

Mark Balmforth

*Tobacco Rāṇi: Commodity, Caste, and Slavery in British Colonial Jaffna*

March 5, 2021. AILS “New Research in Sri Lankan History” seminar

From sugarcane in Guyana to indigo in Bengal, single commodities have long been known to transform social worlds. King Cotton, for instance, became far more than a commercial success in the antebellum southern United States: it was a bellicose ideology used to demonstrate the region’s economic strength and ability to win a war with the North. If cotton was king in Mississippi—to paraphrase Sinnappah Arasaratnam—tobacco was queen in Jaffna. Between 1650 and 1820, vast amounts of tobacco from Ceylon’s Jaffna Peninsula traversed the Indian Ocean, en route to the Raja of Travancore on the Malabar coast, markets along the Coromandel, and east to Java. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was common for Jaffna’s tobacco-led exports to exceed the peninsula’s imports, leading to a balance of trade that accumulated wealth in the hands of Veḷḷāḷar planters and Ciṭṭi brokers. Yet Jaffna’s tobacco wealth came at a steep price: by 1824, an estimated twelve percent of the area’s population was enslaved, a total which included five out of every six people enslaved on the island. Building on recent scholarship that explores Ceylon’s place in Indian Ocean World slavery, this essay describes some of the social contours of Jaffna’s distinctive tobacco plantation culture, what I term Tobacco Rāṇi. Focusing on the first decades of the nineteenth century, I consider the available evidence linking tobacco to caste transformations that consolidated social, political, and economic power in the hands of some while expanding the breadth of unfree labor. Drawing on Dutch and British archival sources, including a British slave registry, this essay argues that the story of Tobacco Rāṇi raises questions about the social, political, and economic dependence of Jaffna society upon its enslaved population in the decades preceding the 1844 abolition of slavery in Ceylon.