# India

**Sarah Besky,** ***The Darjeeling Distinction: Labor and Justice on Fair-Trade Tea Plantations in India***

Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2013. 233 pages. Hardcover, $85.00; paperback, $29.95; eBook, $29.95. ISBN: 9780520277380 (hardcover); 9780520277397 (paperback); 9780520957602 (eBook).

**Debarati Sen,** ***Everyday Sustainability, Gender Justice and Fair Trade Tea in Darjeeling***

Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017. 251 pages. Hardcover, $85.00; paperback, $21.95; eBook, $13.17. ISBN: 9781438467139 (hardcover); 9781438467146 (paperback); 9781438467153 (eBook).

If the Indian tea industry—among the world's largest producers of the processed and dried leaves that yield this immensely popular beverage—is imagined as a pyramid with plantation and packing-company owners at its apex, then the broad base on which it rests consists of the scores of thousands of agricultural workers who hand pluck the flushes of "two leaves and a bud" that, for up to ten months every year, sprout from the evergreen bushes of two varieties of *Camellia*. In India, these workers are overwhelmingly women—for the industry fetishizes the special skill of women's "nimble" and "delicate" fingers in plucking tea and boasts of being the country's single largest employer of female labor—and they are also among India's poorest-paid agricultural workers, earning the equivalent of roughly one US dollar for a full day of arduous toil in often steep and (during the monsoon) slippery terrain. That women tea-pluckers' compensation falls below the minimum wage mandated for agricultural workers in most of the country reflects colonial growers' customary provision, on their remote

worksites, of tangible "facilities" (including housing, firewood, water, food rations, and sometimes schools and medical clinics, though the accessibility and quality of these vary). These benefits were later formalized by India's Plantations Labour Act (PLA) of 1951, and it is on the assumption of their in-kind value that a tea plucker's wage is allowed to remain unusually low.

The irony that such low-paid workers, in the "hill station" of Darjeeling in West Bengal, are responsible for cultivating and harvesting one of the world's most prized and expensive teas—granted "Geographical Indication" (GI) status in 1999 by the World Trade Organization (à la Champagne or Roquefort), and also certified, on numerous estates, by several international "fair trade" and "organic" regulatory bodies—is central to two recent ethnographic studies that focus on the working lives, frustrations, and aspirations of women tea pluckers. Sarah Besky's and Debarati Sen's monographs—both based on long-term fieldwork done during roughly the same period, albeit at different sites in and around the "eighty-seven gardens" officially recognized as producing Darjeeling tea—show substantial overlap in detailing the problems that plantation women and their families face (such as poverty, poor living conditions, gender discrimination, and male unemployment) but also complement one another in certain areas of focus. They offer too some surprisingly divergent conclusions, particularly regarding the potential benefits of fair trade and organic certification for improving women's lives, though anyone who assumes that paying extra money for tea with these labels will result in direct benefit to pluckers is unlikely to find either book reassuring.

Besky's study, based on thirty-one months of fieldwork conducted between 2006 and 2012, is both the more comprehensive and readable of the two; indeed, some of Sen's material may make little sense to readers not already familiar with the geography and history of the Darjeeling region, and the recruitment and ethnographic composition of its agricultural workforce, to each of which Besky devotes lucid chapters early in her study. A further key background for both books is provided by Besky's analysis in chapter 5 of the complex and changing politics of the decades-old demand for "Gorkhaland"—a separate state for Nepali-speakers within India. Besky's focus is on the large tracts of land given, since the mid-nineteenth century, on long-term lease to wealthy entrepreneurs for the cultivation of *Camellia sinensis.* Euphemistically labeled "gardens" or (more accurately) "estates" by the British, and now sometimes reimagined by fair-trade advocates as "large farms" (with a more pastoral and family-run connotation), they are, in Besky's determined terminology, irreducibly "plantations," characterized by massive monoculture and resultant environmental fragility, mostly absentee ownership, and a settled and "semibonded" labor force, "the paradigmatic space of colonial and postcolonial capitalist agricultural production" (30). These tracts are a relic of the colonial legacy and now constitute what she calls "imperial ruins" (53) due to deteriorating conditions since the departure of the British and the assumption of management by Bengali and Marwari landlords based in Kolkata, who often do not make the capital investments needed to maintain their facilities or even to replace aging, low-yielding tea bushes. The result is an environmental and human crisis, especially for the women who are both economically and emotionally tied to the land and its monocrop through their own nostalgic conception, emphasized by Besky throughout her study, of a "tripartite moral economy" (32–34): an era of reciprocal care between foreign owners, Gorkha workers, and the landscape and its tea bushes, which the women approvingly recall as *iṇḍusṭrī* (industry), as opposed to the

self-interested and exploitative practices of latter-day Indian capitalists, which they term *bisnis* (business). The current revival of overseas demand for Darjeeling tea (following several dark decades of depressed markets, plantation closures, and communist-backed violence against management) has not resolved, according to Besky, the underlying crisis of the inherited production system, nor can it be remedied by any of the three "solutions" advanced in recent decades, to each of which she devotes a probing chapter: the securing of GI status for the tea, the introduction of fair trade and organic certification, and the aspiration of tea workers for a Gorkha-dominated state, separate from West Bengal.

Both the GI and fair trade / organic designations help increase the price that consumers are willing to pay for Darjeeling tea by fostering, according to Besky, a "third world agrarian imaginary" (29–32), which pictures "traditional" women, steeped in local lore and knowledge, expertly harvesting choice leaves in harmony with both a "natural" mountain landscape and benign planter-owners committed to environmental stewardship. In practice, however (and apart from the fallacy of nearly every element in the picture), GI status, besides formally designating this tea as the "intellectual property" of the central government's Tea Board, has further burdened plantation women. This is because they now face the task (in addition to six-day work weeks and heavy domestic labor in often poorly maintained company housing) of regularly performing a romanticized role. The audience is both "heritage"-seeking "tea-tourists" staying in owners' bungalows converted into lavish boutique hotels (with the effect, as one village activist told Besky, of "turning the plantation into a zoo") and visiting fair trade certifiers (111). The latter, applying a model developed for small-farmer coffee cooperatives in Central America, naively suppose that "consumer choice" and the "free market" can serve plantation workers better than government regulation, unions, or NGOs, all of which they undermine. Their certification (for which owners pay a substantial price) helps generate a "fair-trade dividend" that is supposed to directly benefit workers. Instead, as Besky shows, it is often lost, amid rhetoric about local "empowerment" and "entrepreneurship," to the hierarchical structure of the plantation—siphoned off by owners or shared with a few workers whom they favor. Further, through a loophole in the certification agreement, as much as half of it may be used to cover the cost of the basic facilities that owners were already mandated to provide by the PLA—saving owners money and resulting in zero gain for workers. And though tea workers continue to hope for a Gorkha state—which would address their marginalization within India as Nepali-speakers, despite often having lived as Indian citizens for generations, and would secure revenue from land rental for a locally based government—Besky's analysis of two major cycles of often-violent agitation finds little willingness on the part of Gorkha politicians to challenge the plantation system, on which depend both the district's economy and its distinct identity.

Debarati Sen's many years of intermittent fieldwork (mainly from 2004 to 2011) were divided between two kinds of sites: several fair-trade and organic-certified plantations within Darjeeling's official GI zone and a single peripheral cooperative made up of smallholder farmers, some of whom were women, who grew and sold both tea and other products through what Sen (rather too often) describes as "situated gendered projects of value" (12ff.). The key issues on the plantations that Sen highlights through sometimes engaging (but also sometimes confusing) translations of interviews largely correspond to those presented by Besky, though Sen gives more atten-

tion to problematic gender relations and to chronic Gorkha male unemployment, with its resultant substance abuse, depression, and out-migration. She also offers, in chapter 4, a detailed and often biting portrayal of fair-trade-inspired "voluntourism," in which idealistic Western vacationers pay to experience life in a "tea garden," while supposedly doing constructive work to benefit its denizens. As with the higher-end "heritage" tourism noted by Besky, such brief junkets by visitors who, though well intentioned, possess no local language skills or knowledge of regional history and culture, end up imposing a new and particularly ironic burden on tea workers.

Where Sen's findings diverge significantly from Besky's is in her other fieldsite (the subject of chapter 6 and of portions of chapters 7 and 8): a pseudonymously identified but fair-trade certified cooperative made up of small tea growers who occupy land parcels on an abandoned plantation and who pride themselves on producing ostensibly "organic" tea leaves. Among the women farmers in this co-op, Sen finds better morale, a sense of empowerment (as well as a tendency to morally disparage their counterparts who work for wages on nearby plantations), entrepreneurial initiative, and a willingness to take on (albeit not always successfully) the Gorkha men who manage the cooperative in a bid for some of the resources provided by the fair-trade dividend. Her findings thus support the idea that coffee-grower-style cooperatives *can* offer increased benefits to tea pluckers through fair trade certification, but this argument seems constrained by the anomalous nature of the co-op and by the fact that, lacking a "factory," its farmer-shareholders must send their leaves for processing to one of the existing plantations, thus reaffirming the systemic domination of the latter and also making it impossible for consumers to know whether a given purchase will actually benefit co-op members.

Stylistically, Sen's book often meanders into redundancy, is burdened by tiresomely repeated theoretical jargon, and is peppered with parenthetical citations that mostly omit page references. The author introduces many local-language terms without adequately defining or explaining them for non-specialist readers (for example, she gives great importance to informal self-help groups called *ghumāuri*, but even after reading an entire chapter about them, pages 105–25, I remain unsure of what they are and how they help plantation women), and there are numerous distracting errors of grammar, spelling, usage, and punctuation. This manuscript would have benefited greatly from competent copyediting, though I am inclined to fault the publisher (rather than a first-time author) for its apparently not having gotten it.

Taken together, Besky's and Sen's monographs provide rich ethnographic documentation and trenchant theoretical analysis of the lives of women tea workers, greatly expanding on the earlier work of Piya Chatterjee, who studied pluckers in the Dooars region of north Bengal, who harvest a different variety of tea and whose lives, though similarly constrained, reflect a different labor history. Each of these newer books significantly contributes to anthropological literature on India and should also be of interest to scholars of geography, women's studies, agriculture and environment, and food systems.

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