforce directly. They could also be identified as being paternalistic in nature, which links to RQ2.

Regarding RQ2, it is evident that the approach to HR and wider management control employed in all case studies was a form of paternalism. This paternalism was significantly influenced by Sri Lankan cultural features and particularly by Buddhism. This approach bore similarities to the paternalistic practices observed in Britain from Victorian-era factories through to the 1970s.

A number of features in the case studies support the comparison to British paternalism. These include: (a) claims to religious humanitarianism as inspiration, (b) the provision of certain welfare measures, (c) a broadly unitarist ideology regarding worker agency, and (d) the necessity of worker acquiescence for the system to function. In all case studies, elements of coercion and consent were observed in the paternalism observed. Paternalism in Sri Lanka consists of authoritarianism, unitarism in decision-making, welfare and ethical consideration based on the assumption of shared cultural values. This is specifically linked to merit transfer as part of their belief in karma. However, there were variations within this framework.

A notable outlier was the tea-picking company T1, where many paternalistic traits were present, but where a more antagonistic relationship between management and workers was evident. This was characterised by the presence of a union, which is similar to a 'classic conflict' union-management relationship observed within British paternalism (Fox, 1974; Cullinane & Dundon, 2014).

This article contributes to the understanding of the degree of autonomy that managers possess in suppliers located in the Global South within GPNs, where peak organisations claim stewardship of high CSR standards. It is well-known that universal best practice HR cannot be

simply transferred to subsidiaries of suppliers across countries under the claim of objective superiority (Brewster, 2012). Furthermore, it is also debateable whether a specific approach to HRM can be imposed by powerful MNCs through supply chains (Cooke et al., 2017).

It is arguable whether the power of MNCs over local companies is purely economic, based on labour costs, or whether it is tempered by more direct prescriptive demands made in the name of regulatory compliance or MNCs' CSR obligations. In either case, the labour process and employment relationships within suppliers are at least partly explained by their involvement in such networks. Thus national, sectoral, and especially internal dynamics and circumstances of suppliers are frequently neglected.

By placing emphasis on the paternalistic management style at the company level in export-oriented Sri Lankan companies, this study addresses this neglected issue. It directly responds to Hammer and Fishwick's (2020) call for the analysis of local labour practices to consider aspects such as localised labour markets, national regulatory regimes, and the fragmentation of core workforces. In this case, a form of paternalism is identified as the basis of managerial styles in the five case-studies analysed. Sri Lankan paternalism appears outwardly benevolent but is tempered by unitarist attitudes to unions and patriarchal divisions of labour. In one case, however, the ability to mobilise common cultural norms to create a unitarist sense of 'common purpose' was disrupted by the ethnic division of labour. This led to lower levels of mutual trust and unionisation and allowed for some degree of labour voice.

It might be argued that adopting the label of 'paternalism' and drawing parallels to the paternalism of Victorian Britain could be viewed as ethnocentric. However, it is not claimed here that the Sri Lankan paternalism observed in this study is based on emulation. Rather, what is proposed is that the managerial styles observed in the Sri Lankan case studies exhibit strong similarities to the aforementioned Western paternalism, and these similarities arise from specific circumstances. Crucially, it is the specific circumstances under which these similarities emerge that merit the comparison. The culturally specific value system that informs managerial behaviour in Sri Lanka is defined by Buddhist humanitarianism. In the absence of statutory welfare provisions, many welfare functions are associated with employment. This compares to equivalent orientations of philanthocapitalism, such as the Quaker approach in Britain prior to the welfare state. Additionally, religious humanitarianism informs the more unitarist orientations of managerial prerogative, as manifested in the belief in karma as a motivating force. Karma explains both a managerial lack of empathy for disadvantage and, in some cases, an acceptance of such conditions by workers.

What interventions could be made to enhance worker conditions within GPN regimes, while respecting cultural and religious traditions in specific regions? It appears that CSR interventions alone are ineffective when it comes to worker protections. This is evidenced in other Sri Lankan cases, where such interference has resulted in negative consequences (Hewamanne, 2020). In these situations, engaging with a relevant Global Union Federation and establishing cross-national sectoral framework agreements, with the support of MNC and local union involvement, could offer better protection (Cotton, 2013). Another intervention could be the engagement and recognition of enhancing worker autonomy and rights through ‘marginalised stakeholders’ (Chowdhury et al., 2024). In Chowdhury’s study, Bangladeshi women in garment factories stood up to challenge the patriarchal attitudes of managers and were rewarded for their efforts. One intervention in this area highlights the potential benefits of recognising and empowering workers from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds within GPNs, particularly in addressing HR challenges such as talent management (Civera et al., 2023).

## Note

1. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal8>.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Data availability statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available.

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