

Changing Agricultural Practice, Regimes of Value, and Visions of Justice
in Darjeeling Tea Production

By

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CHANGING AGRICULTURAL PRACTICE, REGIMES OF VALUES, AND VISIONS OF JUSTICE
IN DARJEELING TEA PRODUCTION

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Under the supervision of Professor Kirin Narayan

at the University of Wisconsin-Madison

Most studies of ethical trade have tended to analyze policies, such as fair trade certification, and their effects on farmers. This dissertation uses an ethnographic study of fair trade tea plantations in Darjeeling, India to turn attention not to farmers, but to farm workers. Working from the perspective of the laborers who, paradoxically, produce “ethically sourced” commodities in the context of industrial agriculture, this dissertation the material and discursive processes by which farm workers conceive of justice and value in ways that encompass environmental, gendered, historical, ethnic, and economic concerns. The dissertation focuses on Nepali-speaking tea workers, who found themselves involved in multiple and sometimes conflicting struggles to distinguish, protect, and enhance the well being of the region, its signature commodity, and its people. These included fair trade certification and WTO-underwritten Geographical Indication (GI) laws. They also included labor unionization and a regional separatist movement for a Nepali-dominated state of Gorkhaland.

Fair trade and GI were largely irrelevant to workers; instead, workers viewed these schemes as part of a shift from *industri* (“industry”) to *bisnis* (“business”), a

realignment of tea production and West Bengal and national politics along neoliberal lines. Planters, however, saw fair trade and GI as strategies for reaching wider, more lucrative markets.

Archival research, participant-observation, content analysis of tea marketing materials, and oral history show how laborers' conceptions of justice, value, and agricultural practice ran counter to the fair trade and GI models embraced by plantation owners, management, and the Indian state. Instead of accepting fair trade "empowerment" schemes like the dispersal of loans for livestock or stores, or GI's promises of renewed prosperity through ecological purification, workers talked about a more holistic and politically relevant concept, "justice," in discussions of plantation reform. "Justice" was only achievable through local control over Darjeeling and the political autonomy of Nepalis from the state of West Bengal. Land tenure reform, specifically the formation of a separate Indian state of Gorkhaland, was a precondition for any meaningful change on Darjeeling tea plantations.

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Notes on Transliteration and Use of Pseudonyms

I have changed almost all tea plantation names as well as the names of workers and other interlocutors. The few notable exceptions are well-known Darjeeling politicians and one plantation owner, as I quote extensively from press about him and marketing materials produced by him.

All translations in text from Nepali unless otherwise indicated. In transcribing words, I consulted Ruth Laila Schmidt's (2005) *A Practical Dictionary of Modern Nepali* (available online at: <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/schmidt/>). In cases where Nepali words are commonly used in English (e.g. bazaar, Nepali), they are not italicized. English words used in Nepali appear in italics and are phonetically written out (e.g. "*industri*" for "industry").

Other words are translated and transliterated from Hindi and Bengali and are noted in the text.

MAPS OF RESEARCH AREA

Figure 0.1: Map of India. West Bengal is shown in red and the Darjeeling District is circled.
[Image credit: unknown; accessed via Google Images, April 22, 2012]



Figure 0.2: Map of the Darjeeling District.
 [Image credit: www.calcuttaweb.com]

Figure 0.3: Enlarged Map of Darjeeling Tea Gardens (in green).
[Image credit: Darjeeling Tea Association]

TIMELINE OF SIGNIFICANT EVENTS

1768-1769	Consolidation of the Kingdom of Nepal under Prithivi Narayan Shah, from the House of Gorkha
1814-1816	Indo-Nepalese wars lead to the British Annex of Darjeeling; Britain cedes Darjeeling to Kingdom of Sikkim in exchange for rights to cross Sikkimese land into Tibet
1815	Treaty of Sugauli – British annexed present day Darjeeling and all territory east of the Mechi River
1815	British begin recruiting Nepalis into British army
1817	Treaty of Titalia - British annexed much of the land Nepal controlled to the west
1820s	Nepal's Rana rulers encourage high-caste Hindus to settle on tribal land in eastern Nepal
1823	Tea discovered growing wild in the jungles of Assam
1834	Formation of the Tea Committee of India
1830s	Development of Assam and Kangra tea industries
1835	Lt. General Lloyd arranges re-annexation of Darjeeling from the Rajah of Sikkim; hill station founded
1839- 1842 & 1856-1860	Opium Wars; East India Company loses trade monopoly
1835-1845	10,000 Nepalis migrate to Darjeeling to build hill station infrastructure and clear forests
1839	Punkabari Road (connecting Darjeeling to the plains) completed
1841	Archibald Campbell plants the first Chinese tea plants in Darjeeling
1849-1850	Campbell and Hooker "held captive" by Sikkimese Rajah
1850	Annexation of southern Sikkim
1850	Founding of the Darjeeling municipality
1856	Founding of Aaloobari, the first Darjeeling Tea Plantation
1857	Gurkha soldiers deployed to suppress Sepoy Rebellion
1859	First Wasteland Rules pertaining to Darjeeling (with revisions in 1864, 1882, and 1898)
1864	Anglo-Bhutanese War
1865	British annex Kalimpong and the Dooars from Bhutan, forming the present-day Darjeeling district
1866	39 tea plantations operating in Darjeeling
1870	56 tea plantations operating in Darjeeling
1874	111 tea plantations operating in Darjeeling
1873	Tea machinery introduced in Darjeeling and across India
1874	Darjeeling designated as a "Scheduled District" (changed from "Non-Regulated Area")

1878	Darjeeling Himalayan Railway Completed
1885	Indian Tea Association Founded
1908	Darjeeling Planters' Association Founded
1910	Darjeeling incorporated into the Province of Bengal
1919	Darjeeling is designated as a "Backward Tract."
1919	Gurkha soldiers deployed to suppress Jallianwala Bagh uprising
1920	Hillmen's Association calls for separation of Darjeeling from Bengal
1924	Nepali Sahitya Samellan formed in Darjeeling
1935	Darjeeling is designated as a "Partially Excluded Area" (until 1947).
1942	Gurkha soldiers deployed against the Quit India Movement
1943	All Bhartiya Gorkha League (ABGL) formed and Communist Party of India established base in Darjeeling
1945	First Tea Garden Workers' Union formed (CPI)
1946	Maila Baaje (Communist Party of India) elected to Legislative Assembly of Bengal
1947	Indian Independence
1947	Indian Tea Association increases wages, benefits, and housing subsidies in Darjeeling
1950	Peace and Friendship Treaty (Nepal and India)
1951	Plantations Labour Act
1955	Strike at Margaret's Hope Tea Estate, followed by massacre
1961	Nepali becomes an "official language" of the Darjeeling district
1971	Plantations Labour Act amended (to include Labor Welfare Officers)
1973	Federal Exchange Regulation Act (FERA) transfers ownership of plantations from British to Indian
1977	Nepali becomes a "scheduled language" in India
1980-84	Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) joins with Pranta Parishad to call for separate statehood
1984	GNLF breaks with Pranta Parishad
1986-88	First Gorkhaland agitation
1987	Central Reserve Police dispatched to put down Gorkhaland agitation
1988	DGHC formed
1988	First Darjeeling plantation certified organic
1990	Madan Tamang disbands Pranta Parishad and rejoins ABGL
1990s	Darjeeling plantations certified as fair trade
1999	Darjeeling becomes India's first Geographical Indication (GI)
2007	Gorkha Janmukti Morcha formed by Bimal Gurung
2007	Prashant Tamang wins Indian Idol
2007-	Second Gorkhaland agitation (arguably fizzled in 2011)
2010	Madan Tamang assassination
2012	Fair Trade USA breaks off from Fair Trade International

Introduction: *Agro-food Studies, Land Tenure, and Plantation Ethnography*

The mountainous tea-growing region of Darjeeling, in the northern part of the state of West Bengal in India, is bisected by a road between Siliguri and Darjeeling town, which sits on the highest ridge in the area. At Siliguri, the railroad from Kolkata and the Bengal plains gives way to a narrow-gauge, coal-fired locomotive known locally as the “Toy Train,” which carries tourists up the ridge on a smoky six-hour journey to Darjeeling town. The journey from Siliguri to Darjeeling town takes just three to four hours by car, traversing through foggy forests and tea plantations that fall off the road and plummet into the valleys below. Cars zig and zag back and forth up the mountain, weaving in and out of the path of the Toy Train, and passing a few villages precariously clinging to the sheer hillsides. Dense *duppi* (*cryptomeria japonica*) forests hug the road in a moist evergreen shade. They are planted in military-like formation – perfectly spaced with impeccable posture – their arm-like branches holding bulbous clumps of needles straight up toward the sky.

The drive is mesmerizing (and for many, nauseating), and the landscape is striking. But Darjeeling’s is a beauty of a manufactured kind: the product of over 170 years of extensive capitalist extraction. The vivid greenness of tea plantations and *duppi* forests obscures the acute environmental and social effects of a long history of monocropping.

In this unique and ecologically vulnerable agricultural landscape on the periphery of modern India - populated by marginal Nepali tea laborers, elite Bengali

planters,¹ and the Anglo-Indian descendants of the British Raj - transnational movements for ethical trade have converged with a colonially derived system of tea production and a heated post-colonial discourse about economic and social rights. Over the past 150 years, consumers and marketers have given Darjeeling tea a specific territorial distinction as a product, but at the same time, laborers on tea plantations have developed geographically and historically distinct ideas of social justice as well as of the value of Darjeeling as a product *and* a home. This dissertation explores the material and ideological aspects of what I call “the Darjeeling Distinction.”

When the fieldwork for this dissertation took place, between 2008 and 2010, schemes like fair trade and organic certification and Geographical Indication (GI),² aimed at ameliorating the economic and ecological ill effects of industrial agricultural production, were largely irrelevant to workers; instead, workers viewed these schemes as part of a shift from *industri* (“industry”) to *bisnis* (“business”), a realignment of the tea industry and West Bengal and national politics along neoliberal lines. Planters, in turn, saw organic and fair trade certification and Geographical Indication as strategies for reaching wider, more lucrative markets. Workers, planters, and other Darjeeling

¹ “Planter” is the term that has been used since the British era for tea plantation managers and assistant managers. In recent years, plantation owners have also begun using this term for themselves.

² There are 87 tea plantations considered “Darjeeling” under Geographical Indication. More than half of these 87 plantations are organic certified. All twenty-two fair trade certified were also organic-certified (I have tried to find out if the number of certified fair trade plantations has increased in Darjeeling, but both Fair Trade International and Fair Trade USA have stopped publishing the names of their producers).

I will not discuss organic certification explicitly in this dissertation; instead, I treat fair trade and organic certification as a complex. Darjeeling tea workers, managers, and development workers did not readily out the aims and objectives of these two certification schemes. “Fair trade organic” was a compound concept deployed in many contexts across Darjeeling.

residents drew on nostalgic imaginaries of a plantation past and metaphors of a plantation “family” to comment on the conditions of contemporary production and envision the future of the district.

This dissertation is guided by tea laborers’ perspectives on plantation life and labor and explores why fair trade and organic tea production was not seen as a meaningful change in Darjeeling. Workers were not fully persuaded by the fair trade movement’s calls for “fairness” through schemes like the dispersal of loans for livestock or stores, or GI’s depiction of them as timelessly rooted stewards of a “natural” tea landscape; rather workers talked about a more holistic concept, “justice,” in discussions of plantation reform. “Justice” took the form of collective rights to their land and control of both the Darjeeling district and the plantation itself. Additionally, “justice” was only achievable through local control over Darjeeling and autonomy from the state of West Bengal. For many tea laborers, land tenure reform, and more specifically the formation of a separate Indian state of Gorkhaland, was a precondition for any meaningful change on tea plantations.

A Day on a Darjeeling Tea Plantation

Almost all plantation workers are full-time residents of plantation villages (*kamaan busti*), small settlements that sit within the fields of tea and whose houses were built and owned by plantation owners.³ The *kamaan bustis* began as “labour lines,” akin

³ Plantations closer to Siliguri sometimes hired temporary labor from non-plantation villages to staff monsoonal demand.

to barracks, where the British housed the first tea plantation labor force. Over the decades, other houses sprouted up around the labour lines, which were slowly broken up into individual family dwellings. The *kamaan bustis* were distinct from Darjeeling town, which was home in the British era to administrators and colonial officers, who occupied the highest points on the ridge, Marwari and Bengali shopkeepers and bureaucrats, who occupied the middle-range of the hill, and Nepali and Tibetan laborers, who lived in the lower section. Being a full-time resident did not mean being a full-time employee (“permanent labor”). Each plantation had a fixed number of full-time employees as well as seasonal tea pluckers (“temporary labor”) for the monsoon months. In 2010, when I left Darjeeling, workers earned Rs. 67 per day, which they were paid either weekly or bi-weekly, depending on the plantation. To offset holiday expenses, permanent laborers were also granted a “bonus,” given to them with their paycheck before the *pujas*, usually in early October. Since the British days, tea plantations have been graded (there are, in descending order, “A,” “B,” “C,” and “D gardens). These grades were based upon the historical prominence of particular tea companies as well as the geographical locations of the plantation. Depending on the grade of his or her home plantation, a worker could expect to receive a bonus of between two and five rupees for each kilogram of tea plucked. Permanent laborers and temporary laborers (when they were working) benefitted from what they called “facilities,” including medical care, food rations, housing, water, latrines, and crèche facilities for children. These facilities were guaranteed by Indian labor law, specifically the Plantations Labour Act of 1951 (see

Chapter 4). Workers saw “facilities” as just as important as monetary wages. As I will describe below, the fundamental way in which they understood the shift from *industri* to *bisnis* was as an erosion of the balance between these two forms of compensation. Over the course of the dissertation, I examine this shift as part of an erosion of a system of reciprocal relationships, both material and immaterial, between laborers and management that I call a “Darjeeling tea plantation moral economy” (Scott 1976; Thompson 1971; see also Chapter 1).

The day starts on a Darjeeling tea plantation well before dawn. During the dry season, upon waking in the cold darkness, male and female plantation residents alike load empty water and whiskey bottles into their *taukoris* and trek into the plantation forest to the nearest spring. This spring can be as much as an hour away by foot. Early in the morning, too, women make tea. Most often, plantation women did not drink the tea they plucked. Instead, they brewed a malty black tea, produced in other tea growing areas and purchased in the local bazaar. Workers usually brewed their tea with milk and sugar to make *ciyaa* (pronounced chee-ya). The morning meal usually consists of *roti alu*, dry pita-like bread made from the biweekly ration of *atta* (processed white flour) accompanied by potatoes, or *boteko bhat* (“carried rice”), rice heated up from the night before with oil and a bit of spice. Women workers have to make enough for their children to take a small tiffin with a rolled up roti or two to school. Then, as the sun rises at 7:00 a.m., working women suit up in men’s button down shirts and *lungis* or old *kurtas*, don rubber boots and knee-high socks, and tie plastic sheeting around their

waists to protect their lower bodies from sharp brambles and branches (see Figure 1.1). This is the ritual from Monday to Saturday. Each day, these women work with their labor crew, composed of the same dozen or so women of various ages from close-by villages, from 7:00 until 4:00 with a brief respite in the middle of the day. If the section they are plucking that day is close enough to their villages, they can go home to eat lunch; otherwise, before 7:00, in addition to pre-packing their children lunches and sending them off to school, they have to pack themselves a tiffin lunch to eat while crouched between tea bushes, shading themselves from the midday sun.

On a normal day of fieldwork, I too got up before dawn and had tea and breakfast (I also found *boteke bhat* to be expeditious and satisfying in the morning) and hiked down the ridge to a plantation. The hike to the plantation typically took one to three hours, depending on whether the crew I would join was working on an “upper” section, near town, or a “lower” one, closer to the valley floors that spread out to the east and west of the ridge. Walking (and stopping for a cup of tea here and there along the way) was key to my method. At 7:00, with the gong of the work bell and rising of the sun, the plantation would come to life. Labor crews collected and unfurled across the sweeping green landscape, while snakes of uniformed children trudged up the steep washed-out dirt roads to the schools in town. I would pass them most mornings and try to convince these children, who lived betwixt and between two worlds of town and plantation, that our pursuits were not that different. The manager’s driver would speed past them in his oversized eight-seat jeep, which dwarfed the lone planter’s child in the back seat.

I would pass by the small crèche houses, empty except for a lone swinging basket attached from the ceiling, in which the crèche attendant would alternately rock fussy babies. And each day I would be pulled into someone's house for tea. Sometimes my host was a worker who was home with a sick child, or was responsible for bringing food to a sick relative up to the "labor ward" of Eden Hospital, the District Hospital in Darjeeling, or perhaps had not yet met me personally, but had heard about the American *keti* (girl) who came down each morning to go and pluck tea and wanted to hear for herself what I was up to. We talked mostly about children, marriage, families, and which foods I was capable of cooking and the recipes I used.

At some point during the morning, I would find a group of plucking women – sometimes this was the group I was looking for, sometimes not. With two hands combing the bush with rhythmic movements, women would pull off the smallest shoots of tea from the flattened tops of each and every bush. They would then toss it behind their head into the basket – the *taukori* – strung from their head. Plucking is a fine skill (balancing on the sheer hillsides was almost as hard as plucking tea). It is one thing to pluck off the young shoot of tea (while not slipping on the moist decomposing underbrush and loose soil beneath your feet), but to do it with both hands simultaneously was quite another, all the while collecting the shoots in your hand before tossing the fistfuls over your shoulders (see Figure 0.4).



Figure 0.4: Woman plucking tea

Each day, I too would pick tea. It took months for me to be able to pluck a handful of tea at a time – but only in my right hand. My left hand never really caught up. Even days before my departure, I was jokingly criticized for being slow and clumsy as I threw my measly handfuls into the *taukoris* of the workers around me.

Plucking dominated the yearly calendar, but during the cold dormant winter months, these same women would prune each of the thousands of tea bushes on the plantation. During pruning, women's work shifted from gentle culling and extraction to

flogging the bush with a small sickle, sending tea trimmings flying in every direction.

The tough gnarled bushes made this excruciatingly hard work.

At midday, before lunch, pluckers would bring the green leaf that they plucked that morning to be weighed by the labor crew's supervisor, or *kaka* ("uncle"). He would record the amount plucked by each worker, and thereby also take attendance. *Kaka* would hang a scale from one of the rafters of the collection shed. Each woman would knot up her collected leaf in the scarf or scrap of fabric she used to cushion her head from the weight of the *taukori*, and the *kaka* would hook the sack up to weigh it. Male supervisors would then arrange for its transport uphill to the plantation factory, either by foot or by tractor. Morning plucking lasted from 7:00 a.m. to noon. At noon, a worker's leaves were measured, and she would take the next hour for lunch. Afternoon picking, which began at 1:00 was generally hotter and more arduous. At 4:00, women would again have their tea weighed, before returning home. I would sometimes accompany workers back to their houses in densely settled *kamaan busti* for a cup of tea or follow them up to town while they carried tiffins filled with rice, *daal*, and vegetables for sick relatives in the Eden Hospital or to visit the chemist to buy medicines for their children. Between Monday and Saturday, the work routine changed little, offering few variations.

More frequently, workers dropped in on me on Sundays, while they were up in town shopping in the bazaar. As one worker explained when I asked why she came all the way up to town on a particularly dreary monsoon day, "The prices are much better

than in the small shops on the plantation! And we had to go to the ration shop too.”

(Ration cards are given out by local *panchayat* [administrative] offices and allot subsidized grains and foodstuffs to residents. Marwari traders, many of whom have also been living in Darjeeling for six and seven generations, typically run the ration shops in Darjeeling.) Because of the workers’ prevalence in the lower bazaar on Sundays, they are dismissively called “Sundays” by upper class, town-based Nepalis. In fact, many of these same upper class Nepalis attribute the degradation of the urban landscape in Darjeeling to the influx of “Sundays” from the plantation to work low-paying permanent jobs in town, which led them to eventually settle around the lower bazaar, or “downtown,” where, historically, non-white Darjeeling residents lived.⁴

Agro-food Studies and the Anthropology of Agriculture and Social Justice

This dissertation builds upon the concerns of the interdisciplinary field of agro-food studies, or the social science of agriculture. The title of this dissertation evokes some of these concerns. How, why, and to what ends is agricultural practice changing (and for whom)? How is value created, manipulated, and remade? How do people – from workers to consumers (with particular attention to the spaces in between) – understand, articulate, and act on ideas of social and environmental justice? In the chapters that follow, I knit three concepts – practice, value, and justice – together in a study of sustainable certification systems in global agricultural commodity production.

⁴ Perhaps one of the most powerful symbolic actions made by the newly formed political party, the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM), was the decision to hold all rallies high on the ridge in Chowrasta, the center of British Darjeeling, not in the “down bazaar,” (the downtown bazaar) the center of Nepali social life since the 1860s. See Chapter 6 for a discussion of GJMM politics.

In Darjeeling, these concepts also help explain tea plantation workers' political actions and subjectivities.

For anthropologists, **practice** connotes embodied action. In his (1977: 72) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Pierre Bourdieu called for attention to such embodied action, elaborate the concept of the *habitus*, “a system of durable transposable dispositions,” “structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures.” Practices are “structured” because the actions and choices that actors in a given agro-food system take are circumscribed by the environment and the conditions of production, rather than by “the orchestrating action of a conductor” (Bourdieu 1977: 72). They are “structuring” because they also tend to reinforce those same circumscribing environmental and productive conditions. While agricultural work – especially industrial labor – may seem highly orchestrated (Thomas 1985), sociological ethnographies of work demonstrate the importance of *habitus* to agricultural and other industrial dynamics (see Burawoy 1979). Workers, whether tea pluckers or tea sellers, embody the wider production system, and it is a premise of both my study and of movements for agricultural change such as fair trade, GI, and the Gorkhaland agitation that work must have an embodied and meaningful component to be economically viable and personally bearable.

At a variety of scales and in a variety of settings, these embodied practices, as well as ideas about them, give **value** to agricultural commodities and agricultural environments. In the sense that I adopt it here, “value” emerges both from *economic*

exchange relations, in which price and utility are at the forefront, and from a shifting set of *moral ideas* about the relationships between economic actors and between people and the things they consume, produce, and sell (Marx 1976 [1867]; Mauss 1990 [1950]).

Marx raised attention to the fluidity of value. For Marx, commodity markets require quantitative commensurability. Commodities acquire an “exchange value,” measured in monetary price. The reduction of commodities to exchange values makes the “qualitative” worth of those things, their practical value, or their “use value,” of lesser economic importance. Use value is not a given quality, however; rather it emerges in specific social contexts. The subsuming of use value to exchange value was, for Marx, key to the abstraction of human labor from things. As Marx argued, quantitative and qualitative value both obscured the role of labor in production.

Contemporary theorists of value have extended this idea to examine not only the interplay between quantitative and qualitative value but also the forms of labor that reproduce them. Doing so, they have called closer attention to social context: the moral ideas about people and their relationships to the things they produce. Drawing on Simmel’s *The Philosophy of Money* (1978), Arjun Appadurai notes that the market economy “consists not only in exchanging *values* but in the exchange *of values*” (Simmel 1978 quoted in Appadurai 1986: 3-4). Appadurai coined the phrase “regimes of value” to describe the way in which social and political context shapes, as Simmel puts it, the *desires* of consumers and producers and the terms of their exchanges (Appadurai 1986: 4). Attention to regimes of value shows how exchange is embedded “in more

encompassing systems of value production,” systems of moral ideas, political consciousness, and ethnic or class identities, in which “value...must be sustained or reproduced through the complex work of production” (Myers 2001: 6). As Fred Myers suggests, the contrast between “qualitative” value (moral, meaning-laden, “encompassing”) and “quantitative” value (economic, utilitarian, price-related) “may underlie significant dynamics within structures of social action” (Myers 2001: 6). Building on this insight, this dissertation pays particular attention to the role of productive practice in making value. *Changing* agricultural practice, then, means changing the meaning of different kinds of activity, from tea drinking (with its connotations of taste and refinement) to tea plucking (with its problematic associations with colonialism). Changing agricultural practice also means, at least potentially, changing the value of both products and systems of production.

Finally, we can imagine social **justice** in several senses. In one sense, justice is about the distribution of social and economic goods, as well as rights to access those goods. Market-driven movements like fair trade attempt to capitalize on the *value* of agricultural commodities like Darjeeling tea to produce a more socially- and environmentally-just system of production. Change in agricultural practices are key to such movements, yet as I will show in this dissertation, international schemes such as fair trade often fail to examine the interconnected practices of agricultural laborers, managers, bureaucrats, and tea buyers (and to a lesser extent consumers). I suggest, drawing on tea workers’ engagements with the plantation system as well as with the

national and regional political and social contexts, that justice entails more than just distribution, access, and rights. It also entails a capacity to *critique* productive conditions and their contexts and to *visualize* ways in which people might transcend those conditions. This situational, context-specific vision of justice draws on a long tradition in the anthropology of law (see Merry 2000; Moore 2005; Rosen 1989). As I show in the pages that follow, although the fair trade, organic, and GI movements do provide critiques of agricultural systems, the context within which agents of these movements choose to enact that critique produces somewhat divergent visions of agricultural justice.

The anthropological contribution of this dissertation is to show, through attention to context, how the Gorkhaland movement blended value and practice to visualize justice in ways that were markedly different from those of international agricultural movements, yet were tied to similar productive histories. Though the proponents of fair trade and organic certification, GI, and Gorkhaland I describe here rarely addressed one another directly or engaged one another at an institutional level, they all asked similar questions of the Darjeeling plantation system. More importantly, they all attempted to engage a common group of subjects, namely, tea plantation laborers. This dissertation, then, is about how laborers met that engagement (or didn't), and how they tried (and often failed) to integrate these disparate visions of justice into everyday practices.

As an anthropologist working in the social science of agriculture and labor, I see the contribution of this dissertation as threefold. First, I examine the linkages between local and global productive and consumptive practice; second, I interrogate the effectiveness of international agricultural certification regimes; third, I explore the terms on which actors construct and situate ideas of environmental and social justice.

Linking Consumption and Production: Sidney Mintz's seminal *Sweetness and Power* (1985) provides an early anthropological contribution to what has become known as "commodity chain" studies: the examination of how things move from spaces of extraction and production to consumption (e.g. Friedberg 2004; Lyon 2011; West 2012; Talbot 2004; Buck, Getz, and Guthman 1997; Goodman 2002; Fischer and Benson 2006). Part of the power of the fair trade movement and Geographical Indication is that they claim to inform conscientious consumers about the conditions under which agricultural commodities are produced, trading on a desire for socially responsible and geographically identifiable production. One of Mintz's key findings concerns the way in which the consumption of sugar shifted from an exclusive practice of elites to an essential necessity of the British working class. Thanks to large scale plantation production, sugar became a cheap and efficient source of calories. Eventually, sugar consumption literally fuelled sugar production: it was a staple "food" for Puerto Rican cane workers by the time of Mintz's earlier (1960) *Worker in the Cane*. Among the British working-class, as Mintz explained, tea became a primary vehicle for sugar delivery. The popularity of tea came thanks in part to the rise of sugar, and sugar

became the uniting ingredient in what Mintz calls the British “tea complex” (1985: 121; cf. DuPuis 2002 for a study of milk, the third element of tea’s dominant consumptive triad), which included not only sugary hot tea but also cakes, pastries, and the accouterments of tea as a meal.

Tea’s position as “food” remains seemingly dependent upon sugar, then, as Mintz notes. Like coffee and cocoa, its taste is bitter and its health benefits uncertain (1985: 109). Since the earliest days of British colonial production, Darjeeling tea has always been exceptional precisely because it has *not* normally been consumed with milk or sugar. Even today, Indian Darjeeling tea planters and marketers insist upon this exception, referring to Darjeeling as the “Champagne of Teas.” Darjeeling tea tends to be light in color, and its flavor tends to be smoky and slightly floral. (Indeed, the words used to describe Darjeeling tea are reminiscent of those sommeliers use to describe fine wine.) In the time of my fieldwork, the consumption of Darjeeling with sugar or milk was seen both in Darjeeling and in other parts of India as uncouth. This exception stems from British notions about the high quality of the tea produced in Darjeeling, as compared to that produced in India’s other tea producing regions, in Sri Lanka, or in Africa. Darjeeling tea was the lone Indian tea that was favorably compared to Chinese tea, the only other variety routinely consumed without milk or sugar (see Chapter 2).

Indian tea was a global commodity from the beginning. It was a major export crop, source of revenue, and the model British colonial agricultural product. While many other colonial agricultural products, such as cinchona, timber, and medicinal

plants, were used within the colony, tea was produced for consumption in European and American markets outside the colony (Schivelbusch 1992: 79-84; c.f. Mintz 1985). The tea market is largely a geographically undifferentiated one. Popular blended tea varieties such as “Earl Grey” and “English Breakfast” can be sourced from any tea-growing region or grade. These teas, blended from broken leaf and dust grades, make up the bulk of the international tea market. There is little demand within India for Darjeeling tea, as the price of the tea is exponentially higher than the price of tea produced in Assam, the Dooars, or other Indian tea producing regions.

These cheaper – and usually extra-local – teas were actually preferred by Darjeeling tea workers and town residents I met. As I was told by many Darjeeling residents, Darjeeling tea just did not taste as good as Assam or Dooars tea. And it was far too expensive. Tea workers frequently reminded me that Darjeeling tea was grown for foreign consumption. Many Assam and the majority of Dooars plantations specialize in CTC- (“cut-thresh-curl;” tea shaped like little balls) grade teas for making *ciyaa*, tea prepared with milk and sugar, a favored preparation across Darjeeling. CTC and leaf-grade (or, “orthodox”) teas are auctioned in centers across the country. In the case of Darjeeling, all grades and gardens are tasted, valued, and auctioned in Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal and the center of the Indian tea trade.

The market for orthodox leaf, and Darjeeling in particular, is complicated by the fact that prices of Darjeeling tea fluctuate dramatically throughout the year because of what growers refer to as “flushes.” There are four flushes, or seasons: First (mid-March

- mid-April), Second (mid-April - May), Monsoon (June - August), and Autumn (September - November). Darjeeling's first and second flushes are among the most prized and some of the highest priced teas in the world. Managers explained to me that a Darjeeling garden makes all its annual money before the start of the monsoon at the end of May, when the heavy rains start and the quality of the leaf changes, becoming bigger and more fibrous. Depending on the season of harvest, a garden can make anywhere from Rs. 18,000 (\$474) to Rs. 200 (\$5)⁵ or less per kilogram for leaf grade teas at the Kolkata auction. There are several grades of leaf tea, all yielding different prices – from STGFOP (Super Fine Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe), FTGFOP (Fine Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe), TGFOP, GFOP, FOP, to OP (Orange Pekoe), broken leaf (BOP), and “fannings” (tea typically found in tea bags and in many cases swept off of the factory floor).⁶ The fine grading of tea in sales leads to a grading in consumption, whereby buyers learn to look for high quality leaves as well.

Unlike buyers and Northern consumers, tea workers literally embodied the tense relationship between tea production and consumption, and it is in their attitudes and preferences that the paradoxes of that relationship become most apparent. Tea workers with whom I talked expressed frustration with the swaths of fields of verdant green bushes that produced nothing edible. At the same time, CTC tea was costly, and most

⁵ These conversions are based on 2008-2009 sale prices and Rupee to US Dollar conversion rates.

⁶ The tea from certain Darjeeling plantations is deemed more desirable according to the direction they face, the valley they are in, or their general *wastu* (“property,” implying their position in the cosmic geography of the universe). It would be fruitful to think more able the linkages between the concept of *vaastu* and *terroir*, which I discuss in Chapter 5.

workers were voracious consumers of broken-leaf Darjeeling tea, which they received in daily rations and bought in the local market. In the fields, they consumed tea in the form of, *kaalo ciyaa* (literally “black tea” and pronounced ‘chee-ya’), leaves steeped with a generous amount of sugar, and *nunko ciyaa* (literally, “salt tea”), leaves steeped with salt. The only consumers of *phikaa ciyaa* (literally, “bland” or “unseasoned tea,” i.e. served with no milk or sugar) were the chronically ill or diabetics. At home, workers would drink a *ciyaa* (often mixed with CTC) prepared with sugar as well as milk. Tea provided a vehicle for salt, sugar, and calorie delivery, albeit in a “complex” decidedly unlike that which Mintz envisioned for middle- and working-class Britain, and decidedly invisible to consumers of Fair Trade Super Fine Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe.

Governance and Certification Regimes: Scholars in anthropology and the social sciences have recently turned increased attention to non-state forms of environmental and social governance and market-based solutions to environmental and social problems (e.g. Jaffee 2005; Lyon and Moberg 2010; Getz and Shreck 2006; Fridell 2007). This dissertation contributes to this literature through ethnography of fair trade and Geographical Indication – governance regimes in plantation-based agriculture that have heretofore been understudied. In taking such regimes as an object of inquiry, I attempt to give voice to those who are the objects of governance: plantation laborers.

Ethical trade movements respond to the uneven distribution of agricultural profits by developing new standards of production. They adopt a universal definition of “fairness,” based on direct relations between consumers and producers, which ensure

better economic compensation for farm products. When farmers receive higher monetary yields for their products, ethical trade advocates claim, the system of global agricultural production becomes “fair.” Anthropologists have noted that fair trade movements discursively divorce products from place and history, turning crops of empire (tea, coffee, sugar, bananas) into crops of empowerment or sustainability (West 2010; Besky 2010). Other scholars, focusing primarily on smallholders and not plantations, have shown how universalistic fair trade programs fail, even on their own terms, to empower farmers (Bacon 2010; Reichman 2008; Lyon 2007). These studies have tended to analyze policies and their effects. This dissertation uses ethnographic inquiry to reverse this methodological trajectory, exploring how tea plantation laborers themselves conceive of industrial ethics and value. Although close to one-third of Darjeeling’s plantations were fair trade certified, I found that tea workers and townspeople alike drew not on the rhetoric of ethical trade, but on a more holistic vision of empowerment. When conceiving of value, they invoked (using the English word) the concept of “justice,” not the internationalized rhetoric of “fairness.” By plucking tea with workers, observing union rallies, attending tea management courses, and following people and product from the soils of Darjeeling to the auction rooms of Kolkata, I put forth a place-based anthropology of justice, one in which historically rooted notions of environmental and ethnic belonging are more important than mere economic remuneration.

With regard to fair trade in particular, this dissertation is one of the few studies

of fair trade on plantations (and as I describe in the conclusion of Chapter 4, the certification of plantations as “fair trade” has become increasingly controversial). In Darjeeling, the colonial-industrial plantation system has remained the dominant agro-environmental mode of tea production—fair trade, organic, or conventional—while elsewhere, banana, sugar, and coffee plantations have been largely converted to smallholder cooperatives. Fair trade projects in Darjeeling tried to apply a model developed among smallholders in agricultural cooperatives to wage laborers in a plantation system. As I highlight in this dissertation and in previously published work (Besky 2008, 2010), these projects framed the decline of the tea industry as an economic problem (farmers without income) with an economic solution (loans for livestock and small businesses). Instead of questioning wage relationships, plantation hierarchy, or land rights, fair trade’s corrective to plantation production was to provide more opportunities for non-plantation labor. *Free* trade and *fair* trade became difficult to distinguish.

Social and Environmental Justice: Recent social scientific studies of agro-food systems have examined how both international certification regimes and conventional agricultural systems promote or restrict social justice (e.g. Mitchell 1996; Guthmann 2004; Jaffee 2007; Brown and Getz 2008; Harrison 2011). These studies show how labor has been largely marginalized in mainstream studies of agro-food systems. Central to all of these inquiries is attention to the experiences of the people who grow food and other crops. My anthropological contribution to this burgeoning area of the

field is to use ethnography to relay the story of changing agricultural practices not from an institutional perspective, but from the perspective of laborers themselves. This is not to ignore institutional factors, however. I have been influenced by the sociology of agriculture in the United States (Wells 1996; Thomas 1985) and previous scholars' attention to the labor process and the structural inequalities in industrial agriculture. I am also inspired by the classic political economy and narrative storytelling of Mintz's (1960) *Worker in the Cane*. Following by Mintz and Eric Wolf (1965), I have tried to shine light on the lives of the laborers enveloped in commodity production on the other side of the world. In doing so, I follow Ortiz (2002) in emphasizing the role of regional labor politics, telling a micro-political story of Darjeeling and its tea. My study asks: What does plantation labor mean to workers; and how do laborers understand their agricultural environment?

The plantation, as a home, a workplace, and a landscape, is thus a crucial part of this story. While the social science literature on agro-food systems, long dominated by U.S. case studies, does engage with industrial agricultural forms, scholars rarely if ever apply the term "plantation" to North American or European farms. The plantation evokes painful memories about the American South, but the word "plantation" and the plantation form remain alive and well in postcolonial contexts in the Global South. Among anthropologists, plantation ethnographies are also fairly rare, with most focused, like Mintz' (1960) foundational *Worker in the Cane*, on Latin America and the Caribbean (e.g. Bourgois 1989; Moberg 1997; Striffler 2002), and others taking a historical rather

than ethnographic approach, examining the plantation as lived and experienced in the colonial era rather than in the contemporary period (see Stoler 1986; Daniel, et al. 1992; Daniel 2008). Outside Latin America, perhaps the most thorough ethnographic study of contemporary plantation life and labor is Chatterjee's (2001) examination of the lives of women tea workers on a Dooars plantation, nestled in the Bengal plains between Darjeeling and Kolkata. Chatterjee's work strongly influences this dissertation, but whereas she emphasizes women's experiences and limits her study almost exclusively to plantations themselves, I situate plantation experiences in relation to environmental and labor histories as well as to life in Darjeeling town and work in its other industries. I have drawn heavily on Chatterjee's understanding of the plantation as a gendered social system rooted in a history of colonial labor migration and recruitment, but my work diverges from hers in its framing of the plantation as an agro-environment whose workers were caught up not only in a still-powerful labor history but also in contemporary political movements.

I see this ethnography as a contribution to South Asian studies and a quickly expanding anthropological literature on Darjeeling (e.g. Middleton 2010, 2011; Shneiderman 2009, 2010). Darjeeling tea laborers work not just to produce a specific crop but also to reproduce and sustain a specific kind of agro-environment. As I argue, such work does not "alienate" people from nature; instead, the labor process forges relationships between laborers and the environment (White 1996). Environmental knowledge remains important both to the distinction of Darjeeling tea on the market

and to the district's geopolitical place within modern India. While fair trade and organic certifications de-territorialize former colonial crops from their unique labor and environmental histories, GI status, sought and approved by India's government, re-territorialized Darjeeling as a politically and economically governable environment. As my research with industry and government regulators in Kolkata revealed, GI marketing rendered both tea and tea workers as ecologically "native" to the region. Back in Darjeeling, however, tea workers capitalized on governmental re-territorialization to refashion themselves as different kinds of environmental subjects, and to assert geopolitical sovereignty over Darjeeling and its plantations.

Instead of accepting fair trade or GI's versions of economic and environmental justice, Nepali workers fused discourses of environmental belonging with historical and moral narratives of ethnic and political belonging to call for a separate Indian state of "Gorkhaland." The Gorkhaland agitation was a different attempt to re-territorialize Darjeeling, one that highlighted the contributions of Nepalis to constructing a tea producing landscape out of the Himalayan forest. Following Keith Basso (1996), I explore how Gorkhas' historical and environmental knowledge and narratives "sit in" that landscape. By attending political rallies on and off of plantations, I studied how Gorkha visions of "tradition" (Hobsbawm 1992) created what I call a kind of "reverse imperialist nostalgia" (Rosaldo 1989; Stewart 1988), in which Nepalis re-imagined the colonial period as a necessary precursor to an age of Gorkha sovereignty.

Methodology

This dissertation is based on 26 months of fieldwork I conducted between January 2008 and May 2010. I worked on twelve different plantations in Darjeeling: those that were both fair trade and organic certified; organic certified; and conventional. I interviewed twenty plantation owners and managers as well as several officers of the Darjeeling Tea Association, the Indian Tea Association, and the Tea Board of India. On my initial trip in the summer of 2006 and early in my fieldwork in 2008, planters and plantation owners enthusiastically sought me out. The Secretary of the Darjeeling Tea Association was particularly excited about the (positive, market-based) ramifications of my research in Darjeeling.

A few days after I arrived in Darjeeling in June 2006, I received a phone call on my brand new mobile phone – someone had told someone, who told someone else, who told the Secretary of the Darjeeling Tea Association, that there was an American *keti* (girl) here to study Darjeeling tea. I went over to an enormous bungalow in town, complete with stuffed animal heads on the wall and doily-lined trays for tea and biscuits. The Secretary and other DTA officers and planters wanted to know about organic and fair trade certification – how to get it, how much people in the United States were willing to pay for it, and, perhaps most importantly, what were the Darjeeling plantations, which were successful at implementing these certifications, actually doing? Was it really that difficult? “The welfare structures of the tea industry are fabulous,” the Secretary would tell me. “We should all be certified as fair trade!” I was perplexed as to why they

were asking *me* these questions, because I was approaching them for answers to precisely these same questions. In the subsequent months and years, as they learned about my findings, they became disenchanted by my presence.

The Tea Board of India and the Indian Tea Association (ITA) in Kolkata (where I was based for several months in 2009) were far more tolerant of my presence. They were long used to dealing with researchers, particularly from the numerous universities in Kolkata. I had a few productive interviews with the Tea Board, which appear in Chapter 5. The Indian Tea Association was a gold mine of archival material. I have yet to process the copious number of digital photos I took of the annual bulletins of the Indian Tea Association, as well as reports, books, and documents, most of which I have not seen anywhere else. I excerpt snippets from the ITA archives in Chapter 3, but this material tells many more stories than were possible to include in this dissertation. I also conducted archival research at the National Library in Kolkata. This was both a productive and demoralizing experience. The catalogue of tea-related holdings is immense; however many of them have rotted or gone missing (tea, chemistry, and computational mathematics are the most pilfered topics, one librarian told me). Chapter 2 highlights many of the materials from the National Library.

I attended tea management classes in Darjeeling, at the Darjeeling Tea Management Training Centre (which I will discuss in Chapter 6) and at North Bengal University), as well as in Kolkata, at the Birla Company's own tea management school, a kind of "farm system" for new assistant managers for Birla plantations. (I was asked to

leave the Birla school in Kolkata after several weeks, as I was deemed “too distracting.”

I was not sure if this was the case for the students, or more likely the teacher, who pegged me as a “labor sympathizer” early on and reveled in starting rather heated *adda* [debate or dialogue in Bengali] with me during class).

Most days, however, I joined female plantation laborers plucking and pruning tea bushes, collecting cow dung for organic compost, and sharing lunch during the midday break. I was emboldened by the West Bengal Rules in the Plantations Labor Act of 1951 (GOI 1951), I knew that I could visit any village on a plantation. Each day, I usually brought *channa* to share, but on other days was given more direct request for certain kinds of biscuits from the German-style bakery in town. While I conducted more formal interviews with planters and various tea officials, I did not take this strategy with workers. I found the day to be more interesting for me (and for them as well, many women told me) if I plucked tea. I learned about plucking, bush productivity, and environmental degradation from working besides women on the plantation. And I learned about just how much work organic tea production demands, something that the women I worked with were quick to point out. Women were not compensated extra for organic production, despite working harder on organic gardens. In particular, the seemingly incessant collection and portering of fertilizing cow dung to the far reaches of the plantation received vocal critique.

Arguably, it was because I was a Nepali-speaking *woman* that I was left alone by management and able to do this research. (I also approximate the general size and hair

color of a Nepali woman from afar). Many people with whom I discuss my research (including renowned anthropologists of Nepal) are shocked when I explain that I just “walked on” to the plantations and chatted with the women. The planters seemed aware of my presence, though I always thought that the planters thought that it would be more trouble for them if they put up more active resistance to my presence than just passive disregard. On most plantations, despite the phone calls made on my behalf from powerful tea “uncles” and officials in town to plantation managers, I was not granted access to tea processing factories. Other plantation managers were more lenient, or perhaps more willfully dismissive of my presence. These gardens ran tourism projects that brought large foreign tour groups through the plantation. While my presence did not put pluckers on most gardens at risk, I felt like it was best to be out of the management’s sight. Some plantation owners of gardens further away simply said “no” to my potential presence, even if I was accompanying tea buyers. One fair trade organic conglomerate cited “problems in the past” as justification for the refusal.

After staying several months at a flagship fair trade and organic plantation in Darjeeling, I got an apartment on the ridge of Darjeeling, and on most days, I hiked down the mountainside to the plantations. I walked and I talked. I have a greater appreciation for the Darjeeling landscape (and its ruins) by walking all over it. In town, I attended dozens of Gorkhaland political rallies (there were rarely other political parties holding rallies; in fact the movement’s leading party, the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM) prohibited them, explaining that they might “confuse” the people), upon occasion

running into my plantation friends. The revived Gorkhaland agitation serves as an ethnographic backdrop to this dissertation, but is more explicitly discussed in Chapters 3 and 6.

On Sundays (the weekly holiday), over multiple cups of tea and lunch, I interviewed male and female plantation residents about Gorkhaland, gardening, roads, houses, water pipes, and most importantly, the future of the plantation system. At first, repetitive stories about an idealized colonial past—stories that came just as often from planters and managers as from tea laborers—struck me as counterproductive, but over time I came to see nostalgia as essential to Darjeeling plantation residents’ political and social critiques of their surroundings (See Chapter 1).

Overview of Dissertation

In Chapter 1, explain how tea workers find meaning in their labor in an era in which both local and international institutions are failing them. In particular, I explore a pervading “reverse imperialist nostalgia” among tea plantation workers, planters, and even fair trade organic proponents. I argue that nostalgia was essential to these actors’ imaginaries of the plantations’ future. I show how affective or immaterial labor, the work of care and concern for land, place and family, shaped Darjeeling tea plantation moral economies (Burawoy 1979; Hardt 1999; Hardt and Negri 2000; McElhinny 2010; Muehlenbach 2011). I draw on Ann Stoler’s (2008) concept of “imperial ruins” to lay an historical foundation for later ethnographic descriptions that detail how the past –

particularly the material remains of the colonial era – are key to understanding Darjeeling residents’ critiques of the present and visions of the future. Historical memory was foundational to the plantation moral economy I describe in Chapter 1. Workers, planters, and Darjeeling town residents I met between 2008 and 2010 located a “better” Darjeeling in the “industrial” past.

Chapter 2 describes the construction of the Darjeeling landscape into a British hill station, and the making of a productive plantation industry out of what colonial administrators deemed to be a “wasteland.” Drawing from archival research conducted in Kolkata, this chapter describes the basis of Darjeeling’s distinction from the perspective of environmental history. The chapter recounts the growth of Darjeeling and its tea industry, as well as a story of the construction of a colonial infrastructure that remains politically salient today. I use stories about the tea-producing infrastructure, as well as the wider colonial organization of the town and the region to tell the story of Darjeeling’s development as a site of both industrial production and leisure.

In Chapter 3, I narrate the development and distinction of Darjeeling and its tea through the lens of Nepali migration, labor recruitment, and identity politics. With particular attention to the post-Independence era, I explore a series of historical shifts in how Gorkhas identified themselves as a population of Nepalis in India. I ground this discussion in archival materials that highlight not only the material basis of the moral economy that workers describe, but also how workers themselves were characterized by British management. The World Wars and the years of the movement for Indian

Independence saw distinct shifts in the ways laborers identified themselves and articulated their belonging in India. I describe workers' shifting allegiances, from military and industrial allegiance to planters and plantation companies, to class-based and nationalist alliances with the Communist party of India, to identity-based mobilizations for regional autonomy led by Gorkha parties, leading up to the rise of the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM) in 2007.

In Chapter 4, I discuss fair trade certification. I built this chapter from previously published work on fair trade certification (Besky 2008, 2010). This chapter describes how fair trade certification has been employed, in workers' terms, as a strategy of *bisnis* – a way to make more money on decreasing yields and lesser quality teas. I also explore how fair trade presents a contending vision of the plantation's tripartite moral economy that actually enables what workers described as *bisnis*-like extractive practices, particularly those that degrade the environment and destabilize plantation villages.

Chapter 5 explores Darjeeling's Geographical Indication (GI) status, asking how an industrial crop like Darjeeling tea can be remade into a product with a distinct *terroir* (or "taste of place"), and how plantation labor can be recast by international regulations as "traditional knowledge." Other notable GIs include Champagne, Roquefort, and Scotch – products thought to be produced from unique environmental conditions by skilled craftspeople. As I describe in Chapter 3, plantation labor was long considered unskilled. Geographical Indication required tea to be a product not only of a distinct place with a distinct *terroir*, but to also be the product of artisanal production or

“traditional knowledge.” Darjeeling tea laborers (unlike migrant workers in vineyards across the globe) are too visible to be ignored in the Geographical Indication of Darjeeling; as a result, they have been integrated into the *terroir* of the product. In glossy brochures and billboards as well as UN reports, tea laborers become vessels of “traditional knowledge.” Through GI, Darjeeling tea and laborers’ knowledge then became the national patrimony of India.

In Chapter 6, I pick back up on many of the themes discussed throughout the dissertation to describe the Gorkhaland movement that I witnessed during my fieldwork. I discuss Gorkha workers’ visions of the past and future of Darjeeling and its plantations, as well as their own place in the Indian nation-state. I explore the role of labor and the environment to what it means to be Gorkha in contemporary India, showing how both the moral economic ideas I trace in Chapter 4 and the ideas about Geographic distinction I trace in Chapter 5 combined in the most recent move for Nepali subnational autonomy in India.

Chapter 1: *The Future in Ruins: Imperialist Nostalgia, Agrarian Imaginaries, and the Meaning of Justice on Darjeeling Tea Plantations*

Smack. Smack. Smack. Smack. As we walked, the sound of *chappals* against pavement competed with the conversation about Salil's recent troubles with a British tourist staying in his home. Salil thought that it might be a good idea if I dropped by that afternoon to talk with her. I was walking with Salil and a small group of male workers down the national highway that bisected this plantation, and to the low-altitude banks of mountain stream. We were headed into a *jhora*, a gully that provided natural drainage between two foothills. Traditionally, tea was not planted in *jhoras*, whose rocky soils and regular landslides made them marginal areas of tea plantations. The low altitude and high temperatures allegedly produced tea of an inferior quality and flavor. Recently, however, the owner of this fair trade organic plantation had decided to begin planting in his *jhoras*.

When we arrived, Salil and a small group of women workers began clearing roots, rocks, and brush to open up a new section of tea. As Salil darted around looking for fallen bamboo, tapping a nearby spring to fashion an irrigation system, I went to join two old women, Bishnu and Jethi, who were crouched down in the shade sharing a *bidi* (a hand-rolled cigarette from full leaf tobacco and an omnipresent symbol of poverty across India) before starting work.

We looked up the sheer hillside to see a line of workers zig-zagged toward us – stepping to side to side to maintain their balance. They bore *taukoris* (large head

baskets usually used to collect tea leaves) filled with scraggly baby tea bushes (See Figure 1.1). These workers, mostly younger women, dropped the plants with Bishnu and Jethi and headed back up to the tea “nursery.” After finishing their *bidi*, the two women began raking the dry dirt with fallen branches, removing rocks and brush from the soil. Once they had cleared the ground, they packed the soil, coaxing the scraggly young plants to stand up. Jethi joked that the most enjoyable way to do this rather tedious work was to dance. “Like this.” She motioned to me, packing down the dirt with rhythmic steps of her plantation-issue rubber boots. To this internal beat, she two-stepped around the twig, twisting her hands above her head and making subtle snake like movements with her head and upper body as she turned around the bush. “*Resham phiriri. Resham phiriri. Udyara jauki dandaima bhanjyang resham phiriri...*”⁷

It took an hour to clear and the plant the new homes of half a dozen baby tea bushes. Looking back along the ridge, we could see the results of this work: evenly placed sprigs of tea poking up from the desiccated soil.

⁷ These are lines from a popular Nepali folk song. Translation: “(my heart is) fluttering like a silk scarf flapping in the air (*phiriri* is an idiophone for the sound of fabric blowing in the wind). I am a donkey, you are a monkey....”



Figure 1.1: Women carrying baby tea bushes in *taukoris*

Bishnu crouched down and pulled out another *bidi* from a small cloth bag attached to the drawstring of her *chaubundi*. “Ehh, *bahini* (younger sister),” she called to me. “See these plants?” She waved toward the new sprigs. “These are our *pukka nani* (“real [non-gendered] children”). Our daughters get married and go away, and our sons? *Aaahh!*” She flipped her hand in a dismissive backward swat. “But these bushes? They are always here. Every day, they need plucking, and pruning, and cleaning [around the roots], just like little children...and every day that is what we do...*Darjeelingko jindagi estai cha* (Darjeeling life is like that).”

Jethi added, “And we are ooold!” She curled her index finger dramatically, indicating they had become hunched. “That is why we get this work [planting new bushes]. This is *bhojuko kam* (grandmother’s work).”

Bishnu and Jethi planted a narrow, 100-yard section. While clearing rocks and underbrush to make room for more baby tea bushes, these women, like many other female tea laborers I interviewed across the Darjeeling district, described a decline of Darjeeling tea. They explained that the tea bush has about the productive life of a human being (50 to 70 years), but most of the bushes in Darjeeling were over 100 years old, planted during the heyday of what they called the British tea “*industri*.”⁸ These women told me that the plantations did not produce as much leaf as once before; the bushes too, had become “old.” They often called them “*buro*,” an affectionate term of light reprimand that they also directed toward their husbands.⁹ For tea workers, it was the job of tea plantation managers, or planters,¹⁰ to regularly replant sections of the tea garden, replacing *buro*, “hunched” tea bushes with vibrant green sprigs. But workers across the district agreed that, in the last 20 years, planters were not committing resources for “*plantation*” (a verb often used in English specifically to refer to the planting of new plants) or for any other development on the plantation. Bishnu and

⁸ *Industri* and *bisnis* were commonly used English concepts to juxtapose the plantation of the past and the plantation of the present. Surprisingly, tea workers and townspeople alike shared these concepts (particularly *bisnis*).

⁹ “*Buro*” is a human qualifier, whereas “*purano*” also meaning “old” is used for inanimate objects.

¹⁰ In Darjeeling, the term “planter” typically refers to the head manager of a plantation. Plantation owners, are typically not planters, but as I will discuss in upcoming chapters, this distinction is becoming blurred, see in particular, Chapters 4 and 5.

Jethi were planting these bushes in new tea fields carved out of plantation forests. They and other female tea workers explained to me that the Indian “*bisnismen*” who ran contemporary plantations chose to invest in new, more marginal, landslide-prone areas such as *jhoras*, not in rejuvenating *buro bot* (“old bushes”). The Indian planter – as *bisnisman* – expanded tea fields (and generally only employed temporary workers on them, not permanent workers) in hopes of capitalizing on the growing international taste for organic and fair trade tea.

To emphasize the deterioration of Darjeeling plantations, female tea laborers told stories about when life on the plantation was “better,” when there was leaf bursting off the bushes, good “*facilitiharu*,” (or, “facilities” [-*haru* is a plural marker], a catch-all term for housing, schools, food rations, medical care, and other amenities)¹¹, and sympathetic management. Stories about good planters and the bygone days of *industri* were often answers to my questions about plantation organization and the condition of crèches, community houses, and cricket grounds. One day on another plantation, I accompanied a retired tea plucker to her daughter’s village. As we walked past a multistoried “community house,” a building that dwarfed the one-room meeting houses I saw on other plantations, I asked, “What’s this building for?”

She explained:

¹¹ The Plantations Labour Act of 1951 (GOI 1951) requires that planters maintain and expand “facilities” for plantation families and is enforced by the West Bengal Department of Labour. Workers said that facilities had eroded in the last 20 years, even under fair trade or organic conditions and increased attention from Western buyers (Besky 2008, 2010).

...it is for weddings and *puja*...children can play there...Isn't it impressive? The company built it years ago, before [the old owner's] children took over and started fighting with each other. They didn't care about us, or about tea even. They just wanted to make money. But the old man, he was like our *baaje* (grandfather). There were always medicines in the dispensary, and the roads were easy to walk on. If you didn't have enough money for your own child's shoes, you could go to him – he was in the factory – and say: “*Saar*,” [she dropped her eyes to the ground mimicking the necessary supplication] “My daughter has no shoes and I cannot afford them; she needs them to go to school.” And he would – oh, he was so gentle – give you the money for *two* pairs of shoes!¹²

Women juxtaposed romantic visions of the Darjeeling of *industri* with descriptions of life in the present, in which Indian planters ran the plantations as extractive *bisnis*. As Bishnu described it, while scraping the ground with her stick: “These new [Indian] companies take, take, take. And, what do they give us?” She asked, looking up from the rocky ground and motioning a flippant interrogative twist of her hand. She answered her own question: “Nothing.”

In interviews, workers complained that the Darjeeling tea “industry” had become a “business.” In their words, an *industriko manche* (industry person, alternatively, *ramro sahib*, or “good planter”) reinvested profits, planting trees to prevent landslides, securing water sources for laborers’ use, and, crucially, replacing withered “old” tea bushes with healthy new ones on a regular basis. For female laborers, this reinvestment signaled not just a concern for the environment but also for labor. *Industriko mancheharu* ensured that there were community houses for weddings and recreational facilities for games and gatherings. They cared for laborers, who in turn cared for the land. The *bisnis* man, by contrast, only extracted. Instead of entrusting the care of the

¹² When referring to management, workers generally say “the company.” Less frequently, they used “*sahib*” (master) or the name of the manager, assistant manager, or owner, accompanied by “*sahib*.”

bushes to skilled laborers, *bisnis* men adopted “scientific” production practices such as organic farming. Indian planters discovered that by marketing their products as “organic” or “fair trade,” they could sell at higher prices and find new markets.

Ironically, as planters invested less and less in infrastructure, they drew upon images of a pristine environment in their tea marketing, obscuring the role of labor in the making and maintenance of the tea landscape. The transition to neoliberal production, or as Nepali laborers referred to it, the shift from *industri* to *bisnis*, engendered changes on the landscape and in laborers’ lives.¹³ In their narratives about this shift, workers identified a severing of ties between labor, land, and product. In the industrial model as workers nostalgically described it, relationships among planters, land, and workers relied upon a mutual ethic of care. Planters’ care for labor was reciprocated through laborers’ care for the land. These remembered mutual relationships of care formed the basis of a plantation moral economy.

On Darjeeling tea plantations, nostalgia for the industrial past informed imaginaries of the future. The imagination, as Vincent Crapanzano (2004) has argued, is a historical and social process. Following Crapanzano, Paige West frames the imaginary as, “merg[ing] the individual process of imagining with the image-making ability of politics and history...” such that “individual actors’ imaginings of the environment”

¹³ Wolf and Mintz (1957) describe a seemingly similar transition in Puerto Rican sugar production – one from the hacienda to the plantation. This transition requires material transformations in the modes of production and acquisition of labor. The shift from “industry” to “business” is also materially experienced (e.g. in the actualization of facilities), but the mode of production and status of laborers – intensive plantation-based production – remains the same.

blend with the “physical...and material production of...spaces” (2006: 150-151). In Darjeeling, nostalgia framed what tea workers, planters, and politicians all saw as a “decline” of the tea industry. As I describe throughout this dissertation, nostalgia also enabled different people in the tea system to imagine Darjeeling’s revitalization. For workers, descriptions of decline and deterioration referenced not only the material plantation infrastructure, but also monetary and non-monetary reciprocity between labor, management, and the agro-environment, a moral economy that undergirded colonial tea production (Thompson 1961, 1971; Scott 1976).¹⁴

E.P. Thompson (1971) developed the concept of the moral economy in his study of bread riots in 18th century Britain. The riots took place across the country because the public saw in rising bread prices a violation of relations between the poor and the wealthy. As Thompson writes: “[The riots were] *legitimized* by the assumptions of an older moral economy, which taught the immorality of any unfair method of forcing up the price of provisions by profiteering upon the necessities of the people” (1971: 63, emphasis added). Massive scale mob protests, he explains, “indicate an extraordinarily deep-rooted pattern of behavior and belief.” These mass actions were *legitimized* by

¹⁴ There are certainly parallels between what I am calling a “tripartite moral economy” on Darjeeling tea plantations and the *jajmani* system, which is a village-based system of exchange in Nepal and Indian villages in which low-caste (usually landless or land-poor) individuals (e.g. blacksmiths, carpenters, sweepers, washer-men) are forced through economic need to provide services to high-caste land owning elites, or *jajmans*. *Jajmans* pay low caste individuals in kind in grains, clothing, agricultural implements, or foodstuffs. In this system, too, the lower castes often exchange services with one another. The *jajmani* system is a non-monetized form of exchange (see Dumont 1980; Beidelman 1959; Kolendra 1963; Breman 1993 [1973]. Mary Cameron [1998] also describes this system in Nepal, called *riti-bhagya*). The plantation on the other hand, is perhaps a hybrid *jajmani*-based circulation and capitalist production. I do not explicitly discuss the *jajmani* system in this dissertation, as workers and plantation owners did not frame their work in these terms. The intersections of these exchange systems would be interesting for future work.

imaginaries of social relationships in the past. James Scott (1976) extends the concept of moral economy to rural life among Vietnamese and Burmese rice farmers. He describes pre-capitalist relationships between peasants and land-holding elites was rooted in a “subsistence ethic,” by which peasants, who lived at the brink of survival, could rely on the elites for their basic needs. Scott explains that these relationships broke down at the hand of capitalist market forces, and as a result, peasants could justify resisting and revolting against the elites.

Urban or rural, the basis of a moral economy is similar. There are certain economic and social conditions that the public agrees upon as acceptable, or even fair. When they deteriorate, however, riots, shirking of work, or other forms of protest and resistance ensue. After the deterioration of these relationships, such protest is legitimized. Crucially, Thompson and Scott highlight that we often do not understand moral economic relationships until they break down. And as I highlight in the pages that follow, among Darjeeling tea workers, this breakdown elicited particular nostalgic narratives of the past and visions of the future.

The plantation moral economy included not just workers and management, but also plants. In a 2010 lecture in the Institute for Research on the Humanities at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Anna Tsing compared the social and emotional relationships people have to the crops they harvest, drawing a comparison between her own research in Kalimantan with swidden agriculturalists and the work of Sidney Mintz (1960). In *Worker in the Cane* (1960), Mintz describes an antagonistic – even violent –

relationship between laborers and the sugar cane they harvested on Puerto Rican sugar plantations. Mintz's descriptions of taking down the cane are dramatic. The plant is a sharp, dry, and adversarial. Tsing describes a different relationship between people in the Indonesian rainforest and the sugar they would find amidst a swidden; but unlike in Puerto Rico, cane is a treat. Sugar cane is not the same plant in these two sites. The cane in which Mintz's informants worked was a specific, standardized, industrial variety; the one that Tsing's informants discovered in swiddens was domestic, but not standard: a treat that resulted from Meratus farmers' cultivation of swiddens.

Contextualizing plants and the agro-environment into a larger moral economic system highlights how historical processes of trade, cultivation, and capital accumulation inform local and transnational frameworks for social and environmental sustainability. In this dissertation, I suggest that nostalgia for the past and visions of the future are about the health and well being of the plantation landscape; they are critiques of present day conditions.

Anthropology, Justice, and the Materiality of Nostalgia

In Darjeeling, discourses about the reproduction of plantation families (both fictive and actual) blended with ideas about economic production (di Leonardo 1987; Lamphere 1985). Women's use of kinship metaphors (*buro*, *nani*) for tea bushes provide a window into the material and ideological production both of Darjeeling's capitalist plantation system and of workers' "consent" to remain in the labor process from

generation to generation (Burawoy 1979). Tea plantation labor was not just bodily; it was also affective (see Hardt 1999; McElhinny 2010; Muehlebach 2011). Laborers used kinship metaphors to explain planters' obligations to care for plantation laborers through the provision of "facilities," and tea laborers' mutual obligation to care, or perform "affective labor," in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's (2000) terms, for the tea bushes blanketing the Darjeeling landscape.¹⁵ Women's nostalgia for the "industrial" period of British plantation management – when fictive kinship relationships and actual economic relationships ensured a vital, productive landscape – was an assertion of the importance of the labor process to the value of Darjeeling tea, an assertion that they made while planters were actively denying that labor process through the adoption of *bisnis* practices like fair trade and organic certification.

Women workers agreed that fair trade and organic certification were important *bisnis* strategies. Instead of working to revitalize the land, workers explained, planters used these strategies to make more money for themselves. Instead of uprooting and replanting old "*buro*" tea bushes, planters extended organic fields onto marginal forestland. *Bisnis* practices undermined relationships of care tea between pluckers and bush "children," ignoring women's affective labor. Women's nostalgia for the colonial period of plantation management amounted to an assertion of the importance of the labor process in the story of Darjeeling tea, an assertion that they made while planters

¹⁵ Throughout this dissertation, I maintain that plantation labor is simultaneously affective and oppressive. Women articulate their labors as care for an agro-environment, even if this agro-environment is owned and controlled by increasingly austere *bisnismen*. They also describe their work as tedious and difficult. For an excellent review of affective labor as it relates to issues of identity and belonging, see McElhinny (2010).

were actively denying that labor process. Despite appearing good for the environment and for labor, workers I interviewed saw organic certification as a strategy for extracting more money out of land and labor under Darjeeling tea. (Though, in this dissertation, I do not explicitly describe organic agriculture; instead, I take fair trade and organic as a complex. All twenty-eight fair trade certified plantations are also certified as organic. See Chapter 4.) Workers were not compensated any more for organic production, despite working “harder” as the result of certification. This additional labor was particularly aggravating because they knew that even though Darjeeling tea already enjoyed a high price both domestically and internationally, organic Darjeeling tea was selling for even more.

Narratives of decline and revitalization were commonplace throughout Darjeeling. In subsequent chapters, I examine the role of nostalgia in women’s visions of the plantation moral economy and its breakdown in: 1) planters’ strategies for reenergizing demand for Darjeeling tea through fair trade and organic production; 2) the postcolonial state’s remaking of Darjeeling tea into national patrimony through Geographical Indication; and, 3) male and female tea workers’ political discourses. I argue that tea workers’ participation in the most recent incarnation of the Gorkhaland agitation, a movement to create a separate, Indian Nepali (or “Gorkha”) state within the Indian federation, was driven in part by Nepali laborers’ nostalgic visions of their role in the development of the plantation landscape. Buyers, consumers, planters, and pluckers attributed Darjeeling’s distinction as a luxury tea with a certain *terroir* (or “taste of

place,” a flavor explicitly associated with the productive environment) to several factors, which I will discuss throughout the dissertation, including: the region’s unique labor force, the suitability of the landscape for tea-growing, the idealized reciprocity and moral economic balance between labor, land, and capital, and continued efforts to distinguish Darjeeling from other teas (and tea-growing regions) through fair trade and organic certification and Geographical Indication.

Indeed, it was the consistency of nostalgic narratives about moral economic relationships that I heard in different contexts and from different people that prompted the analytical frame for the dissertation. My analysis of these narratives of decline and visions of rejuvenation builds on a longstanding discussion within anthropology of the political deployment of affect and the ways in which ideas about past moral economic relations inflect contemporary visions for the future (see also Narayan 1989).

Plantation residents’ descriptions of industry and the idealized colonial plantation signal a variation of what Renato Rosaldo (1989: 68-87) calls “imperialist nostalgia,” a longing of colonizers for the pre-colonial cultures they “destroyed.” Among Darjeeling plantation residents, from Indian planters to Nepali laborers, I observed a kind of reverse imperialist nostalgia, whereby the decolonized longed for the colonial period. In Darjeeling, nostalgia for a stable (and in some cases, idealized and even Edenic) past served as a common starting point for ideas about reforms of the plantation. Indian companies took over plantations following Independence in 1947. The post-Independence era was tumultuous for Darjeeling tea laborers, who endured garden

closures, landslides, starvation deaths, and extensive pesticide use. By the early 1990s, Indian planters had responded by using international fair trade and organic certification schemes to find new markets. Planters often appeared to be genuinely reinvesting in the plantation, but as I will describe, even fair trade and organic plantation managers relied upon a nostalgic agrarian nostalgia to remake Darjeeling's future.

Anthropologist William Bissell (2005) describes a similar upsurge of colonial nostalgia as a commentary on urban development in postcolonial Zanzibar and calls for anthropologists to engage with disparate visions and ambivalent perceptions of the colonial past. I frame nostalgia, following Kathleen Stewart (1998), as both an affective and a narrative device, by which Gorkha tea workers, whose Nepali ancestors came to Darjeeling as migrant laborers during the British era, reinforced a sense of belonging in Darjeeling, asserted an affective connection to the product they cultivated and commented on the conditions under which they lived and worked. As Stewart argues, "In positing a 'once was' in relation to a 'now,' [nostalgia] creates a frame, a means of dramatizing aspects of an increasingly fluid and unnamed social life" (1988: 227). In the dramatization of the past, I argue, workers were imagining a future, what Vincent Crapanzano (2004) calls "a beyond." Nepali workers used nostalgia to assert their ancestors' own agency in the colonial encounter (see also Bashkow 2006: 60 for a similar example in Papua New Guinea).

Darjeeling tea workers neither lamented nor embraced tea's colonial past. In the infrastructure of contemporary Darjeeling, they saw the remnants of a stable moral

economy and productive tea industry. Workers believed that they could revitalize Darjeeling's infrastructure and landscape, but not through fair trade and organic certification programs, despite their popularity with planters. Instead, plantation workers turned to subnational politics. In particular, aspirations for change and visions of a better future were bundled into an English word, "justice," which was deployed both in public political rallies and at home. Nepali tea laborers articulated justice in moral economic terms in which monetary and non-monetary remuneration were both important. While a focus on moral economy might emphasize the binary relations between workers and management, or between labor and capital, in the ethnographic descriptions that follow, I reveal a tripartite relationship that includes workers, managers, *and* the agro-environment (See Figure 1.2).

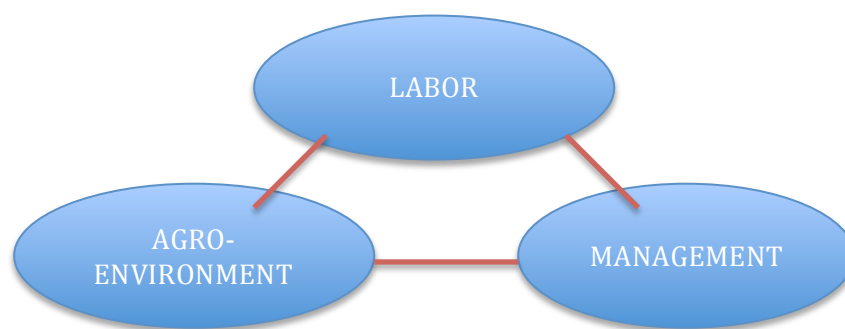


Figure 1.2: Rendering of the Tripartite Moral Economy

For Darjeeling tea workers, justice was inseparable from discussions of "Gorkhaland." The Gorkhaland movement arose in the mid-1980s in response to unequal development at the hands of the Indian state of West Bengal, of which Darjeeling has been a district since Independence. Gorkhaland calls for political and

economic self-determination for Indian Nepalis, or “Gorkhas.”¹⁶ (I will discuss senses of Gorkha identity in Chapters 3 and 6.) Gorkhaland activists demand the formation of a separate Indian state that would encompass all of Darjeeling, its tea plantations, and that would be governed by the district’s Indian Nepali majority. The Gorkhaland movement of 2007-2011 was distinguished by a head-on recognition of the fact that Darjeeling tea, tea workers, and the environment that connected them had a common past. In this sense “justice” was, to adopt Charles Piot’s (2010) terms, a kind of “nostalgia for the future.” Gorkhaland and its imagining of the revitalization of the plantation are akin to Togolese imaginaries of transcendence through international visa lotteries and Christian end time narratives (Piot 2010). Gorkhaland was a transcendent imaginary, but unlike Piot’s descriptions of Togolese aspirations to mobility, it was also an imaginary that rooted Gorkhas in the Darjeeling landscape – in town and on tea plantations, as well as in the roads, rivers, and infrastructures that connected them.

Darjeeling town, perched above valleys of green tea bushes, has a distinctly British feel, dotted with gabled Tudor cottages and bungalows tucked behind groves of evergreen *duppi* trees (*cryptomeria japonica*) imported by the British to make the landscape look more “natural” (Kennedy 1996: 39-62). Darjeeling’s landscape is covered with potholed roads, dried up water pipes, mildewed bungalows, and overgrown *duppis*. These physical remnants of colonialism constitute what Ann Stoler (2008) calls “imperial ruins.” Stoler, whose ethnographic work has largely been on plantations in colonial Indonesia (see Stoler 1986), frames “ruins” as “what “people are

¹⁶ For a discussion of ethnicity and the politics of recognition in Darjeeling, see Middleton (2010, 2011).

'left with' ... the material and social afterlife of structures, sensibilities, and things" (Stoler 2008: 194). Stoler's concept of the "ecologies of remains" (2008: 203), assists me in analyzing the materiality of pluckers', planters', and Gorkha politicians' imaginaries of the Darjeeling landscape, showing how nostalgia imbued the landscape with romantic histories and transcendent futures. Imperial ruins, particularly "facilities" like the community house I described in the opening of this chapter, provided material evidence of balanced moral economic relationships and were central to demands for "justice."

Among tea laborers, discussions of Darjeeling's imperial ruins often evoked a nostalgia (by definition, a selective remembering) for the times and conditions under which they were built. These descriptions did not advocate a wholesale return to the colonial condition, however; instead, Gorkhas tell stories of the material environment to evoke a *shared* past and imagine a shared future. This was a past that linked Gorkhas to the construction of Darjeeling. Colonial labor rooted them in the landscape. Keith Basso (1996: 5) describes a historically informed process of world-building as "place-making," a "tool of the historical imagination." Remembering is a vehicle for imagining:

What is remembered about a particular place – including, prominently, visual and verbal accounts of what has transpired there – guides and constrains how it will be imagined by delimiting a field of workable possibilities...[I]nstances of place-making consist of an adventitious fleshing out of particular historical material that culminates in a posited state of affairs, a particular universe of objects and events – in short, a *place-world* – wherein portions of the past are brought into being (Basso 1996: 5-6).

Place-making is a means of making the past, or perhaps even inventing or revising it.

For Gorkhas, place-making was about making what happened in the past in Darjeeling –

the colonial construction of its plantations, roads, forests, and bungalows – a part of contemporary Gorkha identity.

“Justice,” too, was a dialogue about the past. Justice was a narrative of place-making. Justice highlighted the building of Darjeeling and revised the past to make Gorkhas central to the building of actual discrete locations in Darjeeling, but also to the whole of the nation. In the British and Indian armies, Gorkhas defended and died for India. According to many Gorkhas with whom I talk, therefore, such service justified their belonging in India. Justice was a transcendent imagining of the future that relied on the narration of the literal making of a place in the past. Justice was also a prescription for the revitalization of the Darjeeling landscape.

Gorkha calls for “justice” cannot be fully understood outside the context of a nostalgic and affective grammar that includes not only women workers’ longings for “facilities” and “industry” but also planters’ narratives of plantation revitalization. For their part, the Indian planters that Bishnu and Jethi described as “businessmen” were also keenly interested in revitalizing Darjeeling tea plantations. In the years leading up to the 2007-2011 Gorkhaland agitation, they discovered that by marketing their products as “organic,” “fair trade,” or “geographically indicated” they could sell at higher prices and find new markets. Planters’ nostalgia, manifested in fair trade and organic training as well as in marketing that centered around Geographical Indication (GI) status (a WTO governance regime that aims to “protect” certain products with a distinct *terroir* from market-based adulteration), was, like women’s longings for “facilities,” peppered

with images and imaginaries of a balanced agro-environment. As I argue in Chapters 4 and 5, planters' visions of an agrarian imaginary (see Guthman 2004) held the gentleman farmer, not the worker, at its center, obscuring the role of labor in the making and maintenance of the tea landscape. While discussions of nostalgia often emphasize the plurality and elasticity of the past, my field data revealed the capability of a fairly *limited* set of nostalgic tropes – namely, narratives about past moral economic relations between workers, managers, and the landscape as manifested in imperial ruins – of yielding a multiplicity of possible futures.

Narratives of Ascension and Decline

Between 2008 and 2010, I heard Darjeeling tea laborers, planters, and townspeople alike all agree that Darjeeling and its tea are famous the world over. Some traced the fame of the place and its signature products to the misty mountain climate or the loamy soils; others talked about the work ethic of the Nepali laborers; and others mentioned the importance of the general *wastu* (property or place in a spiritual geography) of the region for this distinction.¹⁷ But most of all, people in Darjeeling credited the presence of the British (planters, scientists, capital) for the success of Darjeeling tea. Tea workers and planters alike described the formative years of Darjeeling and its tea plantations as a period of prosperity and stability, when the production-consumption circuit was solid, when there was “respect” and “discipline” –

¹⁷ *Vaastu* was also a concept used to explain why certain valleys or plantations in Darjeeling had better tea or were generally more successful than others.

cognate concepts for a stable moral economy – on plantations, and when there were enough jobs to go around (particularly for men). Male planters and plantation residents evoked these concepts to explain that planters and workers each had roles to play and that as long as each party respected the other, the plantation would run smoothly. Mutual respect among laborers and planters for the role each played in the larger plantation system enabled stable plantation production.

Both laborers' and planters' narratives of past stability and prosperity contrasted with experiences of 20th century decline. I discuss their respective visions of "decline" in subsequent chapters. For workers in particular, historical narratives, which often drew upon descriptions of Gorkha-British relationships of respect, served to comment on and solidify their senses of belonging in the region. Indian Nepalis in Darjeeling, particularly after Independence, drew upon collective memories of early days of the settlement and development of Darjeeling to forge a collective sense of quasi-diasporic identity, as "Gorkhas."¹⁸

During my research from 2008 to 2010, the leaders of the Gorkhaland agitation maintained that the money made from tea production stayed in Kolkata and did not travel "back up the mountain" to Darjeeling. Gorkhaland activists blamed West Bengal politicians for the lack of reinvestment in the marginal lands in the North of their state. From 1986 to 1988, Subhas Ghising, who grew up on a Darjeeling tea garden, and his political party, the Gorkha National Liberation Front, led a largely male-driven revolt for

¹⁸ I say quasi-diasporic identity, because Indian Nepalis, or Gorkhas, often do not consider themselves part of the Nepali diaspora. At the same time, as I will show throughout the dissertation, Gorkhas (particularly politicians) asserted connections to the Nepalese nation state and the Nepali diaspora (see Hutt 1997).

a separate state within India, the first Gorkhaland agitation (Ganguly 2005; Subba 1992).

In late 2007, another tea garden resident, Bimal Gurung, and his party, the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM), revitalized the Gorkhaland movement. Ghising, Gurung, and their supporters criticized West Bengal politicians for neglecting their constituents in the Darjeeling hills. In public rallies, these men talked about a lack of development, corruption, environmental degradation, and neglect experienced by Darjeeling residents at the hands of West Bengal. The once pristine and productive landscape of Darjeeling had been degraded by decades of political neglect.

Carolyn Merchant (1995, 2003) explains that the story of Western civilizations since the 17th century can be conceptualized as a grand narrative of fall and recovery. The concept of recovery, as it emerged in the 17th century not only meant a recovery from the original Fall from the Garden, but also entailed restoration of health and reclamation of land and property (Merchant 1995, 2003). According to Merchant, the origin story of capitalism is also a narrative of decline and recovery: it is a move from the desert back to the Garden through the transformation of undeveloped nature into a state of civilization and order and the conversion of natural resources into commodities (1995: 136). Fair trade, organic, Geographical Indication, and Gorkhaland are all practices of trying to salvage the environment for capitalism. They are recovery narratives; they narrate the recovery of certain social and environmental relationships.

Narratives of ascension and decline are important to understanding belonging and identity on Darjeeling tea plantations. Historians and anthropologists have

highlighted that narrative helps give shape and order to a series of events (Cronon 1992; Garcia 2008). Narratives also help us connect what happened in the past to what is happening in the present. They present us with causality. William Cronon explains: “When we describe human activities within an ecosystem, we seem always to tell *stories* about them. Like all historians, we configure the events of the past into causal sequences – stories – that order and simplify those events to give them new meanings” (1992: 1349). I am extending Cronon’s theories of the work of environmental history to frame non-historians’ environmental knowledge and senses of chronicity. In my discussions of the historical basis for the Darjeeling distinction, I attempt to cross-pollinate Cronon’s ideas about narrative, causality, and chronicity in environmental history with the work of Keith Basso (1996) on place and meaning. Like the historians Cronon refers to, tea workers and town residents described the history of Darjeeling as one of accession and decline to give meaning to the present – to highlight unfavorable working and environmental conditions. Darjeeling residents’ narrative depended upon a sense of past, present, and future.

Chronicity, as Kirin Narayan has argued, “gives narrative an impression of lifelikeness that can recruit imaginative empathy” (1989: 243). Scholars and the storytellers they study both do this recruitment. Similarly, Renato Rosaldo (1989) highlights that narrative, as an analytical tool, operates on a “double vision,” which

...oscillates between the viewpoint of a social analyst and that of his or her subjects of study. Each viewpoint is arguably incomplete – a mix of insight and blindness, reach and limitations, impartiality and bias – and taken they achieve

neither omniscience nor a master narrative but complex understandings of ever-changing, multifaceted social realities (Rosaldo 1989: 127-128).

In his essay on narrative analysis, Rosaldo discusses E.P. Thompson's (1971) use of "melodrama" in just this sense. Melodramatic narratives about the lives of working class people in Victorian Britain both draw readers sympathetically into their stories and, Rosaldo suggests, capture the aesthetic mood of working class people steeped in a moral economy in which melodramatic storytelling was highly salient.

I was struck by the consistency with which people at all levels of the tea industry, as well as Darjeeling residents, talked about Darjeeling as a narrative of ascension and decline.¹⁹ Planters, pluckers, tourists, tea buyers, and bureaucrats all seemed to orient their experiences in the "ethnographic present" in a chronological fashion, from a "better" distant past to a deteriorated not-so-distant past, to a revitalized future, but the details of this orientation varied. Planters and pluckers used the tropes of ascension and decline to radically different ends. As Rosaldo points out later in the same essay, anthropologists—perhaps unlike historians—must reconcile the viewpoints of a multiplicity of narrative "protagonists" within a single analytical framework (Rosaldo 1989: 141). The trajectory of ascension and decline, then, is my own analytical framing of the disparate narratives my respondents told about their environment and the moral economy in which they lived. I, too, hope to draw readers sympathetically into the worlds of Darjeeling residents. In this chapter, I use narratives of the decline from *industri* to *bisnis* as an analytical tool for understanding workers' perspectives

¹⁹ Interrogating the concept of "improvement" colonial environmental history has been popular (see Grove 1995; Beattie 2012; MacKenzie 1990; Sivaramakrishnan 1999)

environmental degradation, political instability, and social justice. In subsequent chapters on fair trade and geographical indication, I will confront other actors' ways of framing ascension and decline.

Throughout this dissertation, I oscillate between tea workers' discussions of the past, in which they described the importance of the British in the making of the Darjeeling distinction and the role the British played in validating their belonging in India, and British accounts of hill station development, plantation expansion, and labor recruitment. In Darjeeling, perceptions of the past and of the development of Darjeeling and its plantations are integral to understanding the present, in particular the politics of the Gorkhaland movement. Gorkha politicians drew deftly on *itihās* (history) to express belonging in post-independence India, while also explaining why they and Darjeeling did not belong in West Bengal. In Nepali or English, in archival works from the 1880s or 1980s, or at tea stalls in remote villages or over coffee and crust-less sandwiches in Raj-era era cafés in town, during my fieldwork, people told the story of Darjeeling: why it was special, how the workers got there, and how good it used to be. Through these narratives, I aim to illustrate how Darjeeling's distinction stems not from Darjeeling's inherent qualities as a place for growing "good" tea. Instead, Darjeeling's distinction is a product of a distinct set of historical and cultural factors.

Home and Work: Colonialism, Facilities, and the Making of the Darjeeling

Landscape

From 2005 to 2008, Kopibari Tea Estate (a pseudonym) was “closed,” meaning that management had left the garden, all work had stopped, and plantation workers were not receiving wages. Struggling for ways to feed and clothe their children, many female tea laborers walked up the mountainside to look for work in Darjeeling town. They broke rocks for the construction of new hotels and private luxury houses and portered luggage and goods around the crumbling roads. As a porter or a rock breaker, a woman could earn more than she would on the plantation, often in the same number of hours.

When Kopibari reopened under new ownership in 2008, however, most of these women came back to work on the plantation, despite making less money and knowing that the new owner had a reputation for being a “*pukka* [real] *bisnismen*,” the kind who not only skimmed on facilities and cut benefits, but also had all thirteen of his plantations certified fair trade and organic. After Kopibari reopened, I accompanied a group of women as they plucked tea from the “first flush,” the first harvest during the spring. Every day, these women worked from 7:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. They set out to pluck in regular groups, meandering through the rows of tea bushes, planted along the sheer hillsides, searching for the youngest sprigs of green tea. One by one, they scanned the flat tops of the bushes for the supplest leaves and buds and tossed fistfuls into the *taukoris* strung from their heads.

After several days of plucking with these women, I asked them why they chose to return to the plantation, knowing that they could earn just as much—if not more—working in town. One woman answered: “That’s not good work. On the plantation, we have *facilitiharu*. And it is close to home.”

Another woman explained that the plantation was a stable workplace: “It’s easier here. We have to make our children food in the morning and we need to be there when they get home from school. We can’t do that when we work way up there.” She pointed using her pursed lips to the distant Darjeeling town, perched on the hillside above where we were plucking tea. “Here we get medicines, rice, and flour...And when there is plucking we can leave our children in the crèche. We can’t bring them with us when we go up there.”

The plantation was an attractive place of *work*, then, because it was also *home*. The conflation of home with work was central to workers’ conceptions of the plantation moral economy and ultimately to the senses of belonging expressed in the Gorkhaland agitation. Rather than being at odds, home and work on the plantation were sutured together.

This worker was earnest in her insistence that plantation working conditions were superior, yet what she described was far from the reality I have documented elsewhere (Besky 2010). Facilities remained scarce. Still, the *idea* that the plantation was a more humane workspace than town held sway. Idealized – and, I argue, nostalgic – plantation imaginaries, buttressed by the affective kin terminologies I described in this

chapter's opening vignette, held sway in labor-management relations as well. Two times a day, garden supervisors weighed and recorded the amount each woman harvested. On some gardens, supervisors inspected for darker, coarser leaves, known as "mother leaves," (in English, though many workers would also call them "third leaves")²⁰, deemed too old and tough to make proper Darjeeling tea. In 2010, women received a daily wage of 63 Rupees (just above \$1) per day, plus a small per-kilo incentive of a few Rupees. This incentive was harder to come by when plucking old, less productive bushes. Women workers referred to garden supervisors as "uncles," specifically *kaka* (father's younger brother). On Darjeeling plantations, "uncles" helped negotiate the relationships between workers and management. In exchange for women's care for tea bushes, *kaka* was to ensure that the company, run by an owner in Kolkata, provided "facilities" on tea gardens (see Chapter 3). During my fieldwork, as during the colonial era, most plantation men sought employment away from the garden in army regiments and cities and remitted money to their homes in Darjeeling, a practice familiar to Nepali men across the region (Seddon et al. 2002)

Piya Chatterjee (2001) has interpreted discourses of *mai-baap* (mother-father) patronage on Dooars plantations as a metaphor for postcolonial plantations. She explains that in the Dooars, "The planter sits astride a pyramid whose base is field labor" (2001: 6). While it is true that the plantation is a system governed by longstanding paternal and hierarchical relationships, I interpret metaphors of the plantation family in Darjeeling as a way for female tea workers in the hills north of Chatterjee's fieldsite to

²⁰ Most field and factory terms related to tea manufacture were used in English.

place *themselves* at the within the plantation hierarchy as “mothers” to tea bush “children.” This hierarchy was imbedded in a landscape that they understood as both a place of home and a space of work. I see kinship metaphors as enabling women both to resolve the dual home-and-work nature of the plantation and to not only situate themselves in the plantation hierarchy, but also imaginatively transcend its oppression through creative acts.

Humans	
male	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “<i>baaje</i>” (grandfather) – plantation owner/planter of <i>industry</i> [alt. “father;” used often to describe the nostalgic figure of the “gentleman planter”] • “<i>baau</i>” (father) – “garden <i>baau</i>,” higher-level <i>Nepali</i> field managers • “<i>kaka</i>” (uncle) – “father’s younger brother,” field supervisors or <i>duffdars</i> – <i>sardars</i> were also “uncles” (often used in English)
female	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “<i>didi/bahini</i>” (sister elder/younger) – women within the same plucking group [including female anthropologists] • “<i>kaki/pupu</i>” (aunt) – alternatively, women within the same plucking group • “<i>bhoju</i>” (grandmother) – referring to the work of planting new bushes and to the relationship between workers and tea. • “<i>aama</i>” (mother) – as in the fictive kin relationship between female workers and <i>nani</i> tea bushes
Plants	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “<i>nursuri</i>” (nursery) – where tea seedlings are grown before being planted • “<i>nani</i>” (children) – as in tea bush children; what workers called young bushes • “<i>mother leaf</i>” (in English) – the third leaf beneath the “two leaves and a bud” (In Nepali: <i>ek patti dui suero</i>) – the young supple shoots that pluckers wanted to find • “<i>buro</i>” (old, used for men) – a dry and unproductive bush that did not readily produce “two leaves and bud.”

Figure 1.3: Plantation Kinship

Beginning in the late 1850s, British planters provided housing, food rations, and gardening plots to recruit Nepalis to tea plantations. In eastern Nepal, Rai, Gurung, and Tamang peoples had been pushed off of their lands by the Rana monarchy. Planters

relied upon Nepali-speaking labor recruiters, or *sardars*, to bring these villagers to Darjeeling and oversee their welfare on the plantation. Recently de-landed tribal peoples from Eastern Nepal re-created kin and social networks on British plantations in Darjeeling. Even in the early days of Darjeeling tea development, each plantation set aside land for workers' cultivation and herding and also provided medical facilities and housing.²¹ Crucially, the British hired whole families to work on Darjeeling plantations. Unlike in other British colonial enterprises, such as the mines, jungles, railroads, and factories, children on Darjeeling tea plantations could pluck and sort tea alongside their parents.²² Women, children, and men all labored in the fields of tea plantations; they were "coolies" – a colonial term for manual, often non-gendered, labor.²³

Workers' houses were located in "labor lines," which sprouted up amidst the expanding fields of tea.²⁴ These long rows of laborers' quarters remain the core of many plantation villages. Workers described these older wooden structures, "left behind" by colonial planters, as superior to the bamboo shacks (*kachaa* – "raw" – houses, as compared to the *pukka* – "real" – wood ones) that became popular during periods of increased austerity in the years after Independence.

²¹ My archival research, including planter diaries and Indian Tea Association archives, reveals that Darjeeling labor practices were unique because there was no district-wide recruiting system, as in Assam and the Dooars. Early planters could not effectively indenture local populations to work; instead, planters saw recruitment of the type I describe here as much more effective for maintaining a quality labor force.

²² Stolcke (1988) described a similar phenomenon of family employment in Brazilian coffee.

²³ "Coolie" is a term used colloquially to describe a range of laborers, and is generally thought to be derived from the Tamil word for wage, "*kuli*" (Sharma 2011: 73)

²⁴ Houses were organized into lines to facilitate monitoring and surveillance of "coolies." These lines have since filled in and spiraled outwards to create dense plantation villages amidst the fields of tea.

The British also left ideologies behind. As in other colonial contexts, the British racialized the labors of colonial life in Darjeeling. Nepalis were characterized in 19th century texts as “good workers:” amicable, brave, and industrious (Golay 2006). Nepali male migrants worked in and around town, building and maintaining roads and a rail system, planting rubber and cinchona trees, and working in and maintaining a growing number of vacation bungalows. Nepali men, or “Gurkhas,” were deemed a “martial race” by the British and recruited into army service across the Empire. According to a British cultural taxonomy of labor, while men were recruited into military service around the Empire, Nepali women were suited to work in tea fields and bungalows. A popular turn-of-the-century travel guide called the Nepali workers, “a happy-go-lucky lot, cheerful and in good condition. In fact, just the reverse of the Bengali laborers in every respect. They are well paid and well housed, and each family has its little patch of [land for] cultivation rent free...” (*Newman’s Guide* 1900: 50-51). By the mid-19th century, Nepalis were routinely recruited into the British Army and were praised as loyal, courageous, and strong (Des Chene 1991; Caplan 1991, 1995). Gurkha regiments defended British interests across the Empire well into the 20th century. For example, they were deployed to quash Indian rebellions against British colonists, most notably the Sepoy Rebellion in 1857. The same guide explains that “Gurkhas” were “naturally a warlike race, and are willing to indulge their fighting proclivities on every possible opportunity” (*Newman’s Guide* 1900: 81)

Few Nepali tea laborers returned to Nepal, and over time, they developed a single collective Nepali identity in Darjeeling. Though they did not abandon the tribal identities that distinguished them in their own country, Gorkhas I met during my fieldwork assented to a British cultural taxonomy that defined them as adept laborers: brave enough to be good soldiers, but also amenable enough to work as servants in the homes and gardens of the British residents of Darjeeling (Chatterjee 2001; Golay 2006). It was their role as servants on both the domestic and imperial scales that rooted them in Darjeeling. On the plantation, these ideas of labor and belonging were doubly relevant. The plantation, built by Nepalis alongside the British, was both homeplace and workplace. Tea workers and labor officers told me that Darjeeling tea plantation villages were not like those in other parts of India. In an interview over a pot of tea at Glenary's, a century-old German bakery in the center of town, a West Bengal Assistant Labor Commissioner explained in an interview with me:

You walk into a Nepali house and you see a sitting room, with all the furniture covered with the finest decorations they can afford. Their house, this room, is like a bank account – you can see years and years of collective family savings...but, they don't even own the land under it. These housekeeping skills, you know, they learned them from the British. The gardens, potted plants, little doilies... you don't see that anywhere else but in Darjeeling. They don't do this in the Dooars or Assam.

In fact, their houses are actually detrimental...they are misleading of the actual economic status of Nepali laborers. Tea buyers and tourists go down there and all they can talk about is how wonderful a tea worker's life is...they see their houses and they think that they are well cared for. They never ask *who* built those houses. You know, every year the garden has to build 8% new houses. They never do, because you know what the fine is [for noncompliance]? A couple thousand rupees [one new house costs at least 50,000 Rupees]...the companies

pay it.²⁵ They have all this money and they don't care. The laws exist to make workers' lives better, but it is cheaper to just pay the fine. It makes me sick. But what can I do? This is not the era of gentleman planters.

Relationships of care were identifiable in Darjeeling's landscape of imperial ruins, from households to decrepit tea bushes. Affective labor was essential to nostalgia for "industry" in which women's affective labor and men's martial skill was reciprocated by planters' care. This reciprocity (or, rather, nostalgic narratives about it) reflected a past moral economy but one that nonetheless shaped workers' aspirations for the future. Ironically, as I show in the next section, planters believed that by instituting new productive practices, particularly fair trade and organic, they could not only restore a bygone tripartite moral economic relationship but also retrieve the figure of the gentleman planter. Of course, the gentleman planter that the Labor Commissioner was imagining never really existed. Rather, he represented the planter that workers conjured when they spoke of *industri*, a benevolent, paternal figure, quite at odds with the often harsh and licentious planters of the British era.

Distinction and the Uses of Nostalgia: Fair Trade, Organics, and Geographical Indication

In Darjeeling and other commodity crop producing regions in the Global South, fair trade and organic have become leading alternative ways of creating value. These certification schemes attempt to universalize and standardize agricultural ethics

²⁵ Planters have to build new houses for workers, but while the cost of building materials has gone up since 1951, when labor laws were drafted, the fines for noncompliance have stayed the same.

through calls for “fair,” “sustainable,” or “natural” production. Fair trade and organic certification are attempts to remake environmental commodities like coffee, tea, and sugar (crops crucial to the building of Empire) into crops of empowerment. Scholars have effectively questioned whether fair trade and organic projects are living up to their intended goals, exploring the effects of certification on cooperatives, highlighting the economic effects of certification (Bacon 2010; Moberg 2008, 2010; Dolan 2010), or the effects certification has on gender relations in producer communities (Lyon 2008, 2011).

In Darjeeling, the colonial-industrial plantation system has remained the dominant agro-environmental mode of tea production—fair trade, organic, or conventional—while elsewhere, banana, sugar, and coffee plantations have been converted to smallholder cooperatives. Fair trade projects in Darjeeling tried to apply a model developed among smallholders in agricultural cooperatives to wage laborers in a plantation system. Fair trade framed the decline of the tea industry as an economic problem (farmers without income) with an economic solution (loans for livestock and small businesses). Instead of questioning wage relationships, plantation hierarchy, or land rights, fair trade’s corrective to plantation production was to provide more opportunities for non-plantation labor (see Chapter 4).

WTO-backed Geographical Indication (GI) status, is a product of the intellectual property rights legislation in the TRIPS Agreement, protects the usage of the term “Darjeeling.” GI products have a distinct *terroir*, are grown in a bounded region, and are

popularly thought to be the work of craft production and localized “traditional knowledge practices.” As Champagne can only be produced in the Champagne region of France, and Kobe beef can only come from cattle raised in Kobe, Japan, Darjeeling’s GI mandates that only 87 plantations within the Darjeeling district of West Bengal can produce “Darjeeling tea.” Unlike Champagne, Scotch, or Camembert, Darjeeling is not historically the product of “craft” production; it is a highly industrialized crop that depends on a large low wage labor force. Darjeeling had to be recast as a Geographically distinct product with a unique *terroir*. Labor, which on Darjeeling tea plantations is far too visible to be simply ignored (as I would argue is the case in my reading of Champagne, Bourdeaux, and Scotch GI-related marketing materials), had to be enveloped into the *terroir* of Darjeeling tea. In doing so, an industrial crop was remade into a craft product and workers’ skill into “traditional knowledge” (see Chapter 5).

Darjeeling’s association with British luxury and refinement and its smoky muscatel flavor earned Darjeeling the distinction of being known as “Champagne of Teas,” fetching some of the world’s highest prices; however, in 2010, Darjeeling tea laborers remained India’s lowest-paid plantation workers. Darjeeling workers, regardless of whether they work on fair trade, organic, or conventional tea plantations, all receive the same wage for their work (Besky 2010).²⁶ GI, fair trade, and organic, as I

²⁶ In commodity crop producing regions, fair trade and organic have become increasing popular strategies amongst producers for reaching wider and more lucrative markets. Scholars have asked whether fair trade and organic projects are living up to their intended goals, exploring the effects of certification on cooperatives, highlighting the social and economic effects of certification in producer communities (see Lyon and Moberg 2010; Jaffee 2005). In Darjeeling, the plantation has remained the dominant mode of production—fair trade, organic, or conventional—while elsewhere, banana, sugar, and coffee plantations

will argue in Chapters 4 and 5, were attempts to restore a moral economy rooted in an agrarian imaginary, in which independent farmers traded “directly” with their consumers. Agrarian imaginaries rest on a nostalgic vision of agricultural life and labor. Julie Guthman (2004) explains that the “agrarian imaginary” is central to organic agriculture and the sociopolitical salience of the owner-operated farm, despite the fact that, as she argues, organic agriculture in the US (like organic tea production in Darjeeling) is highly industrialized and depends on ethnically marked and marginalized laborers (Mexican labor in the US, Nepali labor in Darjeeling).

Organic certification rests on a nostalgic image of a pre-industrialized agricultural system, free from the chemical inputs most readily associated with industrialized agriculture. The agrarian imaginary of fair trade, too, reifies independent farmers, while obscuring the plantation system’s reliance on stark inequalities between labor and capital. The agrarian imaginary cultivated through GI, fair trade, and organic envisions a particular agricultural moral economy – a state that existed before extensive capitalist production – through the balancing of international trade relationships (see Goodman 2004). Ironically, the “gentleman planter,” who seemed so absent from tea workers’ experiences at Kopibari and on other plantations across Darjeeling, was central to this nostalgic vision.

The imaginary of the tea plantation as a family-run business (or “garden”) seems incongruent with the plantation system, but for fair trade certifiers and international tea

have been largely converted to smallholder cooperatives. Fair trade projects in Darjeeling tried to apply a model developed among smallholders in agricultural cooperatives to the plantation system.

buyers, a key element of Darjeeling tea's revitalization was the "return" of owners to plantations. Even in the colonial era, plantation owners ran their businesses from Kolkata, the center of the tea trade and the region's primary port; they rarely lived on their plantations. Many people in the tea business saw an owner's presence in Kolkata as essential, not negligent. Fair trade enables plantations to trade "directly" with Western buyers, circumventing auctions and other institutions in Kolkata. Fair trade, then, enables owners to embody the agrarian imaginary of the owner-managed farm.

In congruence with Stewart's (1988) observation that nostalgia is a means of dramatizing everyday life, planters on fair trade and organic gardens drew on an agrarian imaginary in which the planter, as a caring steward of the plantation, lay at the center. As the owner of Makaibari Tea Estate, the first fair trade and organic plantation in the district, put it in a speech he regularly recited to visiting tourists and potential tea buyers, "I...put my heart and soul into saving the vanishing woodlands and liberating the people of the plantation" (Banerjee 2008: 9).

Determined to express love and concern for both earth and people, this planter and others recast themselves in the 1990s and early 2000s as stewards of the land. By the 2000s, such stewardship was becoming institutionalized. In the 1990s, Assam Agricultural University and North Bengal University began offering tea management degree programs. The purpose of these programs was to teach new planters to efficiently manage garden inputs, of which labor was only one. During my fieldwork, these two universities ran classes, and private tea companies and management

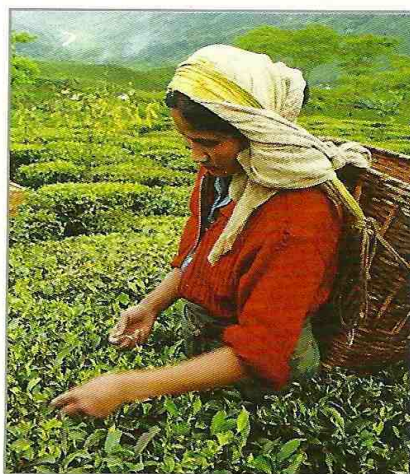
institutes offered similar courses. In these classes, aspiring managers learned that their primary obligations were to care for the bushes and the factory's processing machines. Instead of instructing planters to rely on laborers to care for tea bushes, management courses emphasized planters' responsibility to act as environmental stewards. In this new model, "planters" were explicitly recast as "farmers."

At the "National Seminar on Improving Productivity and Quality of Tea through Traditional Agricultural Practices," a 2008 course at North Bengal University, speakers advised planters who worked on gardens that would be exporting to Western countries to pursue organic certification to maximize profits on decreasing yields. Organic certification would help planters move mediocre and low quality tea, particularly to the United States, where the market for organic tea bags was booming (tea bags, which contain broken, dust-grade leaves, are considered inferior by tea connoisseurs). Despite the title of the seminar, little mention was made of tea laborers or their practices. A presentation by the head of the Assam-based Tea Research Association on "traditional" and "indigenous" knowledge in tea production made no mention of the relative novelty of tea in the Indian Himalayan landscape or of the knowledge of tea laborers, referencing instead Sanskrit texts about nature and agriculture, texts that long predate tea production. He and other lecturers replaced history with timelessness, avoiding questions of capital accumulation in an oppressive colonial and postcolonial system.

The Darjeeling Tea Association (DTA), the industry's principal marketing body, was one of the sponsors the National Seminar, along with various distributors of organic

fertilizers and herbicides. The DTA understood that the conversion to organic and fair trade practice would only be effective if the narrative of “traditional” agriculture in a “mountain paradise” was made replicable. A brochure distributed by the Tea Board of India and the Darjeeling Tea Association as part of Darjeeling’s GI marketing campaign and sent to potential buyers of tea depicts “life on the gardens” (See Figure 1.4).

Life on the gardens



It's an idyllic existence close to nature's heartbeat. That's what makes this tea so unique. The tea pluckers sing of the tiny saplings which bend in the wind as they work. A melody of greenness surrounded by blue skies and the sparkle of the mountain dews. And tied to the circle of life, the tea bushes sustain themselves day in day out, season after season, through the years. Life on a plantation is a completely natural, refreshing state of being.

Figure 1.4: "Life on the Gardens" (From DTA [n.d.] brochure, *Overwhelm Your Senses*)

These descriptions obscured the role of the labor process in the cultivation and valuing of Darjeeling tea. This passage appears next to a glossy picture of a beautiful Gorkha woman plucking tea amidst a field of green.

In her ethnography of female tea laborers on a Dooars plantation, to the south of Darjeeling, Chatterjee (2001) describes how popular tea brands like Brooke Bond and Celestial Seasonings sexualize female tea workers and fetishize their delicate hands. Chatterjee notes the way in which the feminization of tea merges ideas of labor and leisure, as the soft hands of tea pluckers (juxtaposed against their bent backs) echoes the soft touch of the genteel colonial female tea drinker, always an implied presence in contemporary, post-colonial tea marketing (2001: 48-43). The tea marketing for Darjeeling's Geographical Indication has transformed female laborers into "ecologically noble", ahistorical, and hyper-fertile features of the landscape (see Doane 2007, Krech 2000, Nadasdy 2005).

In this agrarian imaginary, Darjeeling tea becomes naturally occurring, rather than produced by skilled tea laborers:

The crafting of Darjeeling Tea begins in the field. Where women workers begin plucking early in the morning, when the leaves are still covered with dew...The tea is picked fresh every day, *as fresh as the crisp green leaves can make them*. The tea bushes are mystic messages on the Earth's canvas. [DTA n.d. emphasis added]

Through marketing, planters rendered a complex moral economic relationship between bushes, labor, and management into a single, fetishized, feminized element of mystical "nature." In essence, fair trade and organic marketing materials discursively deskilled

plantation laborers.²⁷ Through the figure of the gentleman-planter (the one so conspicuously absent laborers' eyes), organic and fair trade certification produced a sense that quality tea production was a result of the farmer's stewardship of a "natural" process. While there are possible positive health connotations to organic production (e.g. the reduction of pesticide use) and theoretically positive economic ramifications of fair trade (e.g. microloans, "supply chain integrity"), all rest on a nostalgic vision of human-environment relationships, in which the plantation labor process is naturalized. Both organic and fair trade are distinctly capitalist projects that drew on ideas about pre-capitalist relationships of natural, reciprocal care between farmers and plants.

Nostalgia for "Justice"

When workers described the decline of the Darjeeling tea industry and their visions for its revitalization, tea laborers drew not on the rhetoric of fair trade or organic but on a more holistic vision, conceptualized and expressed with the English term "justice." For these workers, justice was inseparable from discussions of "Gorkhaland." The Gorkhaland movement advocated the separation of the region from the state of West Bengal, of which it was a part in 2011. A new state of Gorkhaland would encompass all of Darjeeling, its tea plantations, and the Nepali laborers who constituted its majority. The Gorkhaland movement was distinguished by a head-on recognition of

²⁷ Stone (2007), too, argues that the genetic modification of commodity crops results in "agricultural deskilling." For Stone, agricultural deskilling is not simply the automation of farm tasks; it is the degradation of farmers' ability to perform and their ability to innovate. In the case of organic marketing, I argue, laborers are rhetorically deskilled.

the fact that Darjeeling tea, tea workers, and the environment that connected them were all products of colonialism.

Fair trade and organic certifications framed the revitalization of the Darjeeling tea industry as, respectively, economic and ecological processes; Gorkha tea laborers saw revitalization as a political process. Regeneration would come not from a return to colonialism or to a state of pristine nature but from a reinstatement (albeit with some updating) of the moral economic relationships that existed during the colonial era between Gorkhas, the state, and the land. While movements for organic, fair trade, and Geographically Indicated products drew heavily on nostalgia for the gentleman planter to naturalize the relationships between tea and labor, the Gorkhaland agitation used a parallel discourse of agrarian belonging to “naturalize” the connections between Indian Nepalis and the land on which they worked.

The Gorkhaland movement I observed was part of a longer agitation for the rights and autonomy of Indian Nepalis. After Independence, leaders of the *Nepali Bhasa Andolan* (Nepali Language Movement) fought for decades for language recognition on state and local stages. From 1986 to 1988, Subhas Ghising, who grew up on a Darjeeling tea garden, and his political party, the Gorkha National Liberation Front, led a largely male-driven revolt for a separate state within India, the first Gorkhaland agitation (Ganguly 2005; Subba 1992). In late 2007, another tea garden resident, Bimal Gurung, and his party, the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM), again rejuvenated Gorkhaland. Ghising, Gurung, and their supporters criticized West Bengal politicians for neglecting

their constituents in the Darjeeling hills. In public rallies, politicians spoke about the lack of development and increased environmental degradation experienced by Darjeeling residents at the hands of West Bengal, but they often did so by comparing the present to a less austere colonial past. By couching West Bengal government as more oppressive than the British one, they established a framework for political independence and control over the Darjeeling landscape. They called for a reinstatement of the “rights” of Gorkhas to sovereignty over the Darjeeling district. They traced these rights to colonial times, when Nepalese migrants and British colonists built the landscape together.

Darjeeling tea workers involved in the movement used the concept of “justice” to reference a future in which workers would control the land under tea. According to both male and female workers, a Gorkha-run state government would better manage Darjeeling and its tea plantations. After a hot sunny day of work in the field, I sat with Kamala, a tea worker on a fair trade and organic certified tea plantation, and her son, Vikash, drinking a cup of sweet black tea in the shade of her pukka house. This conversation illustrates widespread Gorkha aspirations:

Sarah: In the rallies, people say: “we want justice.” What is justice?

Vikash: Justice means that were are asking for our own land, if we get our state, our land, then we will be free.

Sarah: So, will life be different on the tea plantation in Gorkhaland?

Kamala: It becomes our own land.

Sarah: But it will still be owned by the companies, no?

Kamala: Sure, but that it is not important. The plantation – the factory and other things – will be the owner's, but the *whole land* becomes ours ...That means the *soil* is ours too. The owner will need to pay us. Today we get 60 Rupees. At that time we will get...200, and facilities!

...It's like this, at that time Darjeeling tea will become *Gorkha* Darjeeling tea, because we Gorkhas are working. But the land is not the owner's; it's the government's. Right now they pay taxes to themselves on the land. In Gorkhaland, they would pay taxes to us. And they would have to provide facilities...They will do it; otherwise they cannot have their big businesses here. Darjeeling has its name for tea.

For tea laborers, class and political identity as well as senses of environmental belonging were forged through tea plantation work and the histories of land, labor, and commodity production. Environmental historian Richard White (1996) argues that the labor process forges relationships between laborers and the environment. For Gorkhas, tea labor was a pretext for senses of environmental and political belonging. Tea plucking was part of a wider suite of labor processes employed in the construction of the Darjeeling landscape. In line with Locke's "labor theory" of property (and congruent with an agrarian imaginary that extends from the writings of Jefferson to the contemporary organic movement [see again Guthman 2004]), Gorkha laborers justified entitlement to the Darjeeling landscape their ancestors helped develop as laborers recruited by the British to make the tea landscape: clearcutting forests for tea fields, moving and breaking rocks for roads, and fashioning felled trees into a railroad to transport Darjeeling tea to the plains (Locke 1980). Gurung, Ghising, and other Gorkha leaders drew deftly on colonial history and the British cultural taxonomy of labor. Nepali laborers and British imperialists were both settlers in the hill station of

Darjeeling. They co-developed its landscape and turned it from a forested “wasteland” (Darjeeling’s colonial administrative category until 1910) into a productive tea district.

The discourse of justice hinged on the assertion of an historical linkage between Gorkhas and the “whole land” on which they worked and lived. Darjeeling tea’s tripartite moral economy – one that includes not just labor and management, but also the agro-environment – underscores a crucial *material* dimension of Indian subnationalism and prompts a rethinking of the dominant ideological basis of subnationalist movements. For Gorkhas in the late 2000s, labor identity, rooted in a relationship to the plantation landscape, was inseparable from ethnic identity. Tea labor (whether contemporary or rooted in family histories) was important to being “Gorkha.” Gorkhas’ nostalgic affinity for the British was part of a complex mimetic strategy (Taussig 1993). They used their social and historical relationships to the British to make their rights to the Darjeeling seem “natural.” Organic, fair trade, and GI *bisnis* stripped Darjeeling tea of its history: the very history that Gorkha politicians and tea laborers were invoking by collectively recalling the co-production of the landscape and of the industrial relations of the past. As I show in Chapter 6, Gurung, Ghising, and other Darjeeling residents drew deftly on colonial history and the British cultural taxonomy of labor. Nepali laborers and British imperialists were both settlers in the hill station of Darjeeling.

While Indian subnationalism is generally (including in the case of Gorkhaland) interpreted through linguistic and ethnic lenses (Golay 2006; Subba 1992), I will argue

in Chapter 6 that Gorkha tea workers drew upon labor and environmental histories to call for “justice” and to root those calls in place and materials as well. For both male and female workers, labor – in the tea industry, British army regiments, timber trade, bungalows, gardens, and all other forms of “service” – was essential to the making of productive landscapes and homes. In Darjeeling, agrarian imaginaries of the past helped envision a future in which tea and tea workers had a place in modern India.

Calls for Gorkhaland and narratives of “justice” drew attention to a history of moral economic reciprocity between Gorkha men and women, the landscape they constructed, and the British planter class in an era of *industri*. Gorkhas described the way in which, together, Nepali migrants and British colonists constructed a productive hill station, tea district, and space of leisure out of a forested “wasteland.” While Gorkha women worked in the tea fields and bungalows, Gorkha men were recruited into military service around the Empire. Nepali men clearcut tracts of forests and built the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, which transported coal and supplies up the mountain from the plains of Bengal. On its return trip to Calcutta, the Railway carried processed tea, forest products, and cinchona for passage back to the United Kingdom. Gorkhas I met during my fieldwork assented to a British cultural taxonomy that defined them as good laborers; brave enough to be good soldiers, but also docile enough to work as servants in the homes and gardens of British administrators in Darjeeling (Chatterjee 2001). In the next two chapters, I discuss the material and ideological bases of the Darjeeling distinction. In these chapters, I narrate the same time period (the early

1800s to Indian Independence) through two lenses, first, through the lens of environmental history (Chapter 2) and, second, through the lens of labor migration and identity politics (Chapter 3).

Chapter 2: *Toward a Historical “Ecology of Remains:” Environment, Labor, and the Making of Place*

During my fieldwork, women I worked with on plantations delighted in coming up to my house for tea on Sundays after shopping or party rallies, where they would critique my *ciyaa* making skills and take in the view of their homes from high on the ridge. Despite their excitement, when they arrived, tension was palpable, as this was a marked space, even decades after Independence. I had learned about the geographical tensions on the ridge from my 87-year old next-door Tibetan neighbor, Pala, who came to Darjeeling on a Buddhist pilgrimage from Tibet in 1943. He worked as a *mali*, or gardener, on the compound of bungalows where we lived, high on the ridge overlooking town. He told me that even decades after the Independence, the division between “uptown” and “downtown” Darjeeling was very stark. While the division was not as strictly enforced as it once was, he explained that even after Independence, for many years he and many others would walk long and circuitous routes, so as to not cross any of the *sahib*-only paths.

I spent much of my 2008-2010 fieldwork living in Darjeeling town, and my front door overlooked the vast flower and vegetable gardens of Campbell Cottage, perched high on the ridge of the town, looking in every direction over deep valleys of tea-covered Himalayan foothills. I used to watch the cottage gardener as he stooped over the bushes of fuchsia, picking off the withered flowers. It was here, in 1841, that the first Superintendent of Darjeeling, Archibald Campbell, a self-proclaimed naturalist and up-

and-coming British civil servant, planted tea seeds in his garden. He obtained his seeds from a trip to the Northwest Himalayas, where Chinese tea bushes had been recently made profitable by the denizens of another British Hill station, with the help of experienced tea laborers recruited from China (Sharma 2006). Campbell also knew that the tea industry in the region of Assam, to the east, had been booming in the last decade. Like most tea drinkers, Campbell believed that Chinese tea was superior to the less-flavorful, blacker Assam variety, and he believed that Chinese bushes could be successfully cultivated in Darjeeling, where the climate was similar to that of India's Northwest Himalayas and, more importantly, to that of southwest China.

Present-day Darjeeling town, perched high on a crescent shaped ridge, looks down upon the valleys of green tea bushes. The town maintains a distinct colonial atmosphere: gabled Tudor cottages and stone bungalows adorned with gingerbread ornamentation sit tucked behind towering iron gates and the dark shadows of *duppi* trees that the British imported to make the landscape look more in line with British ideals of a restful and natural landscape. These homes, gardens, and tree lined streets, built during the heyday of the British Raj, were attempts to make the wild and unproductive landscape of the Darjeeling foothills productive for both agriculture and domesticity. Since the 1830s, British colonial officers and foreign and domestic tourists have conceived of Darjeeling simultaneously as a site of leisure and as a site of industry. The opening of a popular history-cum-guidebook to Darjeeling trumpets the area's appeal as a site of leisure:

In the strenuous days when the struggle for existence shackles men to their desks, or keeps them tied to counters in the sweltering heat of the plains, the very mention of Darjeeling recalls memories of the last but too short week-end during which as much of the pleasure as was possible was pressed into it. And yet that word 'pleasure' conveys so much and sometimes so little, according to the idiosyncrasy of the individual, for some take their pleasures as they *come*: others *seek* them (Dozey 1922: 1).

Like others writing about the region for visitors, in elongated histories of the tea industry in Darjeeling, E.C. Dozey implores visitors to seek out the tea gardens. Another Darjeeling guide discusses the industrial quality of the gardens:

The plantations were models of neatness and order, and the planters are always willing to explain each process and the reason for it to visitors. The Nepalese coolies, too, are very interesting. In spite of a pretty liberal coating of dirt, some of the women are good-looking, and men and women alike are a happy-go-lucky lot, cheerful and in good condition. In fact, just the reverse of the Bengali laborers in every respect. They are well paid and well housed, and each family has its little patch of cultivation rent free... (*Newman's Guide* 1900: 50-51)

This dual nature of Darjeeling, as both a site of production and a natural refuge, was characteristic of hill stations across British India. Hill stations, as I describe below, were Edenic spaces for British settlers, populated by industrious settlers, colonial officials, and as these towns developed, these men's' wives and children.

Contemporary Darjeeling grew over, around, and within colonial infrastructures. Darjeeling's potholed roads, dried up water pipes, mildewed bungalows, overgrown *duppi* trees, and tea bushes are what Ann Stoler (2008) calls "imperial ruins": material symbols of British colonialism for Darjeeling residents, from tea pluckers, to merchants, to planters. The imperial ruins of Darjeeling are material conduits for stories about the British and the development of Darjeeling and its plantations and deteriorating

reminders of the role Nepalis played in the co-development of Darjeeling as a hill station and agricultural enclave. In this chapter, I narrate the ascension of Darjeeling and its tea industry, as well as a story of the construction of a colonial infrastructure that remains politically salient today. Here, I reconstruct Darjeeling's ruins, the material legacy of a once-robust colonial enterprise, and tell the story of the development of Darjeeling through them.

The duality of production and leisure is embodied in the words commonly used to refer to Darjeeling's tea plantations. In my fieldwork, I noted a complex linguistic dynamic, between the Nepali word for "plantation," "*kamaan*," used by workers to describe their workplace, and the English word "garden," used by planters and government officials to describe Darjeeling tea plantations. *Kamaan* is of disputable linguistic origin, derived from the English words "command" or "common," or perhaps even colonial British planters' use of "Come on, Come on" to communicate with tea plantation workers.²⁸ For women workers, *kamaan* evoked the oppressive aspects of plantation life: the repetitive plucking, pruning, and maintenance of a commodity crop. The use of *kamaan* reminded my interlocutors of the plantation land tenure system: that rich Indian men, "own" plantations²⁹, while they are staffed by thousands of low-paid

²⁸ In Hindi, "*kamaan*" also means "to be posted," implying a military connotation. In Ruth Laila Schmidt's *Practical Dictionary of Modern Nepali*, "*kamaan*" is indexed as "plantation" (a word unique to the Darjeeling dialect) (<http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/schmidt/> Accessed April 21, 2012). Schmidt notes that in Nepal one would be more likely to say "*ciyaa baarii*" (tea garden; literally "dry fields of tea").

²⁹ Technically, plantations are leased by individuals (known as plantation "owners" and/or "companies") from state governments. In the case of Darjeeling, tea plantation land is leased from the state of West Bengal. In order to make any substantive changes to land use, the plantation owner must first petition the Land Reforms office and receive written permission. The West Bengal Land Reforms Department

wage laborers of Nepali origin, who live in cramped villages (*busti*) amidst the sweeping fields of tea.



Figure 2.1: The *kamaan*. Photo credits: Das Studio, Darjeeling.

The “garden,” on the other hand, framed tea bushes as extensions of domestic space, with aging plants in need of familial “care” by women in order to remain productive. The use of “garden” reminded consumers and producers of Darjeeling’s origin as a British hill station, a refuge from the heat and disease of the plains and a site of social and environmental reproduction. In Darjeeling, both domestic and public spaces mimicked those of Britain – finishing schools, parks, and houseslot gardens (complete with celery, broccoli, and other plants brought from England).

oversees the lease and mandates what actions are permissible to leasehold land, while the West Bengal Labor Department oversees the treatment of workers and the Forest Department governs plantation forests.

In this chapter, I draw from both archival and ethnographic research that I conducted in the Indian Tea Association and Darjeeling Tea Association offices as well as the National Library, all in Kolkata, in 2009 and 2010. Tea workers and townspeople often reminded me that the successes of the Darjeeling tea industry would never have been achieved without the British. As I suggested in Chapter 1, the British plantation days were romanticized by workers, planters, and Darjeeling town residents as the times when the plantations, and Darjeeling in general, worked better – a time when the bushes were bursting with green leaf, when the gardens were financially successful, when laborers were treated better, and when men had jobs. Below, I explore the historical and material roots of Darjeeling’s distinction through the development of Darjeeling and its plantations, in both their *kaaman* and garden aspects. This chapter is an environmental history of Darjeeling and its tea. Darjeeling was born out of an ambivalent British relationship to Himalayan nature: one that oscillated between Edenic ideas and visions of productivity. Both garden and *kaaman* are visible in “imperial ruins,” the structures that Darjeeling residents have been “left with” (Stoler 2008).

Making a “Wasteland”: War, Annexation, and the Acquisition of Darjeeling

In the mid 1820s, The East India Company set up an experimental hill station in Cherrapunji in Assam, in hopes of establishing a retreat for ailing troops to convalesce. The damp weather and misty rolling hills reminded soldiers and officers of the British countryside. Cherrapunji turned out to be one of the wettest places in the world. The

whole settlement literally washed down the hillside in one of the first rainy seasons (Lama 2009: 51-52; Pinn 1987: 1). The East India Company rebuilt, but continued to look for something better. In 1828, The Company dispatched Captain Grant and Lt. General Lloyd to the Himalayan foothills west of Cherrapunji in hopes of finding a more favorable settlement (*Newman's Guide* 1900: 13).

A year later, Lloyd was again sent to the Darjeeling hills to settle a boundary dispute between Nepal and Sikkim. While in discussions over the border dispute, Lloyd negotiated the “gifting” of what became the nucleus of the present-day Darjeeling district to the East India Company from the Rajah of Sikkim.³⁰ This narrow strip of land, twenty-four miles long and five to six miles wide, hugging the ridge of the highest foothill in the region, included an important Buddhist-Hindu pilgrimage site, the Dorjeeling monastery, at one of the highest points on the ridge. Today, the area surrounding the monastery the ridge is considered “Darjeeling town.” Darjeeling quickly developed into a hill station (Pinn 1987: 1-3; Lama 2009: 58-71). For a decade after the signing of the Deed of Grant, the British paid a yearly allowance for the use of the Darjeeling ridge (Bhanja 1943: 12), but British-Sikkimese relationships continued to deteriorate.

³⁰ The Deed of Grant is often quoted in accounts of the period, both British and Nepali. “The Governor General having expressed his desire for the possessions of the Hills of Darjeeling, on account of its cool climate, for the purpose of enabling servants of his Government, suffering from illness to avail themselves of its advantages. I, the Sikkimese Raja, out of the friendship for the said Governor General, hereby present Darjeeling to the East India Company” (Biswas and Roka 2007: 3).

Some Darjeeling town residents cite the fact that Darjeeling was forcibly annexed from Sikkim as a reason why Darjeeling should join the contemporary Indian state of Sikkim. This was a less popular public held belief during the time of my fieldwork. It was, however, the belief of Madan Tamang and the All India Gorkha League (ABGL), the primary opposition party to the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM). I will return to a discussion of Madan Tamang in Chapter 3.

On an 1849 expedition to find an overland trade route through Sikkim to Tibet, the Superintendent of Darjeeling, Archibald Campbell, and the botanist Joseph Hooker, who was accompanying Campbell on the trip to research his *Himalayan Journals* (1854), were “kidnapped,” according to British officials, by the Rajah of Sikkim (Bhanja 1943: 12-14; Bhanja 1948: 19-23). After they were released in 1850, the British annexed the entire Darjeeling district (nearly 640 square miles). In 1865, the British annexed much of then southern Bhutan to acquire the rich agricultural regions of Kalimpong, an important regional trade center, and the Dooars (O’Malley 1907: 26-27).³¹

After the East India Company acquired the Darjeeling ridge in 1835, British administrators, fearing that Darjeeling would become another Cherrapunji, settled on the ridge for nine months and took copious notes on the temperatures, rainfall, and other environmental factors. They deemed that the ridge would be a favorable site for a sanitarium for British soldiers and officers suffering from tuberculosis, malaria, and other diseases, not only because of Darjeeling’s climate and environment, but also because they deemed the region to be uninhabited (Lama 2009: 59). Despite a population of nomadic (and therefore uncountable) Lepchas, the indigenous peoples of Darjeeling and Sikkim, Lloyd determined that there were “no villages” in the proposed settlement:

There are no villages in the Sikkim hills that I have ever seen, each man or family lives in the midst of his own cultivation, but there are collections of huts in a similar style with a quarter of a mile of each other, which scattered groups are

³¹ Even today, the Government of India continues to lease Kalimpong and the Dooars from the Kingdom of Bhutan. For further discussion of border arrangements and relationships between Bhutan and India (See Maxwell 1970; Deb 1976; Kohli 1993).

sometimes for want of a better name called villages...But I must explain that the Lepchas are migratory in their habits and quit the spot they have been cultivating at the expiration of the third year and take up a new location. (Lloyd quoted in Lama 2009: 59)

Both nomadic Lepchas and the land under which they practiced *jhum* (swidden) cultivation were both conceptualized as “free” (in contrast to “settled” agricultural land in Nepal) (Sivaramakrishnan 1999: 192-197). The fact that this land was deemed to be uninhabited led British cartographers and administrators to later categorize Darjeeling and its surrounding land, after the annexations of Sikkim in 1850 and Bhutan in 1865, as “wasteland.”

Darjeeling often fell through the cracks of colonial administration, changing administrative setups several times between its founding in 1835 and Indian Independence in 1947. After the Darjeeling municipality was incorporated, the responsibility of administration lay with its officers. Administratively, this meant that Darjeeling was marginally autonomous. Unlike elsewhere in colonial India, where Rajas maintained a marginal degree of control of the land inhabited and used by the British, the whole of the Darjeeling district was managed and controlled by British settlers and colonial officials.³² In 1865, the British solidified the boundaries of the present-day Darjeeling district and the entirety became classified as a “Non-Regulated Area”

(Darjeeling was given this classification prior to the annexation of Bhutan, but the dates

³² Darjeeling’s wasteland leases are different than the practices in colonial Assam and Bengal. The provincial governments of Assam and Bengal also instituted Wasteland Rules similar to Darjeeling, but for much larger tracts of land of 100 acres at the least. Applicants had to possess capital or stock worth at least Rupees 3 per acre. While this did not explicitly prohibit native elites from applying, the capital requirements greatly deterred them. In the rare cases when a local did have that kind of capital, they were rejected for obscure infractions (Sharma 2011: 34; see also Gidwani 1992).

recorded in secondary historical sources are contradictory). The classification of “Non-Regulated” meant that the acts and regulations of the British Raj (and the Bengal Presidency) did not automatically apply in the district, unless specifically extended. This categorization was generally applied to “less advanced” districts of the Empire (Rai 2009: 270-271; Tamang 2011).³³

Leases for farming and the improvement of “wastelands” were exceptionally favorable for settlers. British officer L.S.S. O'Malley (1907: 150-153) explains that the various permutations of Wasteland Rules (in 1859, 1864, 1882, 1898) made farming and, later, tea cultivation a financially lucrative venture by granting long lease periods and rent-free settlement for large tracts of uncultivated land (the 1882 Darjeeling Wasteland Rules specifically granted rent-free tenancy for tea cultivators). Wasteland Rules provided long-term leases of land (in the case of Darjeeling, they were on 99 year renewable terms). These leaseholds were granted to individuals who vowed to “improve” the land through various forms of productive work. Under the later rewritings of the Wasteland Rules, property rights to a leasehold became transferable between individuals. This enabled settlers to sell their land tracts (and the materials on top of the land) and transfer their leases to new “owners.” This ability to transfer leaseholds and sell property enabled the development of the Darjeeling tea plantation

³³ The term “Non-Regulated Area” was changed to “Scheduled District” in 1874 and again to “Backward Tract” in 1919. Darjeeling was also a “Partially Excluded Area” from 1935 until 1947. And briefly, in the late 1860s, the district was a “Regulated Area,” but not *part of* the Bengal Presidency (for more on the administrative history of Bengal and Darjeeling see: Samanta 2000: 77-84; Chatterji 2007: 117-118).

landscape (see Lees 1867 for a review of Waste Land Rules, native rights, and the imperative of “improvement”).

Eden and Empire: Darjeeling from Refuge to Industrial Landscape

Laid over the administrative history of Darjeeling is a larger, Empire-wide history of environmental and botanical extraction. Tea is perhaps the most well known botanical legacy of British rule in Darjeeling, but it was propagated along with a suite of other food and commercial crops. In fact, scholars of Darjeeling like myself who have also worked in Nepal (where you are more likely to see terraced rice cultivation and spread out village settlements) are often struck by two botanical anomalies: the multitudes of potted plants and the prevalence of broccoli in the local diet (Allendorf and Allendorf, personal communications). Darjeelingers grow flowers and other plants in everything from Lay’s potato chip bags to sections of bamboo. These plants adorn the windows and walkways of village houses. On dry afternoons, outside of the Darjeeling train station, the Toy Train’s last stop on its ascent from Siliguri, village women line up handfuls of broccoli, as well as celery, beets, and carrots that they carried up from their home gardens in the villages below. I never saw celery or broccoli in Nepal, nor did I see beets as juicy and plentiful as I did in Darjeeling. At certain times of year, the shared jeeps that ply the roads around the Darjeeling district would stop at villages known for their colorful root vegetables so that the passengers could bring some to their families in Siliguri or Darjeeling. I would often ask what they did with them. They used beets in

salads; they pressure cooked whole stalks of *seelary* along with yellow *daal*; *brookoli* (described as not quite as tasty as cauliflower) was used for *sabji* (vegetables, generally cooked), particularly in times when the preferred *raiko saag* (mustard greens) were wilted or expensive. The full-service hotels catering to international tourists served boiled beets, carrots, and peas, often for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

As the Assistant Labor Commissioner mentioned in the previous chapter, Nepalis were considered favorable domestic servants and gardeners and began to replicate British housekeeping practices in their own homes. Pala, my Tibetan next-door neighbor, worked as gardener on a ridge-top compound of old British bungalows owned by a wealthy Sikkimese family that allegedly helped broker several land grabs in the late 1800s. Pala told me about the massive gardens that he kept on the compound. To obtain seeds, he would go down to the Botanical gardens or to the numerous plant and bulb dealers in the bazaar that specialized in providing plants for British gardens.

Lloyd Botanical Gardens still sits below the bazaar on the sunny south-facing downslope of the ridge. During the colonial era, officials at the garden not only distributed plants, seed, and bulbs for home gardens and personal consumption, but also tested tea, cinchona, rubber, and other potential commercial crops. Colonial botanists and agricultural specialists, along with teams of Nepali laborers, grew out saplings of these plants for interested settlers for their commercial exploits and leisure activities (Kennedy 1996: 39-48). Lloyd Botanical Garden, too, embodied the *kamaan* and garden duality. It was a space of both relaxation – British residents could stroll through the

winding paths of the garden and rest in its gazebos – and propagation – of commercial and domestic plant varieties.

Botanical gardens were important to the “improvement” narrative of colonial expansion (Arnold 2005; Drayton 2000). In order for early European colonial agricultural projects across the globe to succeed, colonial governments in each of the new territories needed to understand the floras, faunae, and geologies of these new colonies so that they could be integrated into commercial use. Imperial botanical gardens aided colonial powers in their resource extraction and disseminated information on plants that would be “useful to the mother country” (Brockway 1979: 3). Kew Gardens in London was the center of a network of British imperial botanical gardens and regulated the flow of botanical information from core to periphery (Brockway 1979; Drayton 2000; Prest 1981). Decisions made at Kew had far reaching implications for colonial expansion. As the botanical gardens succeed in aiding resource extraction, botanical scientists working in the gardens or with trading companies became important colonial officials (Grove 1995: 8). Scientists had a major role in making the colonies profitable agricultural enclaves (Brockway 1979: 4-11). They answered important questions like: where to find plants that would fill current demand, how to improve plants through species selection and hybridization, how to implement new methods of cultivation, where to cultivate plants with cheap labor, and how to process these plants for the global market (Brockway 1979: 5). In his discussion of governance in colonial India, Thomas Metcalf argued that by the mid-1800s, the

discourse of “improvement” was consolidated into an ideology of imperial governance, inspired by the ideals of British liberalism (Metcalf 1995: 28; see Sharma 2011: 14 for a discussion of this ideological shift in colonial Assam). By the time colonial officers were planting tea in Darjeeling, botanical “improvement” was a key imperial discourse.

According to Richard Grove (1995), the establishment of botanical gardens by colonial scientists were attempts at paternalistic conservation, or “green imperialism.”¹ Environmental historian Donald Worster (1977: 29-55) suggested that environmental destruction has at its root an imperialist attitude towards the environment, but Grove refutes this thesis. Instead, he calls for scholars to challenge monolithic theories of ecological imperialism because, as he argues, they arise out of a misunderstanding of the heterogeneous and ambivalent nature of the early colonial state (Grove 1995: 6-7). Grove explains that modern environmentalism has its roots in both Orientalist discourse and ideas of Eden-like purity. The botanical garden became a metaphor of the purity of nature as well as human control over it (see Prest 1981). In botanical gardens, as Grove and Prest argue, an imperial “improvement” discourse and an Edenic vision of untrammelled “nature” blended. Both the natural world and the colonial state were heterogeneous, contradictory, and ambivalent.

Government nurseries and botanical gardens became productive social and ecological spaces in hill station communities across India. Hill stations served as the seasonal homes of British colonial officials, who retreated to these small towns to escape the heat and disease of the plains. A hill station had to be high enough to escape disease-

ridden “bad airs” and remote enough to provide isolation from the local people. At the time, illnesses such as malaria were associated with altitude, not with insects.³⁴ Hill stations – first Darjeeling north of Calcutta and later Shimla, in the Northwestern Himalayas and north of Delhi – also served as summer capitals for Empire and became important, although temporary, political centers (Kenny 1997). At the same time, hill stations were couched as places for leisure and play, much like seaside retreats such as Brighton in England.³⁵ The British modeled their hill stations in the image of the British countryside, a space of leisure and nature (Urry 1990, 1995).

The climate of the plains was the initial reason for the establishment of hill stations. Many travelogues comment that the cold weather was beneficial to the European constitution, while heat was debilitating (Kennedy 1990; Grove 2002; Kenny 1995). Government surgeons took detailed morbidity and mortality statistics in an attempt to determine the relationship between climate and health. They kept records of temperature, rainfall, wind, and other conditions trying to figure out what influenced the death rate in their colonial territories.³⁶ A “change of climate” became a popular

³⁴ According to Kennedy (1996: 10) there were about 65 hill stations. Nora Mitchell (1972), however, counted over 80 and constructed a typology of these settlements according to use and meaning.

³⁵ Hill stations had symbiotic relationships with particular cities, and they served as seasonal retreats and summer capitals. Darjeeling was to Calcutta, the first capital of British India, what Shimla was to Delhi, the second capital of British India. The British moved the capital to Delhi in 1911 to quell nationalist uprisings and revolutionary politics in Kolkata. For a detailed history of Shimla, see Kanwar 1990. Gorkhaland activists critique this city-hinterland symbiosis as distinctly unequal. With the formation of a separate state of Gorkhaland, they seek to break this historical tie.

³⁶ There is a large genre of work on how climate-based theories of health served as a justification for the establishment and development of hill stations in India (e.g. Spencer and Thomas 1948; Fayrer 1900; Clarke 1881; Campbell 1867).

prescription for those ailing in the plains. As more and more military and civil servants sought refuge in the mountains, these communities grew.³⁷

Darjeeling and other South Asian hill stations were romantic and quaint European villages, unlike the rest of regimented India. Streets were lined with gabled gothic villas, Tudor cottages, gingerbread ornamentation, and Swiss chalets (quite unlike the standardized verandahed bungalows across the Indian plains) as well as a multitude of schools. Unlike elsewhere in India, which was largely dominated by men, as the British presence in India grew, hill stations became the homes of women and children (Kennedy 1996: 117-146). The Darjeeling district became a site for the education both English and Anglo-Indian children (often the progeny of tea planters). Darjeeling remains home to several internationally renowned English-medium boarding schools (see Dewan 1991). Hill stations were sites of reproduction: an opportunity to reproduce the social and environmental conditions of home in colonial India (Kennedy 1996: 1-6).

Keeping a proper “English” garden and bungalow was central to British colonial domesticity. Judith Roberts (1998) highlights that garden cultivation was to create a familiar space and was crucial the psychological and physical wellbeing of colonists. Eugenia Herbert (2011) argues that British gardening practice was more political than simple nostalgia for home. Gardens and bungalows served to mark space as British and embed in the landscape distinct ideas about domesticity. Similarly, Alison Blunt (1999,

³⁷ In the case of Himalayan hill stations, administrators also constructed these settlements with an eye to developing overland trade route between Calcutta and Tibet (Kennedy 1996: 22-26). Hill stations were also sites for army cantonments. In Darjeeling, the army presence served to monitor the Nepalese Gorkha Empire on the other side of the Mechi River.

1997) suggests that the domestic spaces of women in British India were not separate from those of Empire. Instead, based on her analysis of household guides on subjects ranging from keeping servants to choosing a school for an India-born child (guides aimed at the wives of British civil servants, planters, and army officers), she argues that while these guides were aimed at a certain kind of social reproduction in India, the political significance of imperial domesticity extended beyond the boundaries of the home. From the late 1800s until Independence, the cultivation of British domestic space exacerbated tensions and literally created divisions between the British and native populations (Blunt 1999).

Through the introduction of new plants, animals, as well as other forms of landscape modification such as the construction of artificial lakes, the British remade the imperial landscape in accord with their views of “nature” (see Kennedy 1996); however, the physical environment was not the only thing that British settlers remade in their views of nature. They also constructed representations of the people who lived there as pure and worthy of a place in these Himalayan Gardens of Eden (I discuss this further in Chapter 3). Popular representations of the Himalayan region often include such descriptions of spiritual purity and rhetoric of a retreat from the ills of civilization (Bishop 1989, 2001; Hansen 2001; Kaschewsky 2001). This image was perhaps made most iconic in Alex Hilton’s description of Shangri-La in *Lost Horizon* (1933). Shangri-La is a spiritually and physically pure place without sickness, aging, or death, located in a valley of the Himalayas.

The purpose of the romantic constructions of local people, according to Kennedy (1996: 87), was to “fashion an image of these people as the noble guardians of Edenic sanctuaries.” British officials characterized hill people, like the Lepcha of Darjeeling, the Pahari of Simla, and the Toda of Ootacamund, with the simplicity and purity of Rousseau’s “noble savage.” British officials characterized the Lepcha as happy, gentle, and candid people – unsuited for working in manual labor on Darjeeling tea plantations (I will continue this discussion in more detail in Chapter 3). They constructed Lepcha as the moral antithesis to the people living in the plains, in what Edward Said (1978: 49-73) calls an “imaginative geography.” The Lepcha were thought to live closer to nature; they knew about the local flora and fauna and served as guides to the Himalayan interior.³⁸ According to the British officer L.A. Waddell, the Lepcha “represent(ed) the state of primitive man” (quoted in Kennedy 1996: 69). Sawyer and Agrawal (2000) explain that such colonial characterizations exemplify “environmental Orientalism,” a project that feminizes nature and those living close to it. This racialized and gendered rhetoric was at the heart of hill station life. Part of the experience of the hill stations was seeing the pristine primitive as well as the pristine nature (I will discuss this again in Chapter 5). The romanticized vision of the hill stations’ natives allowed colonists to

³⁸ Po’dar and Subba (1991) have more recently explored how Lepchas and other Himalayan people engage in what they call “Home-grown Orientalism,” in which Indians and “the other” actively recreate Orientalist discourses that highlight the primitiveness and the naturalness of hill people. The Lepcha and Sikkim have long been the interest of storytellers and ethnographers, Western and Indian, colonial and postcolonial. These writings date back to the work of the Superintendent of Darjeeling, Archibald Campbell (1869) in the *Journal of the Ethnological Society of London* and Geoffrey Gorer’s (1938[2005]) *Himalayan Village*. (See also Lama 1994; Sinha 2008; Tamlong 2008; Tamsang 2008; Tamsang 1983)

view their own effect on local people as a part of an “improvement” scheme accompanying their alterations to the landscape.

Despite an Edenist rhetoric of hill station settlement, Darjeeling was very much part of the Empire and vulnerable to the rampant extraction of resources. The foremost environmental repercussion of hill station development was deforestation. There was a tremendous demand for wood to make railroad ties, fuel, and building material. The introduction of tea in Darjeeling necessitated the clearcutting of massive tracts of forest. The British also believed that illness lurked in the thick forests of the Himalayan foothills, so they cleared out trees that might harbor disease. To reverse the ill effects of this rapid clearcutting, in 1865 the British designated all of the forest within a five-mile radius of Darjeeling town as a protected area.³⁹ In Darjeeling, like many other protected areas, guards were stationed to prohibit locals from using the forestland.⁴⁰

On tea plantations, too, planters began to perceive a relationship between clearcutting and erosion. Many planters began to reforest the plantation, particularly on the high and low sides of slopes as well as in *jhoras*, or drainage ravines (*Notes on Darjeeling* 1888). *Cryptomeria japonica*, a fast-growing conifer native to Japan, became the favored species for reforestation. *Cryptomeria* served also as a source of softwood timber, which British officials grew on clearcut tracts in out-of-the-way places far from

³⁹ This and many other local policies across the country culminated in India-wide regulations allowing individual states to protect large tracts of forest (see Keiter 1995 for a review of this process in the Himalayas).

⁴⁰ For related examples in postcolonial India, see Agrawal (1997) and Robbins, et al. (2009).

town centers (Kennedy 1996: 55-57; Dozey 1922: 156-160). The wood of the *cryptomeria*, or *duppi*, is reddish in color, waterproof, and resistant to decay; it was thus well suited for both home interiors and tea crates. The monsoons of Darjeeling made both construction and shipment difficult. *Duppi* helped solve both the erosion problem and the problem of how to house and ship processed tea. The evergreen *duppi* thrived and eventually became a symbol of the hills for both British and Gorkhas. As a monocultured secondary forest, *duppi* is not only invasive; it is also toxic. The towering evergreens have choked out other species, including potential food crops.⁴¹

Empire Grown Tea: Assam, the Northwest Himalaya, and Improvement

Hill station development, resource extraction, and landscape transformation in Darjeeling were propelled by the region's key commodity, tea. Today, each tea plantation is still organized around its processing factory. The smell of a tea factory is wonderfully pungent. A sweet earthy particulate-ridden fog brews inside. In the monsoon season, when bushes are their most productive (and in the case of Darjeeling, when production is in its least lucrative flush), the factory bustles with energy. Male factor workers roll empty wooden tea boxes in, and later roll them out filled with tea

⁴¹ *Cryptomeria japonica* was introduced in the Azores as well and has led to depleted bird populations and environmental degradation (Ramos 1996; Silva and Smith 2006). The soil underneath *cryptomeria* trees is so acidic that other plant life cannot grow. Despite this, Darjeeling tea workers and townspeople have an ambivalent relationship to this invasive plant. *Duppi* was central to the industrialization of the Darjeeling landscape, but it also a key symbol in its regeneration. Darjeeling town residents in particular see *duppi*, and its yearlong greenness, to be a source of pride, a characteristic symbol of Darjeeling and Gorkha people. The West Bengal Forest Department was shut down for two years between 2008 and 2010 as a result of the Gorkhaland agitation. Leaders successfully stopped the extraction of *duppi* trees, the cultivation and harvesting of which was a primary occupation of the Darjeeling outpost of the Forest Department. They were not as successful with tea.

and stamped with lot numbers and dates. The tea machinery too, churns, burns, and shakes, sometimes 24 hours a day. These coal-powered machines, embossed often with the trademark of Britannia, the once-prominent British manufacturer of tea equipment and other mechanical implements for resource extraction (e.g. jute manufacture and road construction), are part of the landscape of imperial ruins left by British manufacture. Elsewhere in South Asia, tea factories have switched to diesel or electric processing equipment (or even tea bush cuttings and waste), but Darjeeling manufacturers maintain that coal-fired machines are essential to the taste – the smoky flavor – of Darjeeling tea. Coal too, was of course crucial to powering the building of Empire across South Asia (see Kling 1976, especially pp. 94-121). Tea workers have been “left with” piles of coal (and its relative cheapness, thanks to the colonially forged mining industry) to fuel the postcolonial tea industry. Machinery that rolled, dried, fired, and sorted Empire grown tea was not introduced until 1873 (Ukers 1935: 470-476).⁴²

To contextualize the significance of the tea factory (and the formation of Darjeeling as a hill station and tea producing region), I will travel back in the historical record, before the annexation of Darjeeling, to the early 1800s, when tea was rolled by hand and was sourced from small-scale Chinese manufacturers (via urban Chinese

⁴² Although the first mechanized tea roller was developed in 1873, I am unclear as to how quickly mechanized manufacture was adopted in Darjeeling. There is a lack of historical evidence about hand rolling in Darjeeling, so I can infer that the tea industry in Darjeeling began as a mechanized one, unlike Kangra and Assam. Tea machinery probably developed contemporaneously with the Darjeeling industry (see Ukers 1935: 465-490).

distributors). By this time in Britain, tea drunk with sugar, once the mark of luxury, was rapidly becoming an element of working-class British culture (Mintz 1985). To source this growing demand for tea, the East India Company traded silver with China in exchange for tea. This tea trade became the most profitable venture the East India Company made in Asia, and Chinese tea became synonymous with luxury and refinement back in London. Between 1813 and 1833 the East India Company lost its trade monopoly in China. At the same time, clashes with the Qing state over the Company's involvement in the opium trade made tea trade with China increasingly unstable. These clashes culminated in the Opium Wars (1839-1842 and 1856-1860). It became increasingly clear to the Company that it needed to cultivate tea in recently annexed territories in India to supply the growing demand back home.⁴³ The colonial administration and the East India Company first looked to the wet and mountainous regions of Northeast and Northwest India, and later turned to Darjeeling, to supply tea for Britain.

The development of tea in Northwest and Northeast India coincided with the appointment of Lord Bentinck as Governor-General of India in 1828. Bentinck saw agriculture as a key part of this mission, particularly in the "improvement" of unproductive forest tracts of the Himalayan foothills and jungles of Northeast India (Sharma 2011: 29). In 1834, Bentinck formed the Tea Committee for India, led by the then-director of the Calcutta Botanical Garden, Nathaniel Wallich, and comprised of

⁴³ For more on the Opium Wars and British tea trade with China, see Chaudhuri 1978; Chung 1974; Pettigrew 2001.

influential Calcutta merchants, opium traders (valued for their contacts in China), and various colonial officials and scientists. The first objective of the Tea Committee was to dispatch officials to evaluate colonial lands for agricultural potential. Committee members believed that they could cultivate a tea that would surpass Chinese tea in quality, flavor, and most importantly, efficiency of production (Axelby 2008; Kar 2011).

Before Bentinck ever formed his Tea Committee, two colonial officers, Charles and Robert Bruce, while on an expedition to the Assam-Burma border in 1823 observed that a native tea plant grew in abundance in the forests of the region. Native Singho and Khamti tribes used it primarily for medicinal and ritual purposes. Unlike elsewhere in Asia, where tea consumption was common, these groups were some of the only peoples observed drinking tea in India.⁴⁴ No one ever validated the Bruces' observations, and the "jungle" tea bushes of Assam remained a myth for several more years. Over a decade later, an army officer, Lt. Andrew Charlton, observed local consumption and sent leaves and seeds to the newly formed Tea Committee. Botanists from the Calcutta Botanical Garden were quickly dispatched to the Assam forests to strategize the propagation of the indigenous Assam *jat* of tea.

A discourse of "improvement" drove early tea development. The British viewed the indigenous tea *jat* of Assam, much like the region's native inhabitants, as "wild" and "uncivilized" (Sharma 2011: 30-31; Kar 2002; Chatterjee 2001: 7). Colonial botanists deemed this association to be so problematic that they hypothesized that it would be

⁴⁴ Tea consumption in India develops much later and as the result of directed marketing campaigns aimed at middle and working class Indians. See Bhadra (2005) and Lutgendorf (2009) for a study of Indian tea culture and consumption.

wise to temper the Assam *jat* with the non-native, but more delicate and controllable Chinese *jat* (Griffith 1840). Assam tea was often referred to as “*jungli* stock.” *Jungli*, meaning “wild,” was used to refer to the native inhabitants of the region and later to *adivasi* laborers who staffed Assam plantations. Essentializations that framed tribal laborers as exceptionally apt for jungle clearing and the more menial forms of labor (“*jungli*” labor) were cultural idioms that played a critical role in the staffing and organization of Indian tea plantations (Chatterjee 2001: 79). Botanists deemed it necessary to push for the *controlled* cultivation of Assam and its indigenous variety of tea. Indigenous wild-growing Assam tea could only be useful to the Empire if it was controlled, and as historian Jayeeta Sharma argues, *improved* upon through the application of both Western science, in the form of colonial botanists, and Chinese skill, in the form of imported Chinese (male) labor (Sharma 2006, 2011: 30-40).

The first shipment of Assam-grown tea was a success in London, but not because of the tea’s taste; experts deemed it to be merely acceptable as tea. The first Assam-grown lots of tea auctioned in London at twenty times the price of an average lot of Chinese tea. These high prices are credited mainly to patriotic zeal and excitement over Empire-grown teas (Sharma 2011: 32). By 1839, large-scale production of tea in Assam had intensified, and within a year, the industry privatized into a single corporation, the Assam Company. The company hired Robert Fortune,⁴⁵ a London bio-pro prospector; George Gordon, an opium trader and Tea Committee member; and Rev. Gutzlaff, a China-

⁴⁵ For a recent biography of Robert Fortune and his expeditions to take tea from China to plant in the Himalayas, see Rose 2009.

based missionary, to secure a continuous supply of labor and botanical matter from China (Sharma 2011: 31-36).⁴⁶

In Assam, although planters founded the industry in the image of Chinese tea production, this mode of production was deemed “inefficient” for many reasons (Baildon 1882: 20-34). First, Chinese laborers refused to perform any labor not associated with the cultivation and manufacture of tea, such as clearing forest or portering tea and supplies. British planters attempted to attract native peoples, particular the Nagas (of former colonial and undivided Assam), who would perform such manual labors, and as an added bonus for British capitalists worked for shells, beads, rice, and occasional feasts. Nagas, like the Lepcha in Darjeeling, were nomadic and flowed in and out of tea producing tracts (Jacobs et al. 1990). The British then deemed it imperative to cultivate a *settled* labor force and recruit from more sedentary groups of people. By the 1860s, the recruitment of Chinese men had stopped, and planters looked to identify an alternative workforce that would be cheap, disciplined, and sedentary (Sharma 2011: 38-40).⁴⁷ At the same time, Assam planters looked to mechanize the industry and further differentiate it from the Chinese model of cultivation, characterized by hand-rolled tea produced by individual producers (or family-run small cooperative plots).

⁴⁶ For further information, Jayeeta Sharma’s *Empire’s Garden: Assam and the Making of India* (2011) provides a detailed examination of the role of Chinese labor in the development of the Assam tea industry (see also Sharma 2006).

⁴⁷ Bodhisattva Kar (2002) describes how East India Company and Assam Company officials tried to cope with surpluses in opium by paying Chinese labor in opium. They were able to control their opium eating work force more efficiently than “wild” native laborers.

Planters wanted manufacture, in terms of labor and environment, to be more efficient (Chamney 1930: 53).

While British officers were experimenting with the relative benefits of Assam and China *jats* of tea in Assam, British officials and planters in Kangra and Kumaon in the Northwest Himalaya introduced only the seeds of the China *jat*. Gardens in Kangra and Kumaon also mimicked a Chinese model of “family garden farming” (smaller production plots for green leaf with centralized location hand rolling and packaging), which by the late 1800s had been deemed inefficient by the Indian planter community (Chamney 1930: 43-45). This mode of production was referred to by some planters as a *zamindari* system, as local *zamindars* oversaw the manufacture of small batches of green leaf to government-run processing factories (*Papers on the Tea Factories* 1854). Kangra was slow to integrate mechanized production, despite the desire of planters for more “efficiency”, and for decades after Assamese planters began using Indian labor, Kangra gardens continued to produce tea by hand rolling, often by Chinese laborers imported for that purpose.⁴⁸ (Baildon 1882: 30-34). Vocal planters in Kangra and throughout the Northwest penned letters to each other and wrote official documents calling for centralized factories so that the green leaf did not need to be transported long distances, only to be transported again for shipment back the England.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Hand rolling tea is still practiced on Darjeeling plantations. Many women that I worked with sneaked leaf home and dried it over their home fires, hand rolling it, to use for their own consumption. This supply of tea supplemented their small ration of 350 grams of broken leaf tea.

⁴⁹ Many of these correspondences were available in the National Library, Calcutta.

Planters in the Northwest Himalaya also wrote extensively about the advantages and disadvantages to establishing plantations in the various tea-growing regions (but usually contained these discussions to Upper and Lower Assam, the Bengal Dooars, and Darjeeling).⁵⁰ Though the Northwest Himalaya and Darjeeling shared remarkably similar climates and mountain landscapes, planters in the Northwest were astutely aware of the competition and wrote extensively about the benefits of settlement in Kangra as well as the ways in which the Northwest tea industry would need to change in order to be competitive (see McGowan 1860).

The Geographical and Infrastructural Bases of the Darjeeling Distinction

Archibald Campbell, the Superintendent of Darjeeling, and other officials and settlers had seen how Chinese tea bushes thrived in the Northwest Himalayas and that Assam, to the east of Darjeeling and administered under the similar Wasteland Rules, was rapidly developing an efficient plantation industry. Campbell believed that Chinese tea bushes, or *camellia sinensis* (as opposed to the *camellia assamensis* that grew in Assam), could be industrially cultivated in Darjeeling, where the climate was similar to the Northwest. Most importantly, Campbell and early settlers in Darjeeling pointed out that Darjeeling was more geographically contiguous with the prized tea growing regions of Southwest China than either Assam or the Northwestern Himalaya. Shortly after his arrival in Darjeeling, in 1841, Campbell arranged for Chinese tea seeds to be sent from

⁵⁰ By late 1860s, tea was also extensively cultivated on plantations in South India and Sri Lanka, but I am unaware of documents on the relative benefits of tea production in these areas versus North India.

Kangra so that he could experiment with tea in his backyard garden. Like many British consumers at the time, Campbell believed that the Chinese *jat* of tea was superior in flavor and quality to the blacker malty teas produced from the Assam *jat*.⁵¹ While his experiments were not totally successful in his backyard garden, high up on the cold and windy ridge, Campbell and others hypothesized that the valleys below Darjeeling town could afford better sun and soil and warmer temperatures and that the fickle Chinese *jat* would flourish there.

That British colonial administrators in Calcutta classified Darjeeling and the surrounding foothills to be a “wasteland,” presented additional opportunities for entrepreneurial British men interested in the extractive industries and agriculture (Baildon 1882). Planters cited differences in the land tenure rules (namely native tenancy rights) in Darjeeling and the Northwest Himalaya as crucial to the eventual success of the Darjeeling industry (see also Sivaramakrishnan 1999 for a discussion of the Bengal Tenancy laws). As one manual for planters explained:

In Darjeeling the native cultivators have no saleable rights in the soil...In Kangra the natives dispose of their surplus land or sell their homesteads at simply ridiculous prices (...and they almost invariably squander the money as soon as they get it). (*The Tea Cyclopaedia* 1882: 238)

Through colonial botanical garden networks, the Darjeeling municipality began to distribute tea seeds to interested settlers in the early 1850s, including Darjeeling civil

⁵¹ I should note the extensive writings from the 1830-1860s on the relative merits of China and India (Assam) *jats*. Planters debated with each other about which *jat* was more productive and more flavorful. Others argued about which variety represented the Empire better. Planters published widely about the superiority (and authenticity) of the Assam *jat* in an attempt to boost consumption in the United Kingdom and expand plantation cultivation in Indian tea growing districts, particularly those identified with being “Indian:” Assam, Cachar, and the Dooars (see Mann 1918).

surgeon Dr. Whitecombe and civil engineer Major Crommelin (Dash 1947: 113). By 1856, individual experimentation and cultivation had led to a few commercial gardens in the warmer and sunnier valleys below Darjeeling town. In an 1862 correspondence in the *Friend of India*, the writer attests to the rapid development and sophistication of the Darjeeling industry:

Tea Planting in Darjeeling is not a mere 'experiment or amusement of gentlemen fond of a quiet life.' It is true one or two military officers conducted the first experiments, but at present time but two officers continue to be engaged in the occupation, all the rest of the planters are the same class as have settled in Assam and Cachar and it is a serious enterprise, i.e. is being conducted with as much energy and determination as characterizes the operations in the eastern districts (Jan. 2, 1862, quoted in Fox 1993: 34)

From the inception of the Darjeeling tea industry, and with the help of Wasteland Rules, individual planter-settlers did the work of planting and clearing with the help of Nepali migrant laborers. Settlers were able to cut and burn large tracts of Himalayan forest for their plantations, and after the introduction of tea machinery in 1873, almost all plantations were organized around a central factory.⁵² As a result of lenient Wasteland Rules, Darjeeling plantations thrived as private industries, while Northwest Himalayan tea gardens remained government-run enterprises. The Northwest Provinces and Punjab quickly became shut off from the dominant flows of tea commerce. The proximity of Darjeeling, Assam, and the Dooars to Calcutta – the dominant port for

⁵² Instead of *kaarkhaana*, the typical Nepali word for “factory,” workers and managers were more like to use “*godown*,” also popular in Hindi and British English, generally translated as a “storage shed” or “warehouse.” On the plantation, it was pronounced “*gudum*.” Darjeeling residents joke that like *kaaman* deriving from “come on,” *gudum* (godown) comes from the British yelling at workers to take the tea or other materials *down* to the storage shed for transport – “Go down! Go down!”

export, center of tea trade, and capital of British India – helped these regions become late 19th century India's tea capitals (*Tea Cultivation* 1865: 15-17).

The development of Darjeeling was further facilitated by infrastructure projects, particularly the construction of the Punkabari Road and the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway (DHR) linking Darjeeling to the plains. The 1839 construction of the Punkabari Road linking the “wasteland” of Darjeeling to the plains enabled development of the hill station. According to historian Fred Pinn (1987) in his archival study of 1839-1840 colonial correspondences on Darjeeling, the development of Darjeeling hinged on the construction of a road, which catalyzed the development of the hill station. The condition of the roads (there are still few of them, almost all of which were built during the colonial era) was on the lips of all Darjeeling residents during my fieldwork.⁵³ Every cavernous pothole or delayed travel due to landslides reminded Darjeeling residents of their powerlessness at the hands state and national governments.⁵⁴ Roads were an important symbol and evocative points of discussion on stage at Gorkhaland rallies (see

⁵³ A second road to Kurseong (half way between Siliguri and Darjeeling) was completed in 2006-2007 by then leader Subhas Ghising (resulting in 3 roads to Kurseong and one from Kurseong to Darjeeling). The intent of this road's construction was to: 1) provide a faster, if not more sheer, route to Siliguri and 2) to link the western parts of Darjeeling with a road. The Punkhabari and Hill Cart roads run to the east of the district.

⁵⁴ Many scholars discuss the affects clearcutting and infrastructural disrepair and their effects on the Darjeeling landscape, in particular the effects on the incidence of landslides (Chattopadhyay 1986; Basu 1979; Froelich and Starkel 1993).

Chapter 6). For both the British and Gorkhas, roads were important material and ideological symbols of connection to the Empire and the nation-state, respectively.⁵⁵

The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway (DHR) was built in 1878 to carry tea down the mountainside to Siliguri for passage onto Kolkata and then London and to carry officers and supplies up from the plains.⁵⁶ UNESCO and several UK-based train-lovers associations have revived the DHR, or the “Toy Train,” as it is popularly called. Today, the Toy Train runs at odd hours and primarily serves to transport tourists. It does not stop near the Siliguri bazaar or the hospitals to which many Darjeeling residents have to travel to get medical services. These issues, combined with the fact that a train journey from Darjeeling to Siliguri takes six to seven hours, cause Darjeeling residents to take shared jeeps, a more economical, convenient, and efficient option (the journey by car takes three to four hours). The train line and the Darjeeling Hill Cart Road traverse back and forth, intertwined, up the mountainside. The Punkhabari and Hill Cart Roads remain the only roads linking Darjeeling with the plains and a key piece of “imperial debris.” (The Punkhabari Road is now only used for descending traffic while the Hill Cart Road is for ascending traffic⁵⁷).

⁵⁵ There is an exciting and growing body of literature on the anthropology of infrastructure and both material and ideological connections to state and nation forged through people’s relationships with roads, water, and garbage (e.g. Anand 2011; Campbell 2009; Carse 2010)

⁵⁶ See *The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway: Illustrated Guide for Tourists* (1896).

⁵⁷ These are National Highways, the repair and improvement of which is administered in Delhi and Kolkata. The Darjeeling municipality cannot improve roads on its own.

The construction of the roads and the railway, combined with a proximity to Calcutta, the export port of India, facilitated the development of Darjeeling as a plantation district.⁵⁸ Roads and railways linked Darjeeling to the plains, and by extension Gorkhas to the rest of India, but they were, in their precariousness, also what separated Darjeeling from the seemingly similar tea growing districts in the Northwestern Himalayas. The roads and railways were the culmination of the development of a tea industry that took on a much different shape than in Assam or Kangra. Darjeeling tea was different (and the benefactor of geography) from the outset.

To Assam planters in particular, it became clear by the 1850s that a Chinese labor force was unsustainable. To answer the “Labor Question” (the question of how to procure a settled and controllable workforce), planters in the Northeast looked to Chotanagpur (See Chatterjee 2001: 68-82). Coercing and maintaining the cooperation of “coolies” from Chotanagpur was a violent and costly process. Indeed, the Indian Tea Association (ITA), founded in 1885 arguably for this purpose, would struggle for decades to devise labor recruitment codes, laws, and regulations for keeping the labor force in these tea growing regions healthy and reasonably motivated (Behal and Mohapatra 1992).⁵⁹ Scholars in India have paid particular attention to issues of *adivasi*

⁵⁸ The tea districts of Assam were not connected to Calcutta by rail until 1902 (lower Assam) 1911 (upper Assam), see Sharma (2011: 80-81, 100).

⁵⁹ Some planters told me that indentured servants from Chotanagpur originally staffed the Darjeeling tea plantations, but they all ran off in the middle of the night because the temperatures were too cold and the terrain was too steep. Many of these “*jungli*” laborers, they said, settled in Siliguri, in the plains to the south of Darjeeling and worked on the tea plantations there. Siliguri is the last wide gauge train stop on the way up to Darjeeling and has long been staffed by migrants from all over India.

treatment on plantations in Northeast India as well as the role labor recruiters, not only in the procurement of labor, but also in their manipulation (Bhadra and Bhadra 1997; Bhadra 1997; Chatterjee 2001; Chakravorty 1997; Karotemprel and Roy 1990; Sarkar 1998; Phukan 1984). Recruiters often swindled *adivasis* by requiring them to pay excessive amounts for recruitment fees and British officials often turned a blind eye to this practice (Bates and Carter 1992; Das Gupta 1994). Scholars have described in other Indian labor contexts the Indian state's both official sanction and passive condoning of practices beneficial to their interests (Banaji 1992; Breman 1993 [1973]; Guha 1997). Unlike planters in the Northwest and Assam, Darjeeling tea planters neither relied upon imported Chinese "skill" to develop their tea gardens, nor did they recruit from famine-ridden areas of the plains of Chotanagpur and pay a per-head price for "coolies."

Labor recruiters, or *sardars*, were also pivotal in cultivating a resident labor force in Darjeeling. While in Assam and other Northeast gardens the "Labor Question" was a focus of planters' discussions, in Darjeeling, there was a surplus of labor due to the steady stream of migrants from Nepal (Baildon 1882: 145-227; *Notes on Darjeeling*: 1888: 70-79). Even before the formation of the tea industry, a gazetteer reported that by 1852, "the system of forced labor [had] been abolished, and labour with all other valuables [was] left to find its own price in an open market" (Griffiths 1967: 86). By 1850, Archibald Campbell was credited with having attracted 10,000 settlers from Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan, who came to work as laborers, porters, woodcutters, builders, and servants for the expanding hill station (English 1982: 264). Though some

eastern Nepalis had already come to Darjeeling on religious pilgrimages, and others had decided to remain, the population exploded after the second annexation of Darjeeling in 1850 (I will continue this discussion in the next chapter).

Nepali men cleared tracts of forests and built the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, which transported coal and supplies up the mountain from the plains of Bengal. On its return trip to Calcutta, the Railway cars carried processed tea, forest products, and cinchona for passage back to Britain. Clearcutting also enabled the establishment of Darjeeling's first tea plantations in 1856: Aloobari,⁶⁰ which sloped down from the north side of town, and Steinthal, which rested underneath the bazaar and botanical gardens on the south side of town. By the end of 1866, there were 39 gardens covering an area of 10,000 acres and annual production of 433,000 pounds of tea. By 1870, there were 56 gardens on 11,000 acres, employing 8,000 Nepali laborers and producing 1,708,000 pounds. (The first cinchona plantations were planted beginning in 1869, which also attracted Nepali migrant laborers.) By 1940, there were 142 tea gardens under 63,059 acres of land, producing 23,721,500 pounds of tea (Dash 1947: 113-114).

In the next chapter, I will overlay a discussion of labor history and class formation onto the chronology I have outlined in this chapter. To build a hill station and staff tea plantations, Superintendent Campbell and British planters in Darjeeling looked toward eastern Nepal and the Gorkha soldiers who had nearly defeated them in the Anglo-Nepalese Wars (1814-1816) to find laborers to clear forest, lay railway lines, and

⁶⁰ Aloobari tea plantation remained in operation some 154 years later and was one of the gardens on which I conducted fieldwork.

staff tea plantations. Nepalis were not considered *jungli* laborers, and their history of army service and disenfranchisement at the hands of their King spoke to their ability to be controlled. They were not nomadic like the Lepcha or Bhutia of Darjeeling or the Nagas of Upper Assam (see Siviramakrishnan 1999: 192-197). Nepalis were considered by planters at the time to be an ideal labor force for Darjeeling tea cultivation. I spent much of 2009 reviewing the records of the Indian Tea Association, finding a surprising absence of references to labor recruitment, retention, and treatment in the Darjeeling district, but as I explain in the next chapter, tea workers had some recollections of their ancestors migrations.

Wastelands and The Uses of History

The view from the ridge of Darjeeling town – the green swaths of tea plantations in every direction speckled with laboring Nepali women, or of the *duppi* groves protecting Victorian bungalows with gingerbread ornamentation – is a result of a distinct cultural, environmental, economic, and geopolitical process. In Darjeeling's imperial ruins remain contradictory aspects of the place itself – of both site of extraction and site of refuge. On the plantation, these ruins embody the binary of *kamaan* and garden, a binary I explore in more detail in Chapter 5.

When planters organized the Darjeeling Planters Association in 1908, the scale of tea production would increase, tea would become more industrialized, the labor pool would grow, and the tea industry in Darjeeling, according to workers and planters,

began a slow decline from its productive golden age. The construction of Darjeeling was so successful that Darjeeling ceased to be a “wasteland” by 1910, when it was incorporated into the Province of Bengal after the Partition of Bengal, which solidified district borders in the Northeast and integrated marginal districts into the governmental and bureaucratic structures of British India. The turn of the century saw the development of tea industries in the Dooars, Terai, and South India, as well as the extension of tea cultivation into Sri Lanka and Kenya. There was an increasing amount of Empire-produced tea, so much in fact that in the 1920s, British tea promoters looked to expanding the tea market into the Indian middle and working classes (See Bhadra 2005; Lutgendorf 2009). Darjeeling, however, remained not just a predominately exported crop, but also an Anglicized one that was readily associated with exclusivity and luxury.

In the next chapter, I show how tea workers in Darjeeling began to forge new class and ethnic identities. I also show that the World Wars triggered important changes in the gendered division of labor and precipitated changes in the organization of facilities and articulation of care and control. These changes drastically shifted moral economic relationships. I discuss how British administrators and settlers drew upon a cultural taxonomy of labor, which categorized all Nepali migrants as industrious, loyal, and easy to control. Importantly, the labor recruitment of Nepal farmers hinged upon British memories of them as courageous, loyal soldiers.

In Chapter 6, I also explore how Gorkhas drew on the history of the annexations of Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan and building of Darjeeling to explain why they did not belong in West Bengal, and more importantly why they had rights to Darjeeling as a former “wasteland” turned productive plantation district. That Darjeeling was not incorporated into the administrative structures of Bengal until 1910 was significant. In fact, Gorkhaland activists often called for politicians in Delhi or Kolkata to “read history,” for if they did, they would certainly understand their claims to the land.

Chapter 3: *Making Gorkhas: The Rise of Class and Ethnic Consciousness on Darjeeling Tea Plantations*

I delighted in jumping like a child back and forth across the invisible line – “Now I am in Nepal...” I jump back – “Now I am in India.” I jump again, “Here I am breaking the conditions of my research visa...” I jump back, “Now, I am where I am supposed to be.” Grazing goats passed by and shot me suspicious glances as I examined the small stones that demarcated the border between Nepal and India (see Figure 3.1 and 3.2).



Figure 3.1 and 3.2: Border markers. On the left the marker reads “Bharat” (India). The other side of the marker, shown on the right, reads: “Nepal.”

I repeated the game of border hopscotch several times over the week I spent on Meghma tea estate near Darjeeling,⁶¹ which straddled the Nepal-India border, high up in the Sandakphu range. I watched not only goats and other grazing livestock come across the border, rather uneventfully, but also vintage Land Rovers filled with people, goods, meats, and sacksful of fermented millet, or *chang*, for sale in the markets at the base of the range in the bazaar at Sukhia Pokari. The same Land Rovers would return to Nepal filled with supplies for sale to passing trekkers and vista-seeking tourists: perforated strings of 10 rupee bags of potato chips and wai-wai (ramen noodles) fluttering off the roof.

The Nepal-India border, often marked only by stones like these or three-foot high posts on which market goers tether livestock or hang laundry to dry, remains fluid, despite the contemporary hardening of borders in so many other parts of the world.⁶² In my week at Meghma, I saw people and materials of all kinds ply up and down the long bumpy road to Manebhanjang, the small bazaar town at the head of the Sandakphu trekking route.⁶³ There was a small Indian army post adjacent to the house in which I was staying. Other than daily walks and evening serenades of Bollywood hits (accompanied by the melodic sounds of smashing glass), I was not really sure what the

⁶¹ Meghma is not a “Darjeeling” tea plantation for reasons I will describe in Chapter 5.

⁶² The anthropology of borders and transmigration in South Asia has been an important area of inquiry (Gardner 1991, 1995; Gardner and Osella 2003; Biao 2007; Parry 2003; Osella and Osella 2003; Unnithan-Kumar 2003; De Neve 1999, 2003; Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003; Shah 2006).

⁶³ People in present day Nepal and India have long traded with each other (mainly through Kalimpong, a town in the Darjeeling district, see Shneiderman [2005]).

25 or so Indian soldiers were doing there. When I asked (this was one of the few times while living in Darjeeling that my Hindi language training proved to be useful), they explained that they were “looking for Maoists.”

Following Indian Independence in 1947 and the end of the Kingdom of Nepal’s century-long isolation, the two governments signed the 1950 Peace and Friendship Treaty. The Treaty grants citizens of Nepal and India the same rights in the opposite country. Citizens of India can own property, hold a job, and live without any restrictions in Nepal. The same holds true for Nepalese citizens in India (Subedi 1994). The treaty gave residents of both India and Nepal what Aihwa Ong (1999) calls “flexible citizenship.”⁶⁴ As a document, the Peace and Friendship Treaty serves a purpose similar to that of the dual passports that Ong describes for Hong Kong businessmen, enabling Indians and Nepalis to travel freely across the border.⁶⁵ Ong described the multiple passport-holder in Hong Kong as an “apt contemporary figure. He or she embodies the split between state imposed identity and personal identity caused by political upheavals, migration, and changing global markets” (Ong 1999: 2). Ong notes how “transnational

⁶⁴ The Peace and Friendship Treaty reads: “Each government undertakes, in token of neighborly friendship between India and Nepal, to give the nationals of the other, in its territory, national treatment with regard to participation in industrial and economic development of such territory and to the grant of concessions and contracts relating to such development...The Government of India and Nepal agree to grant, on a reciprocal basis, to the nationals of one country in the territories of the other the same privileges in the matter of residence, ownership of property, participation in trade and commerce, movement and other privileges of similar nature” (Moktan 2004: 44-46).

⁶⁵ Scholars have explored how Nepali migration to India is an important source of revenue for communities in Nepal (see Seddon 2005; Seddon, et al. 2001; Seddon, et al. 2002; Hitchcock 1961). Since the start of the civil war in Nepal in 1999, migration is often the only option for many Nepalese villagers. Seddon (2005) in his 2004 study found that India employed 700,000 Nepalis; 400,000 of whom work in the private sector, 250,000 work in the public sectors, and 50,000 work for the Indian Army, specifically in the “Gurkha Rifles.”

subjects” provide insights into “how nation-states articulate with capitalism in late modernity” (1999: 3). In this chapter, I provide some background on how Darjeeling Nepalis, or Gorkhas, whose belonging in the nation-state is mediated by a changing global market for tea, developed and negotiated a distinct ethnic identity. The fluidity of the boundary between India and Nepal has historically provided opportunities for both capital and labor, but the “open border” has paradoxically erected a barrier between Gorkhas and the Indian state (see Chapter 6). In this sense, the reciprocal citizenship rights granted by the Peace and Friendship treaty undermined Indian Nepalis’ “flexible citizenship.” Indeed, Gorkha identity was predicated on an inflexibility, imposed by the labor migrations I explore in this chapter.

Gorkhas I met during my fieldwork described how the Treaty left them in an uncomfortable liminal space.⁶⁶ Although their jobs were in Darjeeling, in India, the farther they got from the plantations, the less they felt like Indian nationals. As jobs in Darjeeling dwindled, Gorkhas migrated to Delhi and Kolkata in search of work. When traveling, they would routinely have their identification questioned. “You’re not Indian. You don’t look Indian...” guards outside airport terminals would often say, “You look Chinese.” When they traveled over the border to Nepal, their behavior, especially the way they spoke Nepali, marked them as outsiders as well. According to the Peace and Friendship Treaty, if a person of Nepali descent settled in India before the adoption of the 1950 Indian Constitution, that person was declared a “natural citizen” of India

⁶⁶ There are interesting parallels between Guneratne’s (2002) study of the Tharu and my fieldwork with Gorkhas. Both groups have only recently come to identify themselves as one people. Gorkhas, like Tharu, also identity with smaller linguistically-distinct tribal and ethnic identities.

(Subba 2002: 131). As I describe below, Gorkhas began migrating to Darjeeling in the early 1800s in search of land and labor. They were thus “natural citizens” by the terms of the Treaty but not necessarily by the terms of citizenship as practiced in India.

In vernacular terms, “Gorkha” is often synonymous with being Nepali in India (or in some cases outside of Nepal), but in this chapter, I describe the distinct ways that Nepali residents of Darjeeling think of themselves vis-à-vis the nation. Gorkha identity is fluid and comes out of histories of labor recruitment and movements for labor rights and autonomy, what we can think of as an *interface* between different cultural traditions and historical periods. I borrow the term “interface” from James Fisher, whose *Himalayan Anthropology: the Indo-Tibetan Interface* (1978a), encourages scholars to think of the Himalayan region as a liminal space, betwixt and between different cultural traditions. This foundational volume outlined trends that are still prevalent in Himalayan studies today, focusing primarily on Nepal and Tibet and the interactions between their cultures, environments, and practices.⁶⁷ The aims of *Himalayan Anthropology* were to provide the beginnings of an analytical framework for approaching the Himalayas as a “neither-fish-nor-fowl contact zone” (Fisher 1978a: 1). Combined with Ong’s “flexible citizenship,” which calls attention to the role of capital, labor, and the modern state in the making of subjects, concepts of an “interface” or a “contact zone” are provocative analytical tools for understanding not only Darjeeling

⁶⁷ Leo Rose (1963, 1969, 1978) and Fischer, Rose, and Huttenback (1963) discussed the strategic importance of border regions or “buffer states,” such as Ladakh, Sikkim, and Nepal in Asian regional politics (as they lie between China and India) as well as how border conflicts have shaped the internal politics of the Himalayas.

and Gorkha belonging in India, but also the entanglements of peoples, pasts, and products across the Nepal-India border (See map of Darjeeling and the surrounding area, pages xii-xiv).

From its beginnings as a British imperial enterprise, the Indian tea industry and plantation owners in particular had to reckon with what they called “the Labor Question.” Unlike in neighboring China, tea cultivation did not have a long history in India. In each major tea-growing region, the question of how to attract and maintain a willing and skilled labor force in this unfamiliar industry, often located in remote and sparsely populated parts of the colony, was answered in a slightly different way. The solution to the Labor Question in Darjeeling comprises a major part of what I have termed the “Darjeeling distinction.” As I show below, planters in Darjeeling took advantage of the oppression of non-Hindu tribal peoples⁶⁸ in the Kingdom of Nepal to attract a large number of permanent worker-settlers to their plantations. Whereas Assam and Dooars planters relied upon strict conscription codes to legalize the *de facto* indenture of “coolies” to the plantations, Darjeeling planters in the 1800s managed to recruit a willing labor force from Nepal, using the provision of housing, food rations, and land for cultivation and grazing to incentivize the permanent migration of entire clans and villages from the hills of eastern Nepal to Darjeeling. In exchange for what later

⁶⁸ I use “tribal people” or “tribal groups” because these referents were still powerful in the wake of the movements for Sixth Schedule recognition. People in Darjeeling drew on these concepts as significant identifications. The use of “tribal” has also long been used in Nepal studies to describe non-Hindus. “Ethnicity” is potent too. For descriptions of the meanings and mixings of tribal and ethnic affiliations, see Middleton (2010) and Shneiderman (2009). See also Chapter 6 for an additional discussion of Gorkha identity.

became known as “facilities,” Nepalis worked on British plantations, served in the British Army, and helped build Darjeeling’s roads, railroads, bungalows, and factories.

As in other parts of India, the British in Darjeeling deployed what Piya Chatterjee (2001: 77-78) calls a “colonial taxonomy of labor,” distinguishing desirable Nepali, or “Gurkha” workers from others. The “Gurkha” and later “Gorkha” category originates, then, in the history of tea labor recruitment. By the early 1900s, Darjeeling planters, who prided themselves upon their independence and actually competed with one another for “Gurkha” labor, formed their own association, standardizing and codifying the provision of non-monetary “facilities” to Nepali workers. This ensured that “good laborers” were evenly distributed across the hills. By the end of the two World Wars, the British colonial presence was coming to an end, and the relationship between tea workers and planters began to change. A sense of worker identity based upon fidelity to planters was supplanted by a class identity, reinforced by the ascendant Communist Party of India (CPI),⁶⁹ which was particularly active on the plantations of what became West Bengal. In the years after Indian independence, British planters vacated Darjeeling, and plantations began to deteriorate. In the face of falling prices, land degradation, and neglect by the Indian planters and companies that took over for the British, Darjeeling Nepalis’ sense of working-class identity deteriorated as well. By the

⁶⁹ After a split in the CPI in the 1960s, the Communist Party of India (CPI-M), which backs the Left Front in Kolkata, was the Communist presence in the Darjeeling hills. After 1996 (and after the first Gorkhaland agitation), the Communist Party Revolutionary Marxist (CPRM), headed by R.B. Rai, broke off from the CPI-M and remains minority in Darjeeling politics. Like the GJMM and the GNLF, the CPRM only exists in Darjeeling.

1980s and the start of the first Gorkhaland agitation, ethnic and linguistic distinction, rather than class identity, had become salient once again.

Contemporary Gorkha identity has its foundations in three relationships: the reciprocal moral economic ties between Nepali migrants and planters; class sensibilities inspired by politically-backed labor union organizers; and the ethnic and linguistic revitalization of early Gorkha activists who fought for the acknowledgement of Nepali as a national language and of Gorkhas as legitimate subjects of postcolonial, multi-ethnic India.

The Consolidation of Nepal and the Gorkha Empire

In Chapter 2, I described the development of Darjeeling; however, to fully understand the construction of Darjeeling as a hill station and tea industry, we must start in the district of Gorkha in Nepal, west of Kathmandu in the mid-1700s. The roots of the marginalization and migration of tribal people from the Himalayan foothills of eastern Nepal began when Hindus, led by Prithivi Narayan Shah, from the House of Gorkha, conquered and annexed the fertile slopes occupied by Rai, Limbu, Sunuwar, and other tribal groups. The subsequent consolidation of Nepal in the late 1700s created a Kingdom that spread from the Kangra Valley in contemporary Himachal Pradesh to the Teesta River in contemporary Darjeeling (Whelpton 2005: 35-60). For the tribal groups encompassed by the Empire, the Gorkha incursion and the subsequent consolidation of Nepal under the Gorkha monarchy resulted in social marginalization and land

degradation due to over-population and over-farming (see Pradhan 1991). These Tibeto-Burman speaking peoples became subject to high caste Hindu rulers, who controlled the region's land and institutions.

Territorial rivalry between Nepal's Gorkha kingdom and the British East India Company, centered on a British desire for an overland trade route to Tibet, motivated the Anglo-Nepalese Wars from 1814 to 1816 (Whelpton 2005: 42-45). At first, the British lost ground to the Kingdom of Nepal's army, staffed primarily by displaced farmers from the eastern hills. The British were forced to commit considerable resources to the war effort, and after two years of fighting, they eventually managed to annex present day Darjeeling and all territory east of the Mechi River (solidified by the Treaty of Sugauli in 1815 [Moktan 2004: 4]). They also drastically reduced the Kingdom's western possessions (solidified by the Treaty of Titalia in 1817 [Moktan 2004: 8]). After the Wars, the East India Company gave a parcel of the land annexed from Nepal (including contemporary Darjeeling) to the Kingdom of Sikkim, in exchange for rights to cross Sikkimese land into Tibet.

To offset the loss of land, Nepal's monarchy pressed for the reclamation and agricultural intensification of more marginal lands in the eastern hills on the west side of the Mechi River. The Rai, Limbu, Tamang, Gurung, and other tribal peoples who lived there found themselves surrounded by wealthy Hindu settlers that considered them to be socially inferior. While high-caste Hindu children were educated in Sanskrit medium schools, tribal children were forced to work the land. After 1816, Nepal's Rana rulers

encouraged their high-caste subjects to settle the fertile lowlands of eastern Nepal for rice paddy cultivation and irrigation and imposed a caste system on indigenous people predicated on the purity and power of Brahmans and Chettris.⁷⁰ Rana rulers particularly encouraged their subjects to settle on the communal lands (*kipat*) of eastern Nepali tribals (Caplan 1970; Forbes 1999, 1995; English 1982). First, upper caste Hindus settled in the fertile lowlands, but they quickly expanded into the foothills, pushing tribal groups higher up the slopes, onto more marginal lands (Burghart 1984: 101). Many eastern Nepalis, divested of their lands and forced to pay taxes, were conscripted into the army of the Gorkha king.

Gurkha Service and the Work of Empire: A “Colonial Taxonomy” of Labor

On the verandah of the Darjeeling Planters Club, I sat with two senior planters and discussed problems on “the gardens” in 2009. In fact, one of these planters had invited me to tea that afternoon to ask what reforms I would suggest. My suggestions were not quite what he was looking for, as I talked about the lack of dietary, medical, and sanitation facilities on the gardens. This planter explained what he saw as “the real problems” of the plantations:

...It's the men. They have nothing to do. They sit around all day and drink and then they come into town and get up on that stage [the plaza in the center of town where Gorkhaland rallies were held] and talk about how they demand their own state...It does not make any sense; they think that they deserve this and this and this. That is the problem

⁷⁰ Directly after the Anglo-Bhutanese War of 1864, the Raja of Bhutan also invited “industrious Nepalis” to the southern foothills of the Himalayas bordering India to look for cultivatable land (Nath 2005: 63).

with Darjeeling – it is these Gorkha men. At the drop of a hat, they will hold up a *khukuri* to your throat and demand more.

The other planter quietly interjected: “That’s a little brash.” He explained that the difference between the modern period and the colonial past was that there were no Communists in Darjeeling during the “days of the Britishers.” This second planter started in tea before 1973 and the enactment of the Federal Exchange Regulation Act (FERA), which ended the control British companies held over the region. He joined a British company after college and came up to Darjeeling after a couple of years in Assam. Peering up towards us while he packed down his pipe, he explained that, “When the British were here, they ran their gardens like fiefdoms, but they kept the men under control...They brought in army recruiters to take the smarter ones and the sent others to town as porters or to the forests as wood cutters...They were productive and there was much more respect.” Then he turned to me, took a puff off his pipe and said: “They called it paternalism for a reason, dear.”

The first planter placed his teacup down on its saucer, which rattled as he spoke: “But supplies were so inexpensive back then...Planters cannot provide all these things anymore; the workers have to do it themselves. The plantations are no longer that remote.”

Planters I interviewed in Darjeeling felt that the mid-20th century “crisis” in the tea industry came from their own inability to properly “manage” the male population on the gardens. They suggested that “too many males” on the garden created unrest, both on the plantation and in local politics. At the same time, Indian planters exalted British

colonial-era planters for compelling Nepali men to work both on and off the garden. These British planters, they explained, created a stable system. Some acknowledged that the plantation system was akin to a “fiefdom,” but most planters I interviewed contended that in the colonial era, stability on the plantation came from a symbiosis between the tea industry and the government, military, and other economic enterprises ancillary to it. Planters could provide “facilities” (food, land, medical care, schooling) to those who worked for them, but their relatives depended upon employment in town, in the military, in forestry, or in construction. The British taxonomy of labor couched “Gurkha” men and women as suited in different ways to on-plantation and off-plantation labor.

To fashion the hill station of Darjeeling and its sweeping fields of tea out of massive tracts of forest (as described in the previous chapter), British officers looked toward eastern Nepal and the Gorkha soldiers who had nearly defeated them in the Anglo-Nepalese wars (1814-1816) and to the Rai, Limbu, Gurung, and Tamang farmers who had been pushed off their lands and conscripted into the Gorkha army. During the course of the 1814-1816 wars, the British developed respect for Nepali soldiers, whom they called “Gurkhas.” British officer Sir Charles Metcalf said of the Gurkhas: “We have not met with an enemy who has decidedly shown greater bravery and greater steadiness [against] our troops” (quoted in Pradhan 2004: 57).

After 1815, often with the support of the central Nepal government, the British recruited hill people by the thousands to work as soldiers in Gurkha⁷¹ regiments, as woodcutters in the jungles of Northeastern India, as highway and railroad builders throughout the Himalayan foothills, and as laborers on plantations in Darjeeling, Assam, the Dooars, and Jalpaiguri. Lacking the resources to pay taxes, many hill people from eastern Nepal eagerly migrated. For tribals in the middle hills, the incentives for permanent migration were high, considering the oppressive conditions at home. Emigration meant an escape from financial oppression, while resettlement promised opportunities for steady wage labor and reliable supply of food grains. By 1845, the Superintendent of Darjeeling, Archibald Campbell, was credited with attracting 10,000 settlers from Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan, who came to work as laborers, porters, woodcutters, builders, and servants for the expanding British hill station (see Chapter 1; English 1982: 264; Griffiths 1967: 88).

By the mid-19th century, Gorkhas were routinely recruited in to the British Army (Des Chene 1991; Caplan 1991, 1995).⁷² British colonialists came to see the Gurkhas,

⁷¹ “Gurkha” is a mispronunciation of “Gorkha.” Today, the Nepali regiments in both the British and Indian armies are still referred to as “Gurkha” regiments.

⁷² Though Des Chene (1991) explains that the British exclusively recruited Gurung and Tamang men into the Gurkha regiments, I observed that this was far from an exclusive classification. Not only were there many Gorkha men that maintained their ethnic affiliations (reflected in their name, e.g. Rai or Sherpa), many others saw ethnic classifications for the army as malleable and fluid. These individuals had paperwork drawn up that stated that they were “So-and-So Gurung” (and it was always Gurung) to gain access to Gurkha regiments.

and by extension all Nepalis, as loyal, courageous, and strong.⁷³ As one turn-of-the-century travel guide to Darjeeling explains that while Gurkhas were able soldiers, they were also amenable to military service:

They are a plucky lot, and none dare insult them with impunity; it is fortunate that they are not a quarrelsome race, for they can use their “kookries” (or curved knives) with all the skill and adroitness of a Spaniard with his stiletto. The Ghoorkhas, which is the name of the ruling race and dynasty, make splendid soldiers, and many of them are enlisted in the British Imperial Service. They are short and slim, but wonderfully active and enduring, also brave to a degree (*Newman’s Guide* 1900: 81).

Historian Asad Husain explains that the recruitment of Gurkha soldiers was the principle reason why the Raj had a friendly relationship with Nepal (1970: 234) and by extension, a favorable opinion of Nepalis themselves.⁷⁴

By 1887, the British army had established two large recruiting centers, Gorkhapur, the headquarters to the south, and Ghoom (in Darjeeling), to the east. The Sikhs also recruited Nepalis into their armies. In fact, the Nepali word for a soldier in a foreign army is “*lahure*,” after the northern Indian, Urdu-speaking city, Lahore, which was the Sikhs’ central recruiting center (see Seddon, et al. 2001, Seddon, et al. 2002:

⁷³ After retiring from the army, the British encouraged Gorkhas to settle on the frontier of Northeast India. In 1872, Colonel Lewin recommended the establishment of a permanent settlement of Gorkhas in the hills of Northeast India, on the frontier between the hills and the plains. He hoped this would properly demarcate a boundary and separate British India from Southeast Asia and the Indian plains. Lewin’s idea was “to establish...good stockade villages of courageous stiff necked people of Gorkha who would serve as a buffer between the Mong Raja’s territories and independent Lushias to the East” (quoted in Pradhan 2004: 59).

⁷⁴ There is a vast literature on Gurkha soldiers, from accounts written by British and Nepali soldiers (Marks 1974; Tucker 1957; Khanduri 1997; Muktan 2002) to anthropologists and historians who explored the role Gurkhas played in the British Empire (Caplan 1991, 1995; Des Chene 1991; Gould 1999).

19).⁷⁵ The British brought in Gurkha regiments to put down mutinies across the Empire, as they did not bring use local armies on such occasions.⁷⁶ The Gurkhas worked to maintain the Empire. Many Darjeeling residents told me that such labor tied them to India but also ensured that they would never be fully included in it (I will return to this discussion in Chapter 6).

As in other colonial contexts, the British racialized the labors of colonial life in Darjeeling. Nepalis were characterized in 19th century texts as “good workers:” amicable, brave, and industrious (Golay 2006). While men were recruited into military service around the Empire, Nepali women were seen as suited to work in tea fields and bungalows. Gurkhas, associated with endurance, strength, and loyalty, were seen as good soldiers, and this taxonomy was translated into other forms of labor and service. By the time Darjeeling tea production began in the late 1850s, British administrators and settlers drew upon a cultural taxonomy of labor, which categorized all Nepali migrants as industrious, loyal, and easy to control.⁷⁷

In the British cultural taxonomy, the Lepchas and Bhutias, who resided in the foothills of Darjeeling when the British arrived, were deemed unfit for manual labor (see

⁷⁵ Seddon, et al. (2001) explore how recent Nepali foreign employment and the resulting remittance economy, which is facilitated by Nepal and India’s open border, creates a new class of Nepalis, which they term the “new lahures.”

⁷⁶ After the battle, the British punished the residents of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar for their central role in the Sepoy Rebellion. Residents of these states fled from British persecution to Nepal, as well as overseas to Fiji, Trinidad, and Mauritius to work as laborers on plantations (Lal 2002: 105).

⁷⁷ In Chapter 5, I identify a similar reification and celebration of tea workers as tourist attractions when I discuss the rise of Geographical Indication and Darjeeling tea marketing in the contemporary period.

Chapter 2).⁷⁸ Lepchas, instead, knew about the local flora and fauna and served as guides to the Himalayan interior. They were deemed unfit and unwilling to perform manual labor. There were not enough Lepchas to supply the labor for the sweeping plantations and growing food needs in Darjeeling. By 1874, there were 113 tea plantations employing almost 20,000 laborers. By the end of the century, the labor force rose to 64,000 – one-third of the population of the whole district. 96 percent of the tea workers in Darjeeling were Nepali (Kennedy 1996: 188-190). For the British, the Lepcha then became a “dying race,” in danger of being displaced by the floods of immigrating laborers (Kennedy 1996: 78).

The fact that British managers differentiated among “coolies” through cultural taxonomies was not unique to Darjeeling.⁷⁹ For example, Chatterjee (2001) describes the distinct price indexes paid to labor recruiters for different kinds of workers. In the plantations of the plains, *jungli* or “aboriginal” labor fetched a higher price than did Nepali labor, because the British saw indigenous peoples as more suited to the tropical environment (Chatterjee 2001: 75-77). In Assam, a similar taxonomy took hold (see Sharma 2011; Chapter 2). Like Assam, Darjeeling became a crossroads for several types of migrants. In addition to Nepalis, Marwari traders came to open up businesses and

⁷⁸ It is important to note that during the time of my fieldwork, Lepchas and Bhutias remained marginal “Gorkhas.” They participated in the Gorkhaland agitation; however, arguably because of the community bifurcations that were caused by the 6th schedule, in which Lepchas and Bhutias had to prove that they were different than “Nepali tribes,” these communities maintained a liminal status. I will return to a discussion of the 6th schedule below. Lepchas and Bhutias have scheduled status. For a discussion of reservations in Darjeeling, see Middleton (2010, 2011).

⁷⁹ I am using the term “cultural taxonomy” here. Other analyses of the “coolie” category in colonial Asia have emphasized how it melds racial, class, gendered, and even sexual categories (see Stoler 1995, 1985; Breman 1989; Daniel 2008; Daniel, Bernstein and Brass 1999).

moneylending operations (Saha 2003); the British recruited Bengalis, whom they considered to be adept at book keeping and management, into low-level administrative posts on plantations and in town. Finally, Tibetans and Newaris acted as traders between Darjeeling, Kathmandu, and Lhasa. Other Tibetans and Nepalis flowed in and out of the region on religious pilgrimages.

Labor Recruitment and Darjeeling's Special Labor Force

Nepali “coolies” in Darjeeling were not directly forced or indentured laborers. The system of recruitment in Darjeeling was distinct from that that obtained in other regions of the empire. Tea laborers, planters, town residents and politicians all credit the first Superintendent of Darjeeling, Archibald Campbell, for spearheading the successful launch of the tea industry. Campbell remains central to vernacular narratives about the development and expansion of Darjeeling and its tea industry. From 1835 to 1869, the Nepali population in Darjeeling more than doubled (Dash 1947: 49). In 1852, an inspecting officer wrote:

[Campbell] found Darjeeling an inaccessible tract of forest, with a very scanty population...a simple system of administration of justice has been introduced, well adapted to the character of the tribes whom he had to deal; the system of forced labor formerly in use has been abolished, and *labour with all other valuables has been left to find its own price in an open market*; roads have been made; experimental cultivation of tea and coffee has been introduced, and various European fruits and grapes; and this has been effected at the same time that the various tribes of inhabitants have been conciliated, and their habits and prejudices treated with a caution and forbearance which will render further progress in the same direction an easy task. (in Griffiths 1967: 86; emphasis added).

Campbell did not, however, attract the swarms of Nepali laborers all by himself. Unlike tea growing regions of the Northeast, which relied on indentured labor to staff the gardens, in Darjeeling, labor was almost exclusively recruited through a *sardar* system.⁸⁰ The *sardar* system was not unique to Darjeeling. The British often turned to such middlemen to recruit or indenture laborers. *Sardars* used their own “native” knowledge to organize and govern the laboring masses (Chakrabarty 1989; Chatterjee 2001). *Sardars* were associated with particular ethnic groups from particular regions. Establishing longstanding relationships with their natal communities, the recruiters tapped a steady supply of labor that could be controlled according to shared cultural idioms. In this fashion, villages became enclaves of ethnicities, which provided simultaneously for the worker a sense of community, and for the industrialist a stable supply of labor. Unlike in Assam or the Northwest Himalaya, where workers were indentured or violently forced, *sardar*-based recruitment in Darjeeling was a much less violent and coercive process.

Nepali *sardars* escorted eastern Nepalis over the Mechi River to Darjeeling tea plantations. When in Darjeeling, these *sardars* oversaw the laborers on the plantation (Griffiths 1967: 274). Often, *sardars* recruited from the same villages in eastern Nepal over and over again. On many gardens today, single ethnic groups and extended families

⁸⁰ “*Sardar*” is generally translated as “headman,” as in lineage or village headman. In Darjeeling and other plantation enclaves in the northeast, “*sardar*” (alternatively, “*sirdar*” or “*sirdari* system”) refers to a labor recruiter: someone who brings laborers from one location to another to work. I will use the Nepali pronunciation “*sardar*.”

dominate specific gardens (see Chapter 6).⁸¹ On the tea plantation, the *sardar* watched over laborers, making sure that his recruits received food rations and salaries from the planter. The *sardar* was integral to the maintenance of subsistence and an acceptable quality of life on the garden. By 1947, *sardars* were paid three to five rupees for every recruit they obtained that worked for one year on the garden. Recruits were given a small settlement allowance of five to ten rupees (Dash 1947: 118-119).⁸²

Though active recruitment ended before Independence, workers I interviewed in Darjeeling fondly remembered *sardars*, to whom they referred using elder male kinship terms (“father” or “uncle”). If there were problems on the garden, if there was not enough grain, or if a laborer did not have money to perform ritual obligations for dead relatives, then the *sardar* would assist. He was a mediator between management and laborers. *Sardars* did not work in the fields themselves. They drafted field supervisors from among the resident plantation men.

Sardars were particularly important figures in the taxonomy, organization, and moral economy of Darjeeling tea plantation labor. British taxonomies of labor aided in the stable accumulation of capital – everyone had their place in the manufacturing of town, tea, and home. Nepali tea workers employed a parallel (Gorkha) taxonomy of labor, in which the plantation – both people and plants – was organized into a family.

⁸¹ For example, Bimal Gurung, the GJMM leader, was raised on Tukvar, a Gurung-dominated plantation (see Chapters 1 and 6).

⁸² By 1910, planters paid their laborers directly instead of through the *sardars* (Griffiths 1967: 274).

Gorkha taxonomies also highlight the stable accumulation of capital, but they framed it as a set of stable relationships of care.

One of my research goals was to understand the organization of plantation labor (see also Figure 1.3). I would ask women workers to explain their relationships to the male plantation staff. In answer to my queries, the women would adopt affective kin terms. They referred to male field supervisors as “uncles” (*kaka*). In communities across South Asia, the use of elder male kinship terms denotes respect and closeness.⁸³ Women laborers also often refer to each other in familial terms, regardless of actual or fictive relationships – *didi* (older sister), *bahini* (younger sister), *kaki* (father’s younger brother’s wife), and *pupu* (father’s older brother’s wife).⁸⁴

Women’s use of kinship terms and their expectations of amicable treatment can be traced back to the beginnings of Darjeeling plantation history. British **sterling companies** (opposed to the “rupee companies” of contemporary Indian *bisnis* men) in London and Calcutta financially backed the clearing of the Darjeeling “wasteland” by **planters**, white managers who lived on the tea garden and also inhabited the clubs and bungalows of Darjeeling town. Planters provided “facilities” such as housing, food rations, and healthcare for tea laborers. As Percival Griffiths, a Darjeeling planter at Tukdah Tea Estate during the 1940s, explained in his account of the British Indian tea industry: “...men, women, and children brought hundreds of miles from their own

⁸³ For a linguistic anthropological analysis of the uses of “uncle” in Nepali, see Turin (2001).

⁸⁴ This is quite normal in South Asia. What was interesting to me was the consistency with which kinship terminology was traced through the father, not the mother.

country to the notoriously unhealthy tea districts could only survive if planters accepted responsibility for their welfare..." (Griffiths 1967: 350). Nepali plantation residents with whom I talked to often thought of *sardars* familial terms, speaking of them as elderly "fathers" or "uncles."

Sardars appointed *duffdars*, or field supervisors, who oversaw **labor groups** of female laborers. *Duffdars* were members of the same community as the women workers, who called them, *kaka* ("father's younger brother"). During the period of my research, *duffdars* continued to supervise labor groups of women, with whom they shared villages or even houses. A *duffdar* went out into the field with a labor group to watch over their plucking and pruning and to record the weight of green tea leaf collected by female laborers. Plantation workers I interviewed attributed favorable labor conditions and familiar relations between labor and management to intermediary presence of **garden baaus**, higher-level Nepali field managers (there was usually only one on each plantation). There is a homology between these descriptions of plantation-as-family and contemporary discourses of kinship and moral economy.⁸⁵

For the Nepali workers, each plantation provided housing and medical services and set aside land for cultivation and herding. As the plantation economy flourished, education was provided to children of laborers. Under the Ranas in Nepal, on the other hand as I mentioned earlier, education was only open to high caste Hindus (Griffiths 1967: 267). Additionally, the British hired whole families to work on Darjeeling

⁸⁵ Again, there are interesting parallels between the South Asian *jajmani* system and the plantation moral economy (see footnote 12 in Chapter 1). The plantation, however, is a formal, wage-based work arrangement with aspects of non-monetary "facilities" written into Indian labor law (GOI 1951).

plantations, not just males. Unlike other British colonial enterprises, such as the mines, forests, railroads, and factories, children on Darjeeling tea plantations could pluck and sort tea alongside their parents (English 1982: 264).

In Darjeeling, labor could “find its own price,” in the words of the Inspecting Officer quoted above, because Sterling Companies, through planters, *sardars*, and *duffdars*, cultivated and reproduced a labor surplus. At the behest of planters, *sardars* managed, maintained, and fed laborers in caring, kin-like relationships. Darjeeling planters were neither subject to the labor laws and codes set by the Indian Tea Association, the governing body for the industry, founded in the late 1800s, nor were they organized into an association of planters that devised operating rules for the district. Such associations did exist in the adjacent tea growing regions of Assam and the Dooars. The Annual Bulletins of the Indian Tea Association highlighted chronic labor shortages. In Darjeeling, on the other hand, capital was stably accumulated through the development of relationships of care between *sardars*, planters, labor, and the land. “Good” planters were those who could *independently* retain labor on behalf of their companies. Good planters, too, also found creative ways to deal with the population of the plantation. They found off-plantation jobs for men.

This organizational structure and the relationships among planters, *sardars*, *duffdars*, and workers cultivated a mutual ethic of care. Women I interviewed on tea plantations explained that although *duffdars* were their superiors in the work structure, they were expected to treat the women with a certain amount of concern, ensuring equal

distribution of labor, helping to pluck leaf, training inexperienced pluckers, and turning a blind eye toward mid-morning or mid-afternoon breaks. Planters' care for labor was reciprocated through laborers' care for the land. These mutual relationships of care formed the basis of the plantation moral economy. Crucially, the work of tea pluckers was not just material; it was also affective. Workers and management "cared" about each other and the plants in a familial way. The persistent use of kinship terminology in the nostalgic discourses of Gorkha workers (see Chapter 6) has its roots in colonial concerns about labor and land. While British needs to care for labor may have been born out of purely economic motivation, the ethic of conservation I described in Chapter 2 had its roots in the construction of the garden and the hill station as spaces not just of productivity, but also of cultural reproduction. This ethic seems to have been replicated in the treatment of workers. Planters, as I was reminded in the vignette above, had a "paternalistic" vision of their work.

Because Darjeeling planters used individual *sardars* to recruit their laborers, they did not see the need for a large planter association like those that assembled in Assam or the Dooars. The primary function of planter associations was to solve what planters called "the labor question," in other words, to ensure that each plantation could get enough labor to last season to season. The Indian Tea Association formed a Darjeeling and Dooars subcommittee as early as 1892, but Darjeeling Planters initially refused to participate. Darjeeling planters believed that it was both the special environment of the area and their ability to "independently" recruit the Nepali laborers that

“spontaneously” migrated to the district that allowed them to produce the first Indian tea to be considered as good as Chinese tea (Griffiths 1967: 102). It was only in 1910, after it became clear that some planters were providing better wages and nonmonetary compensation than others, inspiring Nepali workers to move from plantation to plantation in search of the most favorable living and working conditions for their families, that the Darjeeling Planters’ Association was founded (Griffiths 1967: 518-519). The Darjeeling Planters Association began standardizing labor and environmental practices across the district. This move served to keep Nepali labor more settled, and it effectively ended the era in which “good planters” could distinguish themselves by offering better remuneration than their neighbors. The Darjeeling Planters’ Association actually set very low standards for the provision of food, housing, and other “facilities.” The codification of relatively modest compensation worked to the planters’ advantage because the Nepalis had by this time permanently settled in the district. It seems telling that the first Secretary to the Darjeeling Planters’ Association was both a former Army officer and the District’s Labor Officer.

State and Class on the Tea Plantation: World Wars and Independence⁸⁶

Tea was not always dominated by female labor. Many older plantation men I met during my fieldwork remembered plucking tea “before the war” (World War II), when most of the able bodied men on the plantation, including the planters, were drafted into the British Army. Before and between the two World Wars, tea moved from being a mercantile/colonial crop to an industrial commodity crop. This shift happened just after the Planters’ Association formed and began curtailing workers’ benefits, and just when the longevity of the British presence in India was coming into question. The British deployed Gurkha soldiers to suppress freedom fighters in Jallianwala Bagh in 1919 and across India during the Quit India Movement of 1942. The Gorkhas gained a reputation within India as pro-British and anti-independence (Subba 1992: 59-60; See also Chapter 6).

During the First and Second World Wars, both planters and male Darjeeling plantation residents were conscripted into service to defend British military interests. While increasing numbers of men were dispatched across India and to warring theaters in Europe, female Nepali laborers remained on the plantations. Although men, women, and children were paid differently, there is little historical evidence that work was

⁸⁶ The World Wars are a fascinating time period on Darjeeling tea plantations, but historical documentation on this period is rather scant. I think that it is important for me to try to narrate some pivotal events from this period, but to do so, I have cobbled together some disparate sources. I draw on Indian Tea Association (ITA) Bulletins (which I read during archival work in Kolkata) for the war years, a Nepali language book written by the leader of the CPRM in Darjeeling (Rai 2000), additional official British sources (Griffiths 1967; Dash 1947), and the work of anthropologist T.B. Subba (1992).

particularly gendered during the colonial era, when there was a labor surplus.⁸⁷ In Indian Tea Association records from before the First World War, Darjeeling laborers were referred to as non-gendered “*coolies*.” Women, men, and children worked in the fields together. Writing in the 1947 Bengal District Gazetteer for Darjeeling, Arthur Dash notes that between 1939 and 1944 the number of women workers relative to male workers increased significantly.⁸⁸

In a 2010 article on the way in which men are increasingly performing the painstaking manual cross-pollination of cotton varieties in Andhra Pradesh – a task known as “women’s work” – Priti Ramamurthy suggests that the feminization of male labor is an “index for the changing relation between labor and capital” (2012: 418). While she explains that the feminization of male and child labor (i.e. men and children adopting typically female roles) are reflective of the business strategies of the multinational corporations that dominate cotton production in India. In Darjeeling, during the war years, formerly non-gendered “coolie” labor became feminized. As I will discuss in Chapter 5, Darjeeling tea’s association with female labor has become integral to its value as a luxury good. The feminization of Darjeeling tea labor, however, is a distinctly historical process. As Ramamurthy explains, in a context in which the global

⁸⁷ A Darjeeling field worker in 1947 made five *annas* if he was male, four *annas* if she was female, and three *annas* if he or she was a child (an *anna* was 1/16 of a Rupee), while factory workers, almost always men, made upwards of 8 *annas* a day. Workers were given a per piece incentive of 6 *pies* (there are 192 *pies* in a Rupee) per *seer* (about two pounds) of green leaf tea. These payments were perceived to be more of a “task rate” than an actual wage, since parts of this were withheld and paid as bonuses for showing up for five consecutive days (Dash 1947: 119).

⁸⁸ In 1939: 39% male/ 43% female/ 18% children, to 34% male/ 49% female/ 17% children (Dash 1947: 119) in 1944.

agricultural labor force has become increasingly feminized, it is important to understand “how and why laborers...feminize their own labor in ways that are significant to them...” (2010: 399). I will return to this discussion in upcoming chapters.

The 1941 Indian Tea Association bulletin, reported that as a result of increased food costs during World War, Darjeeling tea workers’ cost of living had increased beyond workers’ ability to survive (ITA 1942: 46). Inflation and food shortages were making plantation production less lucrative. The Darjeeling Planters’ Association agreed that a “temporary” cash compensation should be given to workers,

...quite apart from the ordinary wages and that it was a special allowance introduced temporarily to meet the increase in the cost of living brought about by the war, and liable to be modified or withdrawn at any time as circumstances might dictate (ITA 1942: 46).

In addition to the cash allowances, some planters began rationing rice and other grain in order to “protect laborers against inflation,” but such rations were uneven (Griffiths 1967: 113). Some plantations provided well for their workers, but on others, conditions deteriorated. The Second World War saw the return of rationing and non-monetary remuneration, as well as land incentives for workers (Dash 1947: 118-119). While most Gorkha men were abroad fighting, women and children received these benefits.

The World War II years also saw the arrival of Darjeeling’s two first major political parties. The All Bhartiya Gorkha League (ABGL)⁸⁹ and the Communist Party of India (CPI) both established bases in the district in 1943. The ABGL aimed to represent Nepalis throughout India. The party was affiliated with the Congress Party, and it

⁸⁹ Also known as the All *India* Gorkha League (AIGL).

remained so until the time of my fieldwork. (In fact, Madan Tamang, the owner of Meghma Tea Estate on the Nepal-India border, was its head until 2010.). Nepali soldiers returning from the War found their loyalties split not only between these two parties but also between the British and soon-to-be-independent Indian nation.⁹⁰

Both the ABGL and the CPI formed labor unions to represent workers, but the Congress-backed ABGL took a generally less antagonistic stance toward the planters and the British.⁹¹ The earliest political victory in Darjeeling, however, went to the CPI. In 1946, Maila Baaje (literally, “middle-oldest grandfather”), who formed the Darjeeling tea garden workers’ union in 1945, was elected to the Legislative Assembly of Bengal on a platform that promised plantation reform. Workers were aware that a few “good planters” still provided facilities and cared for their workers. For workers, the uneven provision of facilities and care from garden to garden was a harbinger of decline. Shortly after, the Communist party organized a labor union, which served strike notices on seventeen different Darjeeling plantations. After the 1945 election, the strength of CPI unions continued to grow. The CPI sponsored an 11-point list of demands for the improvement of working conditions on Darjeeling plantations. Demands included increases in daily wages, maternity expense provision, the elimination of child labor, education, the construction of hospitals on tea estates, retirement pensions, a “bonus” or

⁹⁰ The Gorkha regiments represented imperialism to many Indians, though the Nehru Congress Party government fought with the departing British over the fate of the Gorkha regiments. In the end, just one week before Independence, on August 8, 1947, it was agreed that 4 regiments would remain with the British, and the rest would be returned to India (Subba 1992: 59).

⁹¹ The Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) and Congress Party-backed unions, while prominent in other tea growing regions in the Northeast of India were not a large presence in Darjeeling.

tip,” and the abolishment of rent for grazing and herding (Rai 2000: 28). In essence, the CPI demanded that workers receive the benefits that came during wartime and periods of colonial-era recruitment on a permanent basis.

Planters claimed that of these benefits were intended to only be temporary, but in a circular dated July 28, 1947, less than three weeks before Independence, provisions for wages, benefits, and housing were written into the official ITA bulletin (ITA 1947: 147-149),⁹² setting the stage for the passage of the Plantations Labour Act of 1951, which codified these rules, born in wartime, into the constitution of Independent India. What had been planters’ provisions to “maintain” an efficient and relatively healthy labor force of “coolies” became officially classified as “compensation.” With the coming of the unions, workers began looking beyond the bounds of individual plantations for resources; moreover, the labor unions provided an alternative to the army as a source of institutional connection to the state and local and national politics

Planters saw the post-Independence entry of the Communist party as a poisoning of their “natural sympathy for the hillmen” (Griffiths 1967: 394). According to Percival Griffiths (1967: 320): “For some decades before the Transfer of Power, tea garden proprietors had enjoyed a fair measure of freedom in their dealings with employees and as labour at the time was unorganized the scales had been weighted in the favour of the employers.” Griffiths further explains that after Independence, “...the

⁹² The ITA Bulletin for 1947 includes separate rules for Darjeeling houses. Plantation housing in Darjeeling could be smaller and closer together than in other parts of India, the Bulletin said, because of the “extremely low temperatures” in Darjeeling, and the “constant movement of air up-hill in they day time and down-hill at night” (ITA 1942: 149).

tea industry moved into a new era, in which official intervention in labour relations and government control of the remuneration and conditions of service of labour would be the rule rather than the exception” (Griffiths 1967: 320). Independent Indian labor laws mandated that there be regular tripartite meetings to set wages and other payments on plantations (see Chapter 4). Indian labor law also standardized and concretized *welfare*. For contemporary planters, the government had (and still does have) “an unrealistic view of the paying capacity of the industry.” It was the job of labor unions in post-independence Darjeeling to ensure that the planters were paying.

The CPI and Maila Baaje understood that for tea workers, a political program based on hardline Marxism might not be palatable. As their union became more and more powerful across the district, they began advocating to the Interim Government of India a proposal to form an independent nation of “Gorkhastan” comprising Nepal, Darjeeling, and part of Sikkim (Subba 1992: 90). The appeal to “Gorkhalism” (Subba 1992: 90) was a shrewd one, since the earliest organization to advocate for the rights of Nepalis in Darjeeling, the Hillmen’s Association, had joined with the Darjeeling Planters’ Association in pressing for the separation of the district and the Dooars from West Bengal in 1920.⁹³ Since the founding of the Hillmen’s Association, and especially after the death of its charismatic leader, S.W. Laden La, the idea of regional separation or autonomy had been floating among the few politically active Nepalis in Darjeeling (see also Rhodes and Rhodes 2006). The CPI used a generalized sense of distance from the

⁹³ There were two other calls, in 1907 and 1917, for a “separate administrative setup” for Darjeeling (Subba 1992: 76-77).

Indian nation, reinforced in the awkward experiences of returning Gorkha soldiers, to its political advantage. The Gorkhastan movement fizzled, but regional autonomy remained part of the CPI platform.

In 1955, the CPI's union, in conjunction with the ABGL, organized a strike at Margaret's Hope Tea Estate. British managers had begun ordering workers to work surrounded by police with drawn guns. Strikers came from nearby to attempt to break the police cordon. As Baaje's successor in the Darjeeling Communist Party, R.B. Rai, argued, the Margaret's Hope uprising "proved the allegation wrong that Nepalis [were] just the mercenaries of the vessels of imperialism (the weapon to suppress the public's agitation)...or that they [were] just the prey of the middle class's blind racial illusions" (Rai 2000: 27). On June 25, 1955, six people were killed when the police fired on the strikers, and 250 people were arrested. Several died in jail due to starvation and disease. The government responded by prohibiting Nepalis from walking in groups in public.

The Margaret's Hope strike was remembered among Darjeeling residents during the time of my fieldwork as one of the originating events of the contemporary Gorkhaland agitation. Paradoxically, Gorkhas, now identifying themselves as working-class industrial agricultural laborers (and not military service people) had to rise up against their employers in order to become visible to the Indian state. It seems doubly ironic that the police who fired on the strikers were also ex-military servicemen. After the uprising, British owners and companies became more eager than ever to sell their

plantations. After 1955, Darjeeling plantations were no longer growing; in fact they were shrinking. By the time the Federal Exchange Regulation Act went into effect in 1973, mandating that all plantations be Indian-owned (or become “rupee companies”), most capital had left the region. The number of acres under cultivation and the number of gardens both declined, due to closures and conglomeration. These smaller plantations needed fewer laborers, and with the cost of production going up, new Indian owners and companies had further reason to reduce the number of permanent laborers on tea gardens in favor of seasonal employment. There were more men on Darjeeling gardens, but there was no work for them in town, in the army, or on the plantation itself. In this context, as I show in Chapter 6, labor unions lost their firm grip on Gorkha political life.

Land, Labor, Identity

In his study of land tenure and politics in eastern Nepal, Lionel Caplan argues that “[c]ultural identity becomes political identity in the context of confrontation over ...land” (Caplan 1970: 113, quoted in Guneratne 2002: 5). While it may be tempting to suggest that Gorkha identity is a “hybrid” of ethnicity and class markers, such a binary is misleading. Gorkha identity is a complex amalgam of labor, environmental, national, linguistic, and “diasporic” identification. The history I have reviewed here—and the material on the Gorkhaland agitation I present in Chapter 6, reveals the ways in which

not only politicians but also tea workers, former soldiers, and other self-identified Gorkhas drew on a shifting set of identity markers.

Gorkhas, as I suggested in the introduction to this chapter, live in a “contact zone” (Fisher 1978). The Himalayan foothills have long been a place where cultural traditions mesh and where questions about ethnic identity are constantly re-asked and re-answered (see Fisher 2001; Shneiderman 2010). While William Fisher (2001), like Aihwa Ong (1999), imagined identities and selves as formed through migration across borders and physical barriers, I suggest that for Gorkhas, identity has come less from experiences of movement than about their relationship to place. As I argue in the next three chapters, the construction, deterioration, and revitalization of Darjeeling as a site of tea production and as a Gorkha homeland, reveals an important environmental component to the negotiation and fluidity of identities.

Chapter 4: *Fair Trade's Plantation Problem: Homelands, Workplaces, and the Moral Economies of Tea*

Prakriti and I were crouched down, hovering above the dirt floor of her kitchen, chatting about upcoming weddings on the plantation. She was concerned about what color *kurta* I should wear (I wore too much green) and how I might possibly control my wiry “ghost-like” hair for the occasions. As she got up to get us more tea – milky sugary *ciyaa* made from her monthly ration of dust-grade leaf – the tethered cow in the shed attached to her kitchen let out a long aggravated “*Moooo*,” that vibrated the brittle bamboo walls.

“What do you do with that cow, anyway?” I asked her. I had had tea at Prakriti’s house many times since 2006, and I had never seen that cow outside of the shed. Despite their popularity in development projects on Darjeeling tea plantations, cows were ill-suited for the landscape. Not only would it be difficult for a cow to navigate through the densely planted tea bushes, plantation owners prohibited cows from grazing on plantations. Thus, cows were confined to small sheds in plantation villages and a life of alternatively sitting and standing (though many cows were not readily able to stand without human assistance). Prakriti’s cow just sat there all day munching on bamboo leaves.

“Oh. *That* cow? Years ago, I got it through a [fair trade] loan from the company. We thought that we could sell the milk and the calves up in town. The manager said that the company would buy back the dung for *organiks*.”⁹⁴

“You don’t sell these things?” I asked.

“When do I have time?” she said, exasperated, pouring steaming *ciyaa* into our glasses from a dented aluminum pot. “So what if I have that cow?” She pointed toward the shed. “We are all poor here. I give the milk to my sister and brother...and,” She paused, and turned in the animal’s direction. “She cannot graze anywhere! The legs of that cow are like my life: absolutely weak.”

The Fair Trade Moral Economy and the Making of Entrepreneurial Subjects

I was often left dumbfounded when I tried to find out *what* fair trade certification *was doing* for workers on Darjeeling tea plantations. Prakriti could describe little social change, despite the fact that the plantation on which she lived had been certified as “fair trade” and “organic” for over ten years.⁹⁵ International fair trade and organic certifiers came to Darjeeling in the 1990s in hopes of expanding the growing market for

⁹⁴ I will not discuss organic production or organic certification explicitly. In Darjeeling, fair trade and organic were fused together. All fair trade certified plantations were also organic certified (and the majority of these twenty-two plantations were also “biodynamic,” another international certification scheme attesting to the sustainable operation of the industrial tea landscape).

⁹⁵ In Darjeeling, plantations that were certified fair trade were also certified organic. While fair trade projects aimed to “empower” Darjeeling tea workers and promote “fair” trading conditions, organic agriculture advocates claimed that organic methods could combat the environmental degradation wrought by industrial tea production. If the usage of “fair trade” and “organic” seems at times confused, this may be a deliberate rhetorical strategy to demonstrate how the two concepts were intertwined. At times, planters deployed the concepts as a catchall amalgam: “fair trade organic.”

sustainable and socially responsible products. The region, still reeling from the Gorkhaland agitation of the 1980s, was in the depths of industrial decline that stemmed from decades of falling prices, the collapse of markets in the former Soviet Union, overuse of pesticides, and the proliferation of cheap teas grown in other places but marketed as “Darjeeling.” Tea workers, planters, and town residents agreed that the Darjeeling tea industry was in decline. People at all levels of tea production used the word “crisis” without specific qualification. The word became a catch-all for environmental, economic, and, as I show in Chapter 6, political instability.

Tea workers described the economic decline as a movement from a period of *industri*, when moral economic relations were stable on the plantation, to an age of *bisnis*, in which planters neglected their moral economic obligations to labor (e.g. providing “facilities” and replanting tea bushes) (see Chapter 1). For workers, fair trade certification was part of a suite of *bisnis* practices aimed at reorienting and rebranding the Darjeeling tea industry in a global market. This rebranding further eroded, rather than improved, the environmental and social conditions of the plantation.

Savvy Darjeeling plantation owners saw international certification schemes as a way to tap new markets and make more money on decreasing yields. Fair trade certification allows producers – *owners*, in the case of plantations – to not only be ensured a minimum price for their products, but also to receive an extra fair trade “premium.”

To situate fair trade on Darjeeling tea plantations, it is important to explain a few concepts in fair trade certification. Fair trade minimum *prices* and fair trade *premiums* are different. On coffee cooperatives, for example, workers receive a pre-set minimum price per pound for unroasted green coffee. Similarly, Fair Trade Labeling Organizations International (FLO), the governing body for Fair Trade certification, sets minimum prices for various grades and locations of processed tea.⁹⁶ The fair trade premium is an extra bit of money a consumer pays for a fair trade certified product. This set amount is then returned to the cooperative or plantation for distribution within a producer community to support individual income generating opportunities through the dispersal of microloans or to develop community-wide projects. Aside from the obvious differences in land tenure, the way in which the premium is distributed is perhaps the most glaring reminder that the way fair trade functions on plantations is different from the way it functions on cooperatives. On coffee cooperatives, cooperative members democratically decide how to spend the fair trade premium (though there are inequities in this system, too; see, for example, Lyon 2010), but on tea plantations, a “Joint Body,” composed of management and workers, distributes the premium.

The fair trade movement began on Latin American coffee cooperatives, but over time, FLO developed a set of “hired labor” standards to encompass tea, banana, and flower plantations. Since the late 1990s, FLO has been certifying tea plantations in India. When I began this research, only tea and banana plantations could be certified as

⁹⁶ FLO’s pricing database is available at: <http://www.fairtrade.net/793.html>. Darjeeling tea, however, is exempted from minimum price schemes. Fair Trade Labelling Organizations International is now known as Fair Trade International, but the organization still uses the acronym FLO.

“fair trade” by FLO, but today, FLO certifies factory-made products like sport balls and dried fruit as well as products of wage labor (often on plantations – land tenure situations in which workers live on and work in the agricultural landscape, but have no rights to the land) such as flowers, fruit, and vegetables.⁹⁷ Coffee and tea production are very different, but boxes of fair trade coffee, tea, and other products all explain that consumer revenue goes straight into the pockets of producers, described on the packaging as “empowered small *farmers*.” Plantation workers are neither “small farmers,” nor can a plantation be cooperatively run. As I describe in this chapter, complex systems of moral economic relationships between labor, management, and the agro-environment must be taken into account if fair trade ever hopes to operate meaningfully on plantations. In workers’ opinions, these relationships are indispensable to the equitable functioning of the plantation.⁹⁸

On both cooperatives and plantations, fair trade logic holds that individual income generating strategies and property ownership add up to “empowerment.”⁹⁹ With a cow, for example, Prakriti could sell her dung back to the plantation management as organic compost, or sell her milk to her neighbors. With extra money, Prakriti would be “empowered” to purchase clothes, food, or school supplies for her family. But Prakriti’s neighbors are her siblings or other distant relatives who can trace their

⁹⁷ See: <http://www.fairtrade.net/products.html> (Accessed March 21, 2012). For details about FLO’s Hired Labor Standards or Hired Labor Standards in Tea see FLO 2011a and FLO 2011b.

⁹⁸ For a documentary film that describes the inequities in the distribution of the fair trade premium on tea plantation in Kenya, Sri Lanka, and South India, see Heinemann and Borgen (2008).

⁹⁹ See Fair Trade Federation’s website: <http://fairtradefederation.org/ht/d/sp/i/2733/pid/2733> (Accessed March 21, 2012).

families back to the same regions of Nepal. The Darjeeling plantation system is an elaborate kin (both actual and fictive) network, with marriages across villages and plantations, or even back to Nepal. Neighbors are far more than potential customers.

Prakriti's cow not only represents the individualizing tendency of fair trade, which challenged long-standing moral economic relationships between laborers, land, management, and the postcolonial state. It also represents the erosion of planter responsibility (and the erosion of the figure of the "gentleman planter" introduced in Chapter 1). The premise of the loan was that with this cow, Prakriti would be able to supplement the meager daily wage she received for plantation work. Fair trade has no ability to regulate plantation wages. Instead, it attempts to shift the focus away from plantation wage labor, using individual, non-plantation work – supported by the distribution of microloans – to "empower" plantation workers. Despite the fact that fair trade certification cannot ensure higher wages for plantation workers, fair trade certifiers and certified plantations often invoke the concept of "fair wages" to market certified plantation products.

Fair trade schemes on plantations operate to dissociate tea from the means of its production and from its oppressive colonial past. The term "plantation" is notably avoided in fair trade discussions of tea, in favor of the words "estate" or "garden," terms British colonists and American slaveholders alike used to describe other inherently unequal tenancy arrangements. Fair trade plantation certification by FLO has relied upon a re-imagining of plantation labor as "hired labor." As I showed in previous

chapters, the colonial plantation model, which relied on tenant laborers who worked for low wages and in-kind benefits and lived in "villages" or labor lines on huge monocropped tracts, is alive and well. FLO's use of the term "hired labor" to describe this type of organization makes it seem as if workers freely come and go from land, when in fact the plantation system has historically tied them to land. "Hired labor" evokes a vision of a solely capitalist relationship between workers and the commodity they produce. Darjeeling plantations are far more complex than this. There are not fixed amounts of times spent "at work." Home *is* work for the Darjeeling plantation worker. Prakriti subverted fair trade's intent by giving the milk to her brother and sister, who also lived on the plantation.

By insisting that plantation labor is "hired" work, fair trade certification ignores this fact. Paradoxically, however, fair trade certification on cooperative small farms relies on the establishment of just such a tie between home and work. Fair trade standards for hired labor avoid engaging this compression of home and work because in the context of plantations, this duality evokes not rugged individualism but indenture, sharecropping, and permanent marginalization. In this chapter, I argue that the plantation and its underlying moral economic system must be understood by fair trade activists, consumers, and certifying agencies, who are, after all, trying to implement a contending moral economic system (Goodman 2004; Luetchford 2008: 152- 183). This moral economic system undermines national institutions, specifically Indian labor laws that work to ensure the equitable treatment of plantation workers.

For Darjeeling tea laborers, homeland and workplace were and are one and the same. Post-colonial Indian labor law has taken this tie into account, protecting not only wages but also benefits for workers' domestic space, such as latrines, water, housing, and food rations. Indian labor law acknowledges that laborers live where they work. FLO has undermined an existing labor law, the Plantations Labor Act of 1951 (PLA). After Independence, the Government of India enacted the PLA to protect workers from mistreatment at the hands of plantation owners. This legislation was also driven by the active presence of Communist-backed labor unions in Darjeeling, Assam, the Dooars, and Kerala, Independent India's major tea growing regions (see Chapter 3). The PLA continues to guarantee plantation workers' social welfare. It mandates that owners provide workers housing, health care, food rations, and schooling for their children, what workers call, using the English term, "facilities" (see Chapter 1). The PLA codifies remunerative aspects of the plantation moral economy – the tripartite relationship between laborer, management, and the agro-environment – and makes these relationships a matter of state concern. FLO regulations for "hired labor" encourage entrepreneurship and the formation of new, supposedly democratic (but non-governmental) associations like the Joint Body. For their part, plantation residents I interviewed put little stock in democratic representation or the implementation of an entrepreneurial model of empowerment. Instead, workers used union-based political action in hopes of compelling plantation management to uphold their legal obligations to provide facilities and regular wages.

In this chapter, I describe clashing moral economic visions of postcolonial tea plantation production in Darjeeling. As E.P. Thompson (1971) and James Scott (1976) have highlighted, moral economies are not stable; instead these relationships are most visible in conflicts over the distribution of rights and resources. As I argue below, fair trade's alternative moral economic program has its own tensions between neoliberalism and agrarian idealism. As I have shown in the first part of this dissertation, the plantation has its own moral economy, a complex set of tensions between workers and land, and between workers and planters over resources and facilities. In this chapter, I add a new element: the tension between the state, planters, and workers, over wages and taxes. At every turn, fair trade seems to have aggravated, rather than alleviated, the tensions in the plantation moral economy, even as it perpetuates its own paradoxes.

“Direct Trade” and the Myth of Transparency

Though producers of most fair trade products receive a minimum price for their products on the global market, Darjeeling has been exempted from minimum pricing schemes. According to FLO, until there is a fair trade minimum price set for Darjeeling tea, there will be an exception “made in the case of Darjeeling where basic needs for the workers (e.g. housing, water, and sanitation) may be partly financed through the fair trade premium. This is due to the critical economic situation in Darjeeling” (FLO 2011b: 3; see Besky 2010 for a discussion of the FLO exception). Without further explanation of the “critical economic situation,” FLO has now made it possible for owners to use fair

trade premiums to provide facilities dictated by the Plantations Labor Act. Below, I explain how owners used fair trade premiums to provide facilities that they should be providing from their own profits. In this section, however, I discuss the flaws in one of fair trade's central philosophical tenets: "direct trade." Fair trade envisions a moral economy in which third-world "farmers" trade directly and equitably with first-world consumers. Thus, fair trade evokes (and even fetishizes) economic relationships that existed before extensive capitalist production. These producers and consumers are of course ethnically and geographically marked. The economic premise of fair trade is that participation can rebalance first-world/third-world trade relationships. FLO's "success stories" about "empowered small farmers" I analyze below reinforce this moral economic imaginary and infuse it with neoliberal ideas about entrepreneurship. This combination of pre-capitalist agrarianism and neoliberal individuality has been particularly effective in the remaking of the Darjeeling tea plantation system.

Fair trade encourages buyers to trade directly with producers (i.e. plantation owners) in India, allowing producers to circumvent the auction system. Fair trade often heralds direct trade (at the minimum price) as a keystone to success. For coffee in particular, these direct buying relationships enable buyers and sellers to circumvent intermediaries, or "*coyotes*," and presumably make a higher price since they do not need to pay the intermediaries to shepherd the green coffee to market. Daniel Jaffee (2007:1) states:

Fair traders work to make the trading chain both shorter and fairer – that is, return a large share of the consumer's purchase directly to farmers (often called

producers) or laborers who grew the coffee or picked the bananas. In practical terms, the fair-trade system accomplishes this objective by cutting out many of the intermediaries or middlemen, such as exporters, importers, and brokers, who typically take a cut at each step along the route from tree, field, or farm to the coffee shop or grocery shelf.

Not only does fair trade certification attest to the equitable treatment of workers, it also provides plantation owners a way to get their tea directly to foreign and boutique markers, circumventing the auction system.

On Darjeeling plantations, workers make the same wage regardless of the means of the sale (e.g. directly sold or auctioned). All trade goes through owners and their offices in Kolkata or abroad. Fair trade certainly can shorten the commodity chain and allow plantations to trade directly with international retailers, though this is not a benefit for the workers the fair trade system aims to empower. All financial arrangements go directly through owners and management. The owner of the plantation acts as a middleman, a barrier not only to free trade, but also to fair trade. Many fair trade certified gardens run marketing houses abroad, which market the tea to other smaller retailers like online sellers or boutique teashops. The Darjeeling planters I interviewed found that fair trade certification was an effective and lucrative means of reaching US and European markets without participating in the auction system (and without maintaining the overhead of a marketing office abroad, though several fair trade plantations have these as well).

It is difficult to ascertain how much tea each plantation sells as “fair trade” and how much it sells on the conventional market. In one public meeting I attended, a

community member asked a fair trade plantation owner what his average sales were. The owner claimed that his sales, both direct and at auction, averaged around Rs. 100 per kilogram (less than \$1 a pound). If this were the real average price, it would be absolutely impossible for the owner to run his garden. Rs. 100 per kilogram is far lower than the cost of production (estimated by many to be between Rs. 150-200 per kilogram) and far lower than the average auction sales of the lowest grades of the worst gardens in Darjeeling. It is difficult to account for private sales, the dominant method of marketing among fair trade certified tea producers in Darjeeling. The residents of Darjeeling know this and believe that owners turn much larger profits, particularly through direct trade, but fair trade representatives have accepted the owners' low figures, even though the math does not make sense. Direct buying relationships in Darjeeling are anything but open and transparent. Auction prices, on the other hand, are "public" knowledge, posted and published by both brokers and the Indian Tea Association. The lack of transparency about pricing under fair trade's direct trading scheme is particularly ironic considering that fair trade's "hired labor" standards, as I explain in the next section, encouraged democracy, transparency, and the spread of knowledge about certification and its benefits through Joint Bodies.

The Joint Body and the Undermining of the Plantation Moral Economy

On a cold winter night in 2008, over milky, sugary cups of tea, I talked with fair trade plantation workers about the Gorkhaland movement. On this, as on many other

evenings, we argued about the effectiveness of the movement's factional leaders.

Slamming his hand down on the sticky plastic table, Pranit said, "They eat all the money and buy new clothing and cars with it."

"Wrong! We will get our separate state and they [the politicians] will help us get better wages on the plantation," said Kancha, cigarette hanging out of his mouth as he heaped white rice onto a plate.

Someone else chimed in: "All that happens are [GJMM-mandated] cultural programs – dance, dance, dance; clothes, clothes, clothes – that is all they want to talk about."¹⁰⁰

"Darjeelingko jindagi estai cha. [Darjeeling life is like that]¹⁰¹," said an old woman crouched in the corner without looking up from her dented stainless steel cup of tea.

Later, the cups were filled with military-issue whiskey, and our conversation turned to the politics of the plantation itself. Bhoju told the story of a friend: "...he couldn't get a loan to fix his house... The company used to give loans." [Home construction and repair are "facilities" granted under the PLA]

"Isn't that what the 'Fair Trade Committee' [Joint Body] does?" I asked.

"Not anymore...the company eats all the money and we drink this black, black tea," Bhoju replied, referring to the cheap CTC tea we had been drinking, produced in the plains south of Darjeeling.

¹⁰⁰ I will discuss GJMM-mandated "cultural program" in detail in Chapter 6.

¹⁰¹ Bishnu (in Chapter 1), as well as many other plantation residents I talked to during my fieldwork, also used this refrain.

Everyone turned to Gautam. Silence. We all knew him as one of the few people privileged with knowledge of the higher-level functions of the plantation. Several years earlier, Gautam had been appointed out of the rank-and-file male workforce and transformed into a “ranger.” Gautam had sat on the Joint Body for several years and was also a member of the *thera firma*, a group of thirteen male supervisors and low-level managers and functionaries. The group’s name was a play on the Latin phrase *terra firma* – “solid earth.” In Nepali, “*thera*,” means thirteen. While “*firma*” had no direct translation, I was told by members: “you know, *phirm*; strong.” He was also related to almost everyone in this village through marriage or blood. His relatives were suspicious; most of the ranger work he performed seemed more akin to spying than environmental management, but US-based fair trade executives I talked with thought that the appointment of a forest ranger was a truly revolutionary step towards environmental sustainability. For years, people in his village would ask him to explain the inner workings of management, or perhaps even the whereabouts of promised fair trade benefits, but eventually they stopped asking him. After a few years, he had fallen to the margins of the *thera firma* in favor of individuals with better English language skills and homes closer to the factory (homes that would house foreign tourists, which I will discuss below).

“What is the Joint Body anyway?” I asked. Silence. He stared at this cup, shaking his head.

"Manpardaina" ("I don't like it"), he said shaking his head and hands, still looking down into his tea.

"Why?" I asked.

"Man-par-dai-na," he repeated deliberately. I gave him a puzzled look. After some contemplation, he explained, "You know the problem with Darjeeling politics?" with obvious reference to the last conversation about GJMM "cultural programs." "That is why I don't like it [the Joint Body]." He lowered his head into his tin cup, signaling that the conversation about plantation politics was over.

Part of Fair Trade's mission is to promote democratic decision-making among agricultural workers (Jaffee 2007). In "hired labor" situations, FLO insists upon the establishment of a "Joint Body," but in Darjeeling, this supposedly democratic institution reflected one of the shortcomings of what workers called the *bisnis* model of plantation operation, namely, that owners were able to manipulate favored workers through the unequal distribution of favors and resources. In the idealized "industrial" moral economy described in the first half of this dissertation, such favoritism was absent. According to FLO (2007b), a Joint Body is "an elected group of worker representatives and management representatives who are responsible for jointly managing, investing, and spending the fair trade premium." The Joint Body must: 1) "inform and consult all workers of the company about fair trade standards and the fair trade premium and its use" and 2) "manage and invest the fair trade premium transparently and responsibly."

The Joint Body must be democratically selected through “regular” elections. FLO does not concretely define the intended regularity of meetings.

At Gautam’s plantation, workers claimed that there were never elections. Instead, members were “appointed” by the owner. According to FLO, the composition of the Joint Body should reflect the composition of the workforce, meaning that on a tea plantation, where 60% of the workers are female tea pluckers, the Joint Body should contain a proportional number of pluckers. On this Joint Body, there were more women than men, but these women overwhelmingly came from one village: the one closest to the factory and to the owner’s house. Other tea pluckers would often say that these women on the Joint Body were the recipients of special favors from management (*bakshish*). On all fair trade plantations in Darjeeling, managers and other higher-level plantation functionaries were the visible majority on the Body, and on this garden, the Joint Body “president” was the owner himself. This village is also the most visible from the road and where all tourists stayed when they came (I will discuss tourism below and in Chapter 5), often as guests of members of Joint Body. Residents of Gautam’s plantation said that the joint body included few pluckers. Some cynically said that the Joint Body had ceased to exist. All the money, they said, had been “eaten.”¹⁰²

FLO states that knowledge about fair trade is a central component to effective certification. Within one year of certification, all levels of plantation staff must know

¹⁰² A recent article by Rie Makita (2012), who also conducted fieldwork on fair trade certified plantations in Darjeeling, conflates fair trade certification with a Tazo-Starbucks corporate social responsibility project (CHAI) in its quantification of fair trade benefits. Furthermore, she does not problematize *who* were the recipients of these materials (e.g. medicine, food, transportation, bio gas projects) and *whether* these materials were making a difference in plantation resident’s lives.

about the aims and objectives of fair trade as well as the functions of the Joint Body and fair trade premium. The management is supposed to provide this information. On several fair trade plantations I visited, most laborers neither knew about the aims and missions of fair trade nor what a “Joint Body” was. A select number of community members who worked in the office or had direct contact with an ecotourism project, which I describe in the next chapter, and some of these people had some idea that there was a Joint Body; however, they understood Joint Body members to be only those that are “in the *malik*’s (owner’s) hand” (like Gautam). Those workers I interviewed who had heard of the Joint Body said that they believed it got its money “from foreign donations.”

Similarly, workers had little knowledge of the Indian Labor Department’s workings, but they did know what non-monetary forms of compensation (or, “facilities”) that planters were supposed to provide them. A 1971 amendment to the Plantations Labour Act (PLA) mandates that each plantation have a Labor Welfare Officer, whose job is to translate labor law, which is written in English, into the local language, Nepali. Across Darjeeling, however, owners installed Labor Welfare Officers as assistant managers and saddled them with other duties on top of their obligations to laborers. On Darjeeling fair trade plantations, the Labor Welfare Officers were also appointed as the “fair trade officers” of the Joint Body. In fact, on one fair trade plantation, it was the Labor Welfare Officer who told me that there was no more money left in the Joint Body coffers and no additional funds had come in for some time. In practice, the involvement

of ownership and state labor officers in the Joint Body have undermined rather than promoted workers' ability to access knowledge about their labor rights.

Darjeeling's Assistant Labor Commissioner, who was in charge of the training of the Labor Welfare Officers, was devastated about how the Officers had been coopted by management. Over a pot of tea at a Darjeeling bakery, she told me that all the work that she and Labor Department staff had done to select and train these individuals had been undermined. These officers had been saddled with extra tasks on all Darjeeling gardens, but on what she called "showcase gardens" (those backed by international certifications and labels like fair trade, organic, and biodynamic) that double-duty was particularly upsetting. "All these buyers and tourists come here and they think that it is just so lovely, but they have no idea." She then told me about a promotional poster for another fair trade plantation she had recently seen, which pictured two little Nepali children – a boy and a girl (*kancha* and *kanchi*) – torsos extending out from the cavernous darkness of a beautiful Raj-era bungalow, waving. "That is the manager's bungalow!" she exclaimed. "The only way those children would ever been in there is if they were mopping the floor!"

Workers showed little knowledge about what fair trade was and how it operated, let alone voiced opinions about how fair trade should work or their confusion about aspects of its operation. This finding contrasts with other ethnographies of fair trade, which highlight that workers were dissatisfied with the benefits of fair trade certification (Dolan 2010; Lyon 2010; Moberg 2010). To be dissatisfied, of course,

workers have to have some basic conceptions of the aims and objectives of fair trade. In Darjeeling, workers saw the changes wrought in the name of Fair Trade as emblems of “*bisnis-like*” cronyism and an undermining of the state’s ability to guarantee the presence of “facilities” through laws like the PLA. The PLA provides a legal counter to the inequities of the plantation system by engaging with the fact that laborers live where they work. It does so by defining the non-monetary forms of remuneration that planters should provide. Darjeeling tea was likely deemed a good candidate for fair trade certification because of the stable employment the PLA guaranteed, yet FLO’s hired labor standards fail to acknowledge the importance of both labor law and, as I show in the next section, land tenure rules, to the maintenance of labor relations and environmental sustainability on plantations.¹⁰³

Fair Trade, Land, and (Un)Sustainability

The Indian state is inextricably intertwined in the management of tea plantations because tea plantation land is state property. Individual plantation owners lease their land from state governments. State Land Reforms offices in Darjeeling and Kolkata regulate what can be done to Darjeeling tea plantation land under these tea leases, which were once offered on 99-year terms, but today are generally only reissued for 33-year terms. If plantation owners want to build new buildings, plant new tea, rip up tea

¹⁰³ Forest Department regulations also prohibit owners from logging plantation forests to provide firewood (a ration guaranteed by the Plantations Labour Act).

bushes, or repair roads, they must first apply for and receive approval from the West Bengal Land Reforms Department.

In Chapter 1, Bishnu and Jethi suggested that the new *bisnis* of tea production, marked by rapid alterations to the plantation landscape, violated a moral economic duty by planters to care for land. Workers saw these violations most starkly in the landslides in and around their plantation homes. Bishnu and Jethi were planting new tea bushes in a *jhora*, a rocky gully where two foothills came together, and a steep strip of landslide-prone land. As they planted new baby tea bushes, they were well aware of the likely results of perturbations to this area. Despite claims to environmental sustainability, I saw *more* landslides on fair trade and organic plantations than on conventional estates (See Figure 4.1). Tea workers and taxi drivers would often point out a huge brown swath that swept down towards the valley floor, explaining to me that they heard that this was the largest landslide in Asia! It originated from the forested land of Ambootia Tea Estate (a long-time fair trade organic certified plantation), allegedly caused by the plantation management cutting down all of the trees to sell to timber brokers. Business practices quite literally destabilized laborers' home and work places and the moral economic practices that knit them together.



Figure 4.1: Marginal land around a *jhora* on a fair trade and organic Darjeeling tea plantation. The bald space in the center is a landslide. Ironically, this image comes from a book illustrating the environmental benefits of fair trade and organic tea production (Banerjee 2008).

The growing market for fair trade and organic tea has inspired planters to *extend* fields and not prune, maintain, and replace tea bushes. In Kolkata and Darjeeling, I

attended tea management schools, where I learned more than I ever thought possible about the multiple ways to prune a tea bush. Every year, the Tea Research Association (TRA), based in Assam, where colonial soil scientists experimented with similar questions of tea bush live and longevity, released updated research on strategies for tea rejuvenation. The Tea Board of India gave out grants for replantation under the Special Tea Fund, but still, bushes were not replanted as often as workers might have hoped. On many fair trade gardens, they only did “*el-pee*” (LP - light pruned) pruning.¹⁰⁴ Planters rarely trimmed the bushes all the way down (let alone replanted them), though “heavy pruning” is crucial to the health of the bush. As it turned out, the “antique” bushes impressed many international tea buyers. This antique-ness became a prized characteristic of Darjeeling tea “heritage” and its *terroir*. (I will discuss this in Chapter 5).

FLO emphasizes *sustainability* of the “natural” and “human” environments in its standards for environmental development. For the “natural” environment, fair trade environmental standards focus on environmental protection, sustainable farm inputs, reforestation, and reducing soil erosion. Tea has long been a mono-crop in Darjeeling. The hillsides of Darjeeling are clear-cut slopes covered in rows of neatly planted tea bushes, often 100 years old. Fair trade standards push producers toward organic and sustainable production. Unlike the case of banana farms in the Caribbean (see Moberg 2008, 2010), planters in Darjeeling described that that this environmental hurdle to fair

¹⁰⁴ I mentioned in Chapter 1 that factory and field terms, such as “mother leaf” is directly appropriated from English. The vocabulary for pruning and non-plucking plantation work is particularly dominated with English. Words like *el-pee* (for light prune), *em-pee* (for medium prune), or *el-es* (for light skiff) rendered numerical concepts of length and height into Nepali.

trade certification was not difficult to surmount. Organics were good business, after all, and what their consumers wanted. Many Darjeeling plantations were certified organic before becoming certified fair trade. Most continue to operate without chemicals; however, some have had to revert to conventional production, citing organic production costs as too high.

According to FLO's environmental standards, whenever possible, producers should use renewable energy. In Darjeeling, the processing machines and plucking methods are the same ones used in the 1850s and 1860s. Coal is the primary input in Darjeeling tea production, and it takes three kilograms of coal to process one kilogram of tea. Darjeeling plantations process about 10 tons of tea a year, which means they expend over 30 tons of coal each year in a very small area. FLO standards have done little to lessen the environmental impact of tea processing. Even though coal and pesticide use are dangerous and unsustainable, few workers I interviewed expressed serious concerns about these "natural" environmental issues. Instead, they discussed persistent problems with their everyday environment, specifically obstacles to the acquisition of garden space and by extension healthy and affordable food that international third-party certifications could not help them overcome.

Tea plantation villages have burst far beyond capacity in the last 150 years, and lands are very rarely allotted for new settlements. As fair trade planters extended tea fields due to increased demand, they encroached upon workers' garden space. The planting-over of gardening space constituted another materialization of *bisnis* and a

breakdown in the moral economy, one that once hinged on the distribution of space for cultivation as a key “facility” (see Chapter 3). This encroachment was particularly blatant on one of fair trade’s “showcase gardens,” whose owner justified a lack of family or community garden space by explaining that the forests, protected by Indian land reform law, were rich in wild vegetables. People there were afraid of the forests, however, because, they said, the owner bred leopards within them. The presence of wildlife in the plantation satisfied FLO’s goal of “environmental protection,” but fearful workers had to buy all of their food from small stores on the plantation or at the market at least an hour’s walk uphill. Workers only had one day off a week to do their shopping. At Rs. 63 a day,¹⁰⁵ a worker could afford very little in the way of vegetables and quality grains or meats. Plantation stores often only carry low quality white rice, flour, potatoes, oil, and sugar.

At “health camps” sponsored by international NGOs and the Rotary Club, tea workers queued up by the dozen to talk to volunteer doctors about their “pressure problems,” “sugar problems,” or full blown diabetes. These doctors, knowing that laborers did not have the wages to support long-term medical care and that the plantation was unlikely to reimburse them for medicine expenses in a timely fashion (a provision under the PLA), typically told them to “eat less sugar.”

¹⁰⁵ The 2008 wage talks resulted in incremental raised between 2008 and 2011 (from Rs. 53 (2008) to Rs. 58 (2009) to Rs. 63 (2010) to Rs. 67 (2011). The daily wage was Rs. 63 a day when I concluded my dissertation fieldwork in Darjeeling in 2010. There were wage talks in 2011, and after a GJMM led agitation during the talks, the wage was raised to Rs. 90 for the three year period. The plantation daily wage is actually lower than the minimum state wage for agricultural workers (between Rs. 127-154 a day depending on kind of labor and skill-level). The justification for paying less than the minimum wage is that plantation workers receive many non-monetary benefits (i.e. “facilities”).

Over a meal of potatoes and rice, a female tea plucker with adult-onset diabetes told me that given the constraints of their purchasing power, “eating less sugar” was practically very difficult. She explained that food rations on Darjeeling gardens (mandated by the PLA) provide four kilograms of flour and two kilograms of rice (both of the lowest quality) per worker every fifteen days. This potentially would last a single worker over a fifteen-day period, but it was not adequate to meet the needs of the extended family members she supported (often a husband, a couple of children, and a set of aging parents). Though the ration was inadequate, at least the Indian labor law addressed the problem of food security, even though these starches, combined with a lack of garden space, were contributing to more silent epidemics. FLO implicitly assumes that through “democratically elected bodies,” fair trade revenue will somehow be distributed where it is needed most.

Land tenure, too, is important to understanding social, economic, and environmental conditions on the plantation, but other than the parceling of “small producers” from “hired labor” in FLO standards, land is not discussed. Despite the fact that several generations of workers have lived on Darjeeling plantations, workers have no control over the land on which they live. Workers have nominal authority over their own houses (some even have proper titles granted decades ago during the height of Communist power in the region). Since workers do not own the land, owners can resettle them to another place on the plantation at any time. A lack of land ownership is a serious obstacle to empowerment. For the workers I interviewed, land and land

tenure were the central “environmental” problems they faced. Over-planting and landslides were threats to them precisely because they did not own the land on which they lived. Landslides, home gardens, and plantation leases remind us that there is a moral economic link between workers, management, and the environment, but that the state is also relevant to regulating and ensuring the sustainability of workers’ landscapes of home and work. In terms of food security and environmental sustainability, fair trade discourse resonates with free trade and neoliberal logic. I will now examine neoliberal logic as it applies to fair trade’s hired labor standards, which presume that with the revenues from fair trade premiums, development assistance somehow makes it to where it is needed most.

From Labor Lines to Eco-lodges: The Logic of Neoliberalizing “Facilities”

Fair trade is both a movement and a market. Gavin Fridell (2007) argues that fair trade both counters and aligns with neoliberal economic theory and practice and is enmeshed in larger processes of consumer-driven social justice and market-based environmentalism (see also Bacon 2010). For Daniel Jaffee (2007), democratic organization is at the heart of the fair trade movement (and for this reason, Jaffee is highly critical of the extension of fair trade certification to wage labor situations and plantations). Fair trade is a global movement for the equitable treatment and the establishment of fair prices in the developing world. In Darjeeling, I did not see tea

workers participating in *a fair trade movement*; instead, they were enveloped in and fetishized by *a market*.

Rooted in neoclassical economics, neoliberalism upholds the free market – a market that is free of obstacles to trade like national government policies, and a market that privileges the power of private interests over publicly held institutions. Neoliberal theory maintains that institutions that preserve strong private property rights and free markets can best protect individual liberty and freedom. Proponents of neoliberalism claim that the state should not be involved in the economy; instead, the state should use its power to preserve private property rights and the free market. Neoliberal logic privileges non-state actors, like fair trade certification agencies, as the best regulators of capital. It encourages the state to promote the free flow of capital, orienting state power toward capital circulation rather than protectionism. Not only can non-state actors accomplish this more effectively according to neoliberal logic, they can distribute capital in more equitable ways.

Neoliberal logic privileges non-state actors, like fair trade certification agencies, as the best regulators of capital. On the one hand, fair trade is part of what Peck and Tickell call “roll-out liberalization,” characterized by the “roll-out of new forms of institutional ‘hardware’” (2002: 389). The institutional “hardware” of fair trade certification includes “social” policymaking strategies, such as direct buying, aimed at opening trade in the Global South. On the other, fair trade presents an alternative to neoliberal policies because it seeks to empower individuals not conventionally

empowered in a free market system through the setting of minimum prices (Fridell 2007). Direct buying too, is aimed at opening trade to those who would otherwise not have access or those who must rely on intermediaries to get their product to market (see Jaffee 2007).

Ethnographies of fair trade have focused predominantly on cooperative coffee in Latin America (e.g. Jaffee [2007] in Mexico; Luetchford [2008] in Costa Rica; Lyon [2011] in Guatemala; Reichmann [2012] in Honduras). Social scientists working in Latin American coffee cooperatives have shown how fair trade presents an alternative to neoliberal economic policies (Bacon 2005; Jaffee 2007; Lyon 2007; Smith 2007; Murray, et al. 2006; Renard 2003; Rice 2000). Other scholars, following Karl Polanyi's (1944) vision that the market is "embedded" in society and therefore a market dis-embedded from society (e.g. under neoliberal economic policies) will fail, describe how fair trade certification is a means of re-embedding commodity production (see Lyon 2006b; Raynolds 2000), if only discursively (West 2010). In recent years, scholars have begun to look beyond coffee cooperatives to explore the lived experiences of fair trade certification (e.g. Shreck [2005], Frundt [2009], Moberg [2008] on banana cooperatives; Dolan [2010], Dolan and Blowfield [2010], Sen [2009] on cooperative tea production; Makita [2012] on tea plantation production; Ziegler [2010] on plantation-based flower production; and Prieto-Carron [2006] on "ethical sourcing" from Chiquita banana plantations).

Fridell (2007) highlights that fair trade, as both a movement and a market, extends the neoliberal economic emphasis on non-governmental regulation and individual empowerment but also challenges the disenfranchisement that such policies cause. This ideology of individual freedom within a global market is a key tenet of both neoliberal orthodoxy and fair trade. In both free trade and fair trade, private property rights and individual entrepreneurial identity confer “empowerment.” In her discussion of NGOs and the cultivation of civil society, Sangeeta Kamat (2004) describes a key neoliberal shift:

A fundamental cultural transformation involved in the transition from state-led development to a deregulated market economy is that citizens have to forego their sense of entitlement and have to acquire an entrepreneurial citizen identity that derives from liberal values of independence and autonomy... The new economic institutions are engaged in this process of advancing a new citizen culture, aiding in the development of an active and dynamic civil society in which all citizens, including the poor, are encouraged to be enterprising and seize the opportunities of the global economy (Kamat 2004: 164).

Tea laborers on Darjeeling plantations are not adopting ideas of individual entrepreneurship, forgoing their sense of governmental entitlement or petitioning civil society organizations to improve their living conditions. Entrepreneurial producer identity is central to fair trade marketing. Fair trade retailers, certifiers, and even planters highlight “success stories” in their websites and other promotional materials. Descriptions on fair trade tea boxes and retail websites make lofty claims about farmer empowerment and additional money earned by workers. Consumer-driven social justice is inherently fetishizing: labor, poverty, and the struggling farmer become consumable through fair trade. And consumers are empowered by a transcendent

aspect of the fair trade market – they can release farmers from adverse conditions through the purchase of fair trade products. Fair trade links consumers to producers in new ways and reinforces the idea that a single consumer can empower a single producer through his or her consumption practices. Bryant and Goodman (2004) argue that the re-envisioning of production and consumption linkages through fair trade creates a “solidarity-seeking” commodity culture, in which the products themselves tell stories (what they call “political ecology narratives”) about the means of their production. Molly Doane (2010) calls this consumption practice that of purchasing “relationship coffees.” This self-narrating product stands in opposition to the “dis-embedded,” person-less and place-less commodities that characterize global capitalism (see Kloppenburg, et al. 1996).

On one of Darjeeling’s “showcase plantations,” workers conflated the Joint Body and all workings of fair trade with a Tazo Tea-funded¹⁰⁶ development project on the plantation called the Community Health and Advancement in India (CHAI) program. Exemplifying this re-embedding narrative strategy, FLO promotional materials from 2005 celebrated “women’s empowerment” through a tourist project for which CHAI was a major donor.¹⁰⁷ FLO claims that women on this plantation who wanted to develop ecotourism to diversify their income “decided” to build eco-lodges and develop

¹⁰⁶ Tazo Tea is a subsidiary of Starbucks.

¹⁰⁷ Sarah Lyon (2010), referencing her fieldwork with female Guatemalan coffee farmers, explains that the fair trade movement holds gender equality and women’s issues at the forefront, often highlighting them in promotional materials, but Guatemalan women feel that certification falls far short of its goals.

homestays in villages so that visitors could “glean a whiff of the [garden’s] mystique” (FLO 2005). Homestays were part of a self-conscious marketing project that, along with fair trade, tried to recast the plantation as a landscape of entrepreneurial *farmers*. The spaces of home and work were fetishized.¹⁰⁸ Workers I interviewed on this particular plantation, however, were ambivalent about homestay tourism projects. These projects exacerbated existing tensions in the village. Relatively more affluent villagers (often those whose family members had served in the Gurkha regiments) had nicer houses, and it was these families who received tourists. Despite the extra income, tourists often created tense situations. Workers spoke scant amounts of English, and tourists arrived without a word of Nepali. Many tourists retreated into their rooms (which were often the living rooms of villagers) for hours at a time, refused to eat, and used copious amounts of water (always in short supply as there were no water facilities on the plantation; workers had to hike one hour into the forest to collect water from the natural spring and cart it back to the village, often using old *taukoris* and tourists’ two-liter Bisleri water bottles to do so).

When the project started in 2006, a one-night stay cost Rs. 300, Rs. 200 of this was supposed to go to the family, while Rs. 100 to the Joint Body. Workers that participated in homestay projects claimed that they were paid arbitrary and meager amounts of money. The tourists, of course, paid the management, who was responsible for then dolling out the family’s portion. By 2011, it seemed as if the project was failing.

¹⁰⁸ Discussing farm tourism in the USA, Brandth and Haugen (2010) show how gendered performances, especially the division of labor, sometimes reproduce tourist’s normative expectations of men’s and women’s farm work, and sometimes subvert them.

Workers were aggravated when foreign tourists were plopped into their houses without warning and without an explanation of how long they would stay. Management too, was becoming frustrated, despite the fact that the per-night price of the homestays had gone up to Rs. 1250 (approximately \$30, which is quite a lot for a Darjeeling hotel). Tourists wanted a more luxurious experience. In the next chapter, I will describe in greater detail how some plantations sought to provide that experience.

On this particular plantation, several of the homestays were benefiting members of the Joint Body individually, and as of 2008, the only “eco-lodges” had been built by the CHAI project, with financial contributions from the villagers in addition to an unspecified investment from the Joint Body. “Community development” amounted to the bolstering of a select few in a village, those whom other villagers described as “in the *malik*’s hand,” largely through a corporate social responsibility scheme, not Fair Trade. The formation of the ecotourism projects, intended as economic development, did little more than remind workers of great distance between tea prices and plantation wages. FLO promotional materials (see Figure 4.2) narrate fair trade “success stories” such as the one about the “eco-lodges,” even though housing is among the “facilities” already granted to workers through Indian labor law.

As I have explained elsewhere (Besky 2008, 2010), fair trade standards and “success stories” are standing in for national institutions. In Figure 4.2 below, excerpted from the FLO website, the viewer is led to think that a “dispensary with pharmacist” is something that is unique to the fair trade certified plantation, but India’s Plantations

Labour Act mandates that management provide medical facilities, which include pharmacies, a regularly visiting doctor, and an ambulance (GOI 1951).

QUOTABLE

“ I am very grateful to the Fair Trade premiums through which I get loans for weddings and death ceremonies. It has also played an important role improving the health of our children by providing Hepatitis B vaccinations. ”

Sumitra Nirola

PROGRAMS

Dispensary with pharmacist

The estate has a dispensary with a qualified pharmacist and two mid-wives for providing assistance in child delivery. There is also an ambulance to transport patients to the nearby government hospital in case of an emergency.

Credit Program

Seeyok Estate runs credit programs for members to fund expenses such as weddings and death ceremonies. Additionally, members began a cow loan and floriculture program, enabling additional household income.

Home Improvements:

With Fair Trade premiums, farmers financed and purchased gas connections, ovens, and pressure cookers for their households.

Figure 4.2: Profile of a fair trade certified Darjeeling plantation, excerpted from FLO’s website¹⁰⁹

Another FLO “success story” comes from a plantation in the Western Ghat Mountains of South India. The press release profiles 58-year old Manickam, a longtime plantation worker who signed up for a fair trade premium-funded retirement project (spearheaded by the plantation’s Joint Body) that “gained him the right to receive a monthly pension for the next 15 years – a novelty in a country like India” (FLO n.d.). The press release claimed that workers like Manickam must leave the plantation after they retire. This is not the norm in Indian tea production. The story explained that retiring is

¹⁰⁹ <http://fairtradeusa.org/node/30682> (Accessed March 21, 2012).

almost impossible in India because there is little access to pensions. Under the fair trade pension scheme in the Western Ghats, workers received Rs. 800 a month if they worked for 20 years and Rs. 1200 a month for 30 years of service. FLO's claims that India does not have pension fund projects, particularly on tea plantations, displays an ignorance of the institutions that already exist to protect workers. In addition to their wages, workers on all plantations are entitled to a "provident fund" (essentially a pension), a "gratuity" upon retirement, and an annual bonus for the holiday season. In India, the Employees' Provident Fund Organization of India (EPFO), established after Independence, mandates that all owners set aside a percentage of workers' wages in a provident fund to be given to the worker upon retirement (see Griffiths 1967: 344-345). The press release says nothing about whether this garden has paid its gratuities or Provident Funds to workers, as often gardens neglect to pay these, especially if the family still has one member employed on the plantation.¹¹⁰

FLO's website has also boasted that fair trade premiums in Darjeeling were spent on latrine construction. Again, latrines are a "facility" that planters must provide for their workers. FLO has allowed Darjeeling tea plantations (and not other tea producers) to use the fair trade premium to cover the financial obligations imposed by the Plantations Labour Act. If this is the case and owners can usurp the premium for their own means (and the fair trade prices do not affect wages) what are the financial benefits for "hired laborers" on Darjeeling plantations?

¹¹⁰ Plantation jobs are passed from one family member to another upon retirement. I discuss this further in Chapter 6.

Some Darjeeling tea plantation owners gained the attention of fair trade certifiers because their adherence to the PLA, as well as their penchant for self-promotion, made them viable candidates for fair trade certification. Certification attests to the social welfare of agricultural laborers (see Chapter 5 for a longer discussion of self-promotion). During the period of my fieldwork, these same planters sought to “update” what they saw as the “irrelevant” sections of the PLA, namely the social welfare clauses that dictate that owners provide workers houses, medical care, firewood, and food rations. For the owners, these were not “facilities,” but “social costs.” Members of the Darjeeling Tea Association, the plantation owners’ organization, lobbied the central government to rewrite the PLA so that they would not have to bear these costs. Owners contended that workers should provide these things for themselves. Even as plantation owners fought against paying the “social costs,” they also sought fair trade certification and what Trubek and Bowen (2008) call “values-based labeling” to find new markets for their tea (Besky 2008, 2010).

Behind the Label: Wage Negotiations and the State

FLO has exempted Darjeeling tea plantations from minimum pricing schemes. The minimum price, critical to the actualization of fair trade certification for coffee, means little to Darjeeling tea laborers. The price a pound of tea yields, pre-set or market driven, has no bearing on the wage of a tea worker. Whether a kilogram of tea sells for Rs. 18,000 or Rs. 200, the Darjeeling tea worker makes exactly the same amount of

money, her daily wage. These wages are regulated by tripartite state-by-state wage negotiations, not fair trade.

Consumers do not see these dynamics when they purchase a box of fair trade certified Darjeeling tea. Some social scientists have situated the consumption of socially and environmentally labeled products within a larger suite of environmentalist practices (Elkington and Hailes 1989; James 1993; Loureiro and Lotade 2004), while others have identified such consumption in class distinction and formation (Roseberry 1996; Guthman 2003). Often the literature on fair trade and ethically-sourced commodities explores the consumption and consumer perception of these products (e.g. Barrientos and Smith 2007; Lyon 2006a; McDonagh 2002; Wright and McCrea 2007). The labels that adorn fair trade [See Figures 4.3 and 4.4], as well as organic, Rainforest Alliance, shade-grown, or a range of other certifications, distinguish alternative markets.



Figure 4.3: Fair Trade USA logo (2012)



Figure 4.4: FLO logo

Labels are symbols that affirm consumers' belief that consumption can be a political as well as an ethical act (Fischer 2007; Howard and Allen 2006; Loureiro and Lotade 2004; Shreck 2005; Newhouse 2011). Julie Guthman (2007) discusses how voluntary food

labels express certain social values that challenge the ravages of global capitalism, but at the same time, labels can deceive buyers about the processes they aim to challenge. As Julia Smith (2010) explains, consumers are confident about what they purchase because of the standardization of fair trade certification, which is embodied in the fair trade label.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of the inclusion of tea plantations in the fair trade system is the popular misrepresentation, through labels and advertising, of the wage relationship in Indian tea producing regions. Plantation workers receive a daily wage, supplemented by very small per-kilogram plucking incentives (often only a couple of rupees and there is a remarkable amount of green leaf in one kilogram). Wages on tea plantations are negotiated every three years in tripartite meetings between the state (represented by the Department of Labour), the workers (represented by local labor unions), and the planters (represented by regional planters' associations). These negotiations take place in each Indian state. Darjeeling wage negotiations, therefore, are part of the larger wage talks for the state of West Bengal, which encompasses multiple tea growing regions (the Dooars, Terai, Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling).

FLO and other third party fair trade certifiers may be able to set minimum prices (which are recast as "fair wages" by marketers) for a given pound of tea, but fair trade certification *cannot change* the daily wage of tea plantation workers. In Darjeeling tea, however, plantations are exempt from fair trade minimum price schemes (see Besky 2010). FLO's standards for "hired labor" are variable: "All workers must work under fair

conditions of employment. The company must pay wages in line with or exceeding national laws and agreements on minimum wages or the regional average” (FLO 2011a: 16). FLO cannot change the plantation labor relationship; certification can only introduce alternative (and contending) forms of governance, such as the Joint Body, yet fair trade advertisements regularly evoke “wages,” making consumers believe that certification can affect the wage relationship. While I was writing this chapter, I was flipping through the October 2011 issue of *Vegetarian Times* and came across an advertisement (Figure 4.5) on the back cover. The text of the advertisement read, “Fair trade means growers are treated with dignity and are paid a *fair wage*, which results in a higher quality cup of coffee for you...”

The frequent deployment of the term “wages” on fair trade advertisements makes sense. Wages are certainly more comprehensible to first-world consumers than “facilities,” and wage earning implies a free sale of labor. In Darjeeling, however, workers relied upon three-way political negotiations, between laborers (represented by unions), owners, and the state of West Bengal, to achieve wage hikes. As in the provision of facilities through the PLA, workers saw the state as a guarantor of uniform treatment at the hands of management.

**"I REALIZED
I can make a difference."**

When you choose our Fair Trade Certified™ coffees, you get great taste and you help make the world a better place with each sip.

Fair Trade means growers are treated with dignity and are paid a fair wage, which results in a higher quality cup of coffee for you. That's why we've been ardent supporters of Fair Trade for over a decade.

 Go to [Facebook.com/GreenMountainCoffee](https://www.facebook.com/GreenMountainCoffee) to learn more about Fair Trade.

GREEN MOUNTAIN COFFEE

House Blend
Whole Bean

Sumatran Reserve
Whole Bean

EVERY PURCHASE MATTERS
Quality Products. Improving Lives. Protecting The Environment.

A REVELATION IN EVERY CUP®

Figure 4.5: Green Mountain Coffee advertisement (*Vegetarian Times*, October 2011, 37(8)).

In the summer of 2008, before the wage talks that were to be held in August, the leading political party in Darjeeling, the Gorkhaland-supporting GJMM, told its affiliated union leaders to have workers enact a hunger strike for higher wages. I sat with laborers on a fair trade and organic certified plantation. For hours they asked me about

how much their plantation's tea cost in the United States. On that day, hunger strikes were taking place on every plantation in Darjeeling, but they had particular resonance on fair trade plantations. One of the effects of tourism projects, like the one I described above, was that workers began to learn more about the market for tea from consumers. They learned that their tea sold for \$10 a cup in New York City at TSalon, a vendor that had a direct buying relationship with the plantation. In 2008, they only made about \$1.00 a day. "Do *you* pay that much for a cup of tea?" a worker asked me while sitting on hunger strike. "Just the tea? Not the milk and sugar?" a woman asked. Another man interjected, "No, only rich people can afford this tea, like the people who stay in the owner's house."

It is important to note that this and other strikes were not wholly against owners. Instead, workers saw themselves as striking against the state of West Bengal, because they saw the state as the guarantor of fair wages. Attempting to diffuse the strike, the owner tried to use fair trade Joint Body meetings to discuss the union's wage complaints.¹¹¹ After days of waiting, scheduled meetings, then cancelled meetings, the issues put before the Joint Body by striking workers were dropped. The wage talks concluded later in the summer of 2008, but many pluckers doubted the efficacy of the strike.

¹¹¹ FLO mandates that unions or some form of democratic organization, outside the Joint Body, collectively bargain for wages and equitable treatment. On Indian plantations, no single union represents all laborers. Instead, unions are affiliated with political parties, so there can be a few contending unions on any one plantation.

Despite the fact that Darjeeling tea is some of the priciest tea in the world Darjeeling tea laborers are paid some of the lowest wages in India's tea sector. In 2010, wages ranged from Rs. 50 in Assam to Rs. 147 in Kerala. Other tea producing states in India, such as Kerala and Assam, produce lesser quality tea, which sell for less on the domestic and international markets. Wages are negotiated every three years in tripartite meetings for each state. The 2008 wage talks in West Bengal raised the wage from 53.90 Rupees a day to 58 Rupees a day, just over a dollar a day. By 2010, the state raised the daily wage to 63 Rupees a day.

FLO's "hired labor" standards treat minimum pricing schemes as a program that could be revolutionary for plantations workers, but workers do not see higher prices reflected in their wages. Workers on fair trade gardens receive the same daily wage as those at conventional gardens. The PLA includes several clauses addressing how workers should be paid for overtime and holiday time. State and national laws attempt to concretize socially just wages, while FLO's "minimum prices" and premiums are better structured to benefit cooperative farmers, who do not work for wages.

Sanjay Bansal, owner of the fair trade company Ambootia¹¹² and president of the Darjeeling Tea Association, described the 2008 wage hike from 53 to 58 rupees a day as "unprecedented," far too high for the economic conditions of the area (it was in fact, not unprecedented, as the rate of inflation between the last wage talks in 2005 and 2008 was much higher than this). This hike, he said, set an "unhealthy trend for future

¹¹² Coincidentally, Ambootia is not only fair trade and organic certified. The plantation also boasts what is popularly referred to by Darjeeling residents as the "largest landslide in Asia."

negotiations.”¹¹³ Throughout my fieldwork, Bansal and owners of both conventional and fair trade gardens continued lobbying to get the social welfare statutes removed and fighting to keep workers’ wages down. As I show in Chapter 6, workers turned to separatist politics to obtain not only wages but also control over land from planters and the Indian government. A principle of the Gorkhaland movement was that the only way laborers could get what they deserved and have some bargaining power with the owners was to have their own state. Indeed, the GJMM was successful in raising the plantation wage again in 2011, from Rs. 67 to Rs. 90.¹¹⁴

Fair Trade on Plantations: A Model for the Future?

I was sitting with a New York-based tea buyer who specialized in organic and fair trade teas, outside a fair-trade certified plantation’s processing factory on a chilly spring evening in 2008. One of the assistant managers asked her how her day was. She dramatically leaned back in her chair and exclaimed “How could you have a bad day here!?!?” I thought about how the workers with whom I talked, ate, and carried water certainly had things to say about how their day could be made more livable. After years of fieldwork on Darjeeling tea plantations, I am left with the cynical opinion that the extension of fair trade to tea plantations is a movement for retailers and, more

¹¹³ Source: Indian Associated News Service. Article available online: <http://twocircles.net/node/99592> (Accessed March 21, 2012). Bansal echoed this statement (as did many planters and Darjeeling Tea Association officials) after the wage meetings in 2008.

¹¹⁴ The wage hike came after I left the field in 2010 and it is likely unevenly distributed. I am returning to Darjeeling in Summer 2012 to follow up on these developments.

importantly, for consumers, to engage in what Bryant and Goodman (2004) call “solidarity-seeking” market-based consumption. Fair trade is a way for consumers to tell a story about themselves through their consumption practices. Fair trade is selling a moral economic fetish, a dream of equitable relations in empirically unequal productive conditions, and sales are booming.

The extension of fair trade onto plantations became newly relevant in 2011, after Fair Trade USA (formerly called Transfair USA), ¹¹⁵ the largest third-party certifier of fair trade products in the United States, announced that it would withdraw from FLO and became an independent certifying organization. On their websites, both organizations state: “while FLO and Fair Trade USA share the same mission, we have differing perspectives on how to reach our goals.” Fair Trade USA seeks to double the volume of Fair Trade certified goods imported into the US by 2015. To do so, they seek to expand the number of hectares under and producers for fair trade products (see www.fairtradeusa.org).

Fair Trade USA has adopted a new motto - “Every Purchase Matters”¹¹⁶, describing itself as “more inclusive for more impact.” Its webpage elaborates:

Today Fair Trade standards simultaneously and successfully support both cooperative members as well as *small farmers unable to access the support of a cooperative* in the categories of tea, flowers, and bananas, but not coffee, sugar, or cocoa. As a model that seeks to alleviate poverty and empower farming

¹¹⁵ In 2011, in preparation for the withdrawal from FLO, Transfair USA rebranded itself as “Fair Trade USA.” Fair Trade USA remains the largest certifier of fair trade products in the United States.

¹¹⁶ Fair Trade USA briefly used “Fair for All” for their new motto, but seem to have settled on “Every Purchase Matters.”

communities, this inconsistency and systematic exclusion with the Fair Trade system is no longer acceptable.

To create a more just and consistent Fair Trade model, Fair Trade USA will adapt existing international fair trade standards from tea, bananas, and flowers, and apply them first to coffee and then to additional categories over time.

We must innovate responsibly, including more people without negatively impacting our current partners in the Fair Trade system. In this respect, Fair Trade USA is conducting feasibility studies in a limited number of coffee-producing regions to determine how best to pilot standards that will include additional producer groups. ...

We will continue to set common rigorous standards for all industry partners as we work to provide consumers with a broad selection of Fair Trade products that allow them to make their small everyday purchases matter.¹¹⁷

FLO's standards do not make claims to the fixing of wages and often discursively skirt the existence of wage relationships in hired labor situations. Fair Trade USA is much bolder in its claims that fair trade certification can support or institute "fair minimum wages" (See Figure 4.6):

¹¹⁷ <http://fairtradeusa.org/about-fair-trade-usa> (Accessed March 21, 2012).



Figure 4.6: Excerpt from Fair Trade USA website¹¹⁸

In this message, Fair Trade USA invokes both “a fair wage” and “a sustainable income,” and all in the passive voice. Moreover, the difference between worker and farmer is not helpful in the case of Darjeeling. The “hired labor” model depends upon the consumer’s willingness to believe that plantation workers will gain a lucrative off-plantation income from fair trade premiums. A Darjeeling tea worker works from 7:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., six days a week, nearly all year round. Any sustainable income—waged or not—must come from that activity, not from “investments” in “farms” (which are scarce) or “communities.”

¹¹⁸ <http://fairtradeusa.org/certification/producers/tea> (Accessed March 21, 2012).

At the same time, Fair Trade USA's new marketing program recasts plantations as "cooperatives" (See Figure 4.7):



Figure 4.7: Excerpt from Fair Trade USA website¹¹⁹

In Darjeeling, the implementation of fair trade certification has benefited *plantation* owners, not workers. (The number of cooperatives in Darjeeling is negligible, and all must process their picked tea in *plantation* factories.) But with the proposed extension of certification to coffee plantations by Fair Trade USA, fair trade plantations will be increasingly prevalent. Fair trade standards need to reflect that plantations are hierarchical, colonially derived industries in which workers depend upon owners not just for money, but also for food, medical care, schools, and housing. This has been the case in Darjeeling since the 1850s. Their hierarchical structure makes it impossible for

¹¹⁹ <http://fairtradeusa.org/products-partners/tea> (Accessed March 21, 2012).

resources to be managed “jointly.” Instead, international certifiers must privilege workers and take measures to prevent owners from manipulating the system for their own benefit. Recasting plantation work as “hired labor,” or even more problematically calling plantations “cooperatives,” will not benefit workers.

The appointment of rangers like Gautam, temporary favorites of fickle owners, to weak Joint Bodies, and the extension of tea into marginal landslide prone areas were just a few of the practices that workers identified as *bisnis*. Workers saw *bisnis* practices and crony-based politics as divisive to plantation village life, social solidarity, and to a larger system of moral economic reciprocity between workers, management, and the agro-environment. The plantation moral economy hinges on village-level solidarity. *Maliks* have tried to break this for years, but fair trade actually helps them do this even more effectively through institutions such as the Joint Body. While the PLA nominally protects workers’ rights to organize into politically affiliated labor unions, fair trade presents a separate-but-equal institution, the Joint Body, leading to plantation governance by a select few (including management). But for international buyers and fair trade certifiers (fair trade is, after all, consumer-driven social justice), fair trade institutions and ideologies supersede existing state institutions aimed at protecting workers’ rights. By ignoring the state and the structures already existent on the plantation that work to ensure the equitable treatment of workers, fair trade aggravates, rather than alleviates, the tensions of plantation life. Workers do not want to be entrepreneurs; they want plucking tea to remain a respectable form of employment.

Chapter 5: *Governing Taste, Making Place: “Geographical Indication” and the Place of Labor in the Terroir of Darjeeling Tea*

In the spring of 2009, as the first tea buds were popping up on the tea bushes after a winter of dormancy, in what is known as the prized “first flush,” I was sitting outside the manager’s office of a large conventional tea plantation with Manesh Rai, a retired member of a British Gurkha regiment, who eagerly arranged this meeting for me. He tagged along, as he was worried about what people might think if I, a single woman, was seen in this *thulo manche’s* (or “big man’s”) office for extended periods of time.

Manesh grew up on this plantation and came from a line of *sardars*, colonial labor recruiters who escorted landless tribal people from the eastern hills of Nepal to British-owned Darjeeling plantations (see Chapter 3). He now lived in Darjeeling town in the big multistoried house he built after leaving the army in 1997 (after the British ceded Hong Kong back to China, the British Gurkhas disbanded). A *sardar* lineage certainly came with privilege, even after the British left Darjeeling. It enabled Manesh’s father to become a garden *baau*. A *baau*, loosely translated as “father,” was a kind of unofficial Nepali manager, appointed from the plantation population by Indian or British planters. Garden *baaus* mediated between plantation residents, supervisors, and management, much like their *sardar* predecessors. Manesh proudly used this connection to secure me a meeting at this plantation. I was happy to attend, as I was eager to ask the manager why this plantation – one of the largest and most successful in the region – had abandoned organic certification a few years earlier.

While Manesh milled around the floors, asking each person who passed about his or her parents or children, and reprimanding men younger than him for slipping wads of Neva chewing tobacco into their cheeks, I chatted with the office *didi* (literally, “older sister”) over a cup of tea. During my fieldwork, I found office *didis* to be most helpful and knowledgeable. The office *didi* was a hybrid position of secretary and servant, and depending on the garden, her role leaned to one or the other of these poles. (Here, she held a more secretarial position.) We joked about the state of the desk in the foyer, where she often had to work, examining random pieces of scratch paper with cryptic notes or lists of numbers without qualifiers. Assistant managers would dump these papers and unmarked files on the desk as they passed through. I pulled out a glossy piece of paper that poked out from under a stack of file folders. It was a poster, covered with trails of more cryptic numbers scratched upon it. I asked what it was for. She said that “the *sahib*” (referring to the manager; but “*sahib*” is a term connoting authority and dominance) gave them out to visitors to the factory. These kinds of *Tea Boardko kaagaj*, or “Tea Board papers,” frequently arrived from Kolkata with instructions about display or distribution. She told me to take this one home with me. An antique-looking scroll unfurled on the poster asked:

“What is it that makes the world’s tea aficionados rush to Darjeeling during springtime to “book” the first flush teas?”

The answer?

...Darjeeling Tea just happens.

The reports blame it on the mixed soil, the pristine air, the well orchestrated rainfall, the lofty altitude, the optimum humidity levels – and how they have all come together uniquely to make Darjeeling Tea *Darjeeling Tea*.

To science, Darjeeling Tea is a strange phenomenon. To the faithful, it is a rare blessing.

Thankfully, the Darjeeling Tea Estates have always lived by their faith – by humbly accepting this unique gift of nature and doing everything to retain its natural eloquence.

So, Darjeeling Tea hand-plucked by local women with magician's fingers, withered, rolled and fermented in orthodox fashion, with the sole intention of bringing out the best in them.

Then the tea is manually sorted, packaged and begins its world tour. The only problem with Darjeeling Tea is that there is never enough of it to satisfy the connoisseurs around the world.

But then, the finest things on earth are like that – very very rare – or they would not be considered the finest.

This was one of the first of many encounters I had with these advertisements, which were distributed by the Tea Board of India, the government regulator of the tea industry, formed after Indian Independence, and the Darjeeling Tea Association (formerly known as the Darjeeling Planter's Association, see Chapter 3). The advertisements were part of the Board's efforts to market Darjeeling's Geographical Indication, or GI, an international legal distinction that protected Darjeeling tea as the "intellectual property" of the Indian government.

Over the course of fieldwork in Darjeeling and Kolkata between 2008 and 2010, the *Tea Boardko kaagaj* of GI became prolific, as the Tea Board petitioned the European Union to recognize Darjeeling tea's "Geographical Indication" and protect it against

imitators. (The EU finally recognized Darjeeling tea as a geographically protected product in 2011.) In interviews with Tea Board officials, I learned that these posters were not just aimed at the international market. They were also distributed within India to educate domestic consumers, tea marketers, and tea blenders about the national and international regulations protecting Darjeeling tea. Each time I went to a meeting or interview with Kolkata tea merchants and Darjeeling planters, I saw these posters displayed on their walls, stacked up on desks, or poking out from forgotten file folders. And each time I visited the Darjeeling Tea Association offices in either Darjeeling or Kolkata, I would leave with a stack of the latest promotional materials, with the planter or bureaucrat's instructions: "If you meet anybody who is interested, perhaps you could pass them along!"

During my fieldwork, distinguishing Darjeeling was the priority of all planters I met, but I came to Darjeeling to study organic and fair trade, schemes that seem to have much greater resonance in the minds of conscientious consumers than GI. As my fieldwork went on, I asked myself why, despite a general upsurge in organic and fair trade certification, with the new markets and presumably more sustainable practices they ensured, some plantations were choosing to abandon organic and even fair trade certifications. I learned that there was more than one way to use international environmental governance schemes to distinguish Darjeeling tea as socially and environmentally friendly on the global market. Following Bourdieu (1984), this chapter will explore "taste" on two levels: that which can be perceived with the mouth and that

which can be seen through class distinctions. As Bourdieu points out, these two elements of taste go hand in hand.

In this chapter, I portray these *Tea Boardko kaagaj*, these “papers,” as elements of “bureaucratic authority,” following Max Weber (1975) and Michael Herzfeld (1992). As symbols of authority, these papers stand in for human actors. As ethnographic data, these papers provide a way of entry into a discussion of Geographical Indication as a form of governance, as an intellectual property rights regime, and as a set of performances. My analysis of GI as governance, property, and performance draws on the wider social science literature on the cultural construction of *terroir*, or “taste of place.” The cultural and class-based distinction of Darjeeling as a unique *taste* was legally and performatively tied to the governance of Darjeeling and the activities of tea laborers, as part of a bounded *place*.

I draw primarily on interviews with tea planters; officials from the Indian Tea Association (ITA), the Darjeeling Tea Association (DTA), and the Tea Board of India; and Kolkata-based tea brokers, tasters, and distributors. I supplement this ethnography with insights from extended fieldwork on Darjeeling tea plantations and an analysis of GI-related marketing materials. I bring these methods, scales, and people together to explore what happens when a commodity whose production depends upon a colonially-derived system of labor organization is included in the realm of geographically indicated fine wines, cheeses, and liquors – products with a specific *terroir* as well as a social distinction?

Geographical Indication is an international legal regime that protects a wide range of products, the most notable of which have a distinct *terroir* and are produced through “traditional knowledge” practices. For Darjeeling, GI is a form of distinction and a strategy for the rejuvenation of the tea industry that has the teeth of international trade law behind it. This legal force makes it unlike third party certification systems like fair trade. In a global market that is calling for locally sourced, socially responsible, and environmentally friendly commodities, Darjeeling tea planters and the Tea Board looked to GI to distinguish their product from other Indian, African, and blended teas on the market. Descriptions of the environment of Darjeeling – the rainfall, the altitude, the humidity, and the “magical” fingers of local women tea workers – defined Darjeeling’s *terroir*. The “place” where tea was produced was depicted as integral to the tea’s “taste.”

Since Darjeeling tea’s ascension to the realm of GI products in 1999, the industry has witnessed a resurgence: closed plantations have reopened, and tea is fetching higher prices (GOI 1999). Key to this resurgence has been the commodification of both the sensory experience of drinking Darjeeling tea and the “craft” of its production. In the 2000s, Darjeeling was re-branded as “the Champagne of teas.” This re-branding echoes the *terroir*-work of artisan wine makers, cheese makers, and distillers. In geographically indicated products, place stands in for the product. Many of us know that Champagne is sparkling wine, that Roquefort is cheese, that Scotch is whiskey, and that Vidalias are onions, without being told so. The Tea Board and the DTA wanted consumers to

associate “Darjeeling” with these GIs – *luxury* products with territorial distinction. This association was often quite overt. On another remarkably stark poster, which the office *didi* dug out from under a stack of papers after I expressed interest in the first one, there are three glasses labeled: “Cognac. Champagne. Darjeeling!” (See Figure 5.1)



Figure 5.1: Tea Board and DTA promotional poster (personal collection)

The poster continues:

Our very own Darjeeling Tea joins the global elites.

The whole world now recognizes the fact that this magical brew owes its unique eloquence to its place of origin, the misty hills of Darjeeling.

Darjeeling Tea has now been registered as a GI (Geographic Indication) in India. Which officially places Darjeeling Tea in the esteemed company of a Cognac or Champagne – other famous GIs.

The unique geographic conditions of Darjeeling help make its teas such a rarity. Just the way Cognac and Champagne are rare because they can only come from specific regions in France.

To celebrate this new rise in status for India, just raise your cup!

In Chapters 2 and 3, I discussed the historical and material bases of Darjeeling's territorial and market distinction. Since the 1830s, when it was established as a British hill station, a refuge from the heat of the Indian plains, Darjeeling has been simultaneously conceived of as both a site of leisure and as a site of industry. This dual nature is encapsulated in a linguistic dynamic, between the Nepali word for "plantation," *kamaan*, used by workers to describe their work place, and the English word "garden,"¹²⁰ used both historically and by the Tea Board to describe Darjeeling tea plantations. *Kamaan* and garden evoke different visions of the agro-environment. *Kamaan* is of disputable linguistic origin, derived from the English words "command" or "common," or perhaps even colonial British planters' use of "Come on! Come on!" to communicate with workers. *Kamaan* evoked the oppressive aspects of plantation life: the repetitive plucking, pruning, and maintenance of a commodity crop. *Kamaan* also signals the materiality of the plantation and an industrial mode of production – the factories, machines, division of labor, transport system, as well as the rugged physical topography, heat, and mud that make tea plucking so difficult. The use of *kamaan* reminded my interlocutors of the plantation land tenure system; managed by affluent

¹²⁰ "Estate" is another euphemism for the plantation, used as an alternative to "garden."

Indian men and staffed by thousands of low-paid wage laborers of Nepali origin, who live in cramped villages amidst the sweeping fields of tea.

Darjeeling's Geographical Indication and its attendant marketing materials (or *Tea Boardko kaagaj*) required Tea Board executives and planters to reconcile the polarized images of *kamaan* and garden. The language of *terroir* enabled them to do so. Tea planters, tea tasters, and tea brokers all agree that Darjeeling has long been associated with a *terroir*; however, when Darjeeling tea producers began seeking GI status, the imaginary of Darjeeling as a place of leisure had to mesh with the reality of Darjeeling as a mono-cropped plantation landscape maintained by low paid wage laborers.

In this chapter I ask, how did an industrial plantation crop with a less than savory colonial past become a product with an authentic *terroir* (placed uncritically next to Champagne and Cognac)? I argue that contemporary planters hoping to export to international markets had to solve a variation of what colonial planters called the "The Labor Question," which I discussed in Chapter 3. In short, the Labor Question was about how to maintain a willing labor force in burgeoning Indian tea districts. Today's "Labor Question," does not focus on the acquisition of labor, but instead on how planters deal with and often euphemize the legacy of the plantation and its system of unequal labor relations. Consumers are demanding more of a global food system, which, according to Kloppenburg, et al. (1996: 34) "...comes from a global everywhere, yet from nowhere that [North American consumers] know in particular. The distance from which their

food comes represents their separation from the knowledge of how and by whom what they consume is produced, processed, and transported.” At the same time, as Paige West (2010) highlights, the producers of commodity food crops, like Papua New Guinean coffee, are re-fetishized through product marketing, in an attempt to morally link producers and consumers through idealized values, or “generational pitches.” GI is the Government of India’s solution to the Labor Question, which in Darjeeling is answered by the active construction of tea as the outgrowth of the “traditional knowledge” of magic-fingered women, bounded timelessly to the misty Himalayan foothills.

Solving the Labor Question involves re-making Darjeeling as both place and taste through three interrelated processes. I have already introduced the first of these: extensive marketing campaigns aimed at defining the Darjeeling *terroir* and educating consumers about the “traditional knowledge” that goes into its production. I will return to this below and relate my analysis to a wider literature in the social sciences on *terroir* and GI. The push of media is not enough to create *terroir*, however. The second process is the application of international law to define the borders within which and the ecological conditions under which Darjeeling tea can be produced. Specifically, planters and marketers saw GI regulations as “protecting” tea produced in India by establishing the traditional knowledge of tea pluckers and the plantation environment as the “intellectual property” of the Tea Board of India and the patrimony of the nation. The appeal to intellectual property masks the longstanding circulation of labor across the porous border between Nepal and India (see Chapter 3 and Chapter 6), reinforcing the

impression that laborers reside happily and stably on Darjeeling gardens. The third process is the introduction of “tea tourism” and the performative remaking of tea plantations into sites of “heritage.”

Geographical Indication: Governing Taste and Place in the Global Market



Figure 5.2: Darjeeling Tea Logo

Simply put, a “geographical indication” is material or linguistic symbol used to distinguish the product of a given location. The protection of geographical indications has long fallen under national laws aimed at curtailing the imitation or falsification of certain

products. Though it has undergone several transformations throughout the 20th century, one of the first systems for the protection of the geographical indication of food products is the French *appellation d'origine contrôlée* (AOC), first codified in 1905. Food items that meet AOC regulations that verify that they are made in a particular geographical location that exhibits a distinct *terroir* can have a French government issued stamped on them. AOC regulations have governed many French wines and cheeses for over 100 years (Colman 2008: 37-67).

To have an authentic *terroir*, a product must embody special amalgamating characteristics that make up its “taste of place.” These characteristics are endowed by the geology, climate, and geography of the region in which the product is grown (for an extended discussion of the geological and climatic basis for *terroir*, see Wilson 1998). A

product's distinction as a geographical indication with a discrete *terroir* is as much a cultural process as a "natural" one. People are central to *terroir*, and people's knowledge of crafted forms of production in a specific place frame contemporary understanding of *terroir* (Trubek 2008: 10-12).

Pierre Boisard (1992), in his examination of Camembert, what he calls "the odorous emblem of France" (1992: xi) and a recognizable *terroir*-based product, argues that this product, *naturally* associated with Frenchness, is actually embedded in "national myths" about the French nation-state. Similarly, Kolleen Guy (2003) in her study of Champagne, another comestible symbol of the French nation state, describes how the production of uniquely French wines was tied up in rural populations' integration into the nation. Though France can be most readily identified with discussions of the taste and its relationship to place, *terroir* has become a global commentary on the values, histories, and characteristics of certain foods, as consumers become more aware about the origins of their food (Trubek and Bowen 2008: 24).

Under the Geographical Indications Act of 1999, Darjeeling Tea became the first of India's now 150 registered GIs.¹²¹ This national legislation endowed the Tea Board, and by extension the Government of India, with "ownership" over "Darjeeling tea" and its logo (see Figure 5.2). The Darjeeling tea logo, as well as the *TeaBoardko kaagaj* are

¹²¹ Other agricultural products now governed by Indian GI legislation include Basmati rice, Alphonso mangoes and Nagpur oranges. The 1999 legislation also protects a large number of handicrafts, such as Kullu shawls, Kancheepuram silk, and Chanderi fabric. For a complete list of India GIs, see the Intellectual Property India Geographical Registrations Registry, <http://ipindia.nic.in/girindia/> (Accessed March 21, 2012).

symbols of bureaucratic authority, which stand in for people. In actuality, people in Darjeeling have little power in the GI system. Bureaucrats and lawyers in the Kolkata offices of the Tea Board of India do most of the work of GI.

Following this Indian legislation in 1999, the WTO recognized Darjeeling as a Geographical Indication under the Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights, or TRIPS, Agreement (Rao 2005).¹²² Under TRIPS, producers of Roquefort cheese are protected from imitation, but corporations like Monsanto are also empowered to patent biological life. Many social scientists and scholar-activists have described the monopolization of plant genetic resources, often focusing on Monsanto's transgenic corn, wheat, and cotton in India (Herring 2005, 2006, 2007; Shiva 2000; Stone 2002a, 2002b, 2004, 2007).¹²³ Much as Monsanto can patent and "own" genetically modified plant varieties such as pest-resistant Bt cotton, the Tea Board of India "owns" Darjeeling tea; Indian law (1999 GI Act) makes the name and logo a certified trademark (CTM) owned by the Government of India, represented by the Tea Board of India as proxy (See Figure 5.3).

¹²² The term "geographical indication" comes from the 1994 WTO TRIPS Agreement.

¹²³ Vandana Shiva explains that the TRIPS agreement "criminalizes seed-saving and seed-sharing. [TRIPS]...legalizes the dumping of genetically engineered foods on countries and criminalizes actions to protect the biological and cultural diversity on which diverse food systems are based" (2000: 2). According to Shiva, the free exchange of seeds is a central practice in maintaining food security and biodiversity, but as the result of TRIPS, corporations can now claim seeds as their own "intellectual property" and control seed use and circulation.



Figure 5.3: CTM billboard at the entrance to a Darjeeling tea plantation

Under TRIPS and GI, both Bt seeds and boutique tea are considered “intellectual property.” Legally speaking, then, “Darjeeling tea” is only produced on 87 plantations in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal. Plantations located in the Darjeeling district, but outside of the hilly sub-districts (not to mention the few tea-growing cooperatives in the hilly sub-districts) are not, legally, “Darjeeling.”¹²⁴ GI is aimed at thwarting the blending

¹²⁴ There are few cooperatives, small farmers, or artisanal producers. Tea cooperatives in Darjeeling must sell their green leaf to a plantation for production, as these farming communities do not have a factory. All tea that is exported from India as first been processed (dried, rolled, oxidized (fermented), and sorted) by hand or machine.

of Darjeeling tea with other teas. The Darjeeling Tea Association also believes that this legal protection has given struggling gardens a better market for their tea.

The extension of GI to non-Western contexts (and beyond wines, liquors, and cheeses) is a new phenomenon, and relatively few scholars have explored these products and processes (particularly as they relate to WTO governance). In one of the few studies of GIs in non-Western contexts, Sociologist Sarah Bowen (2010) evaluates GI regulation as a form of “development from within,” in which “local actors” are given the legal tools to sustainably manage their crop, but she concludes that GIs in the developing world face distinct challenges. In the case of Mexican tequila production, small agave farmers did not benefit from the tequila GI. Instead, large tequila distilling companies benefited the most from the brand protection. There are multiple parties and interests along the tequila commodity chain that are all enveloped by the tequila GI. Despite appeals to development, distilleries retain immense power over agave farmers (see also Bowen and Zapata 2008). In their study of the “*terroir* approach” in West Africa, Bassett et al. (2007) posit that appeals to geographical indication and *terroir* are ways that development workers legitimate their work to larger audiences. In Darjeeling too, GIs are sought after and deployed by bureaucrats and tea planters to stimulate demand.

Marketing Place, Marketing Taste

Historically, Darjeeling’s distinction as a good quality tea came from its taste (it was similar in color and flavor to the Chinese teas favored by British consumers) as well

as its place. Darjeeling has long existed in Indian and Western imaginaries as a place of refuge and purity, an accessible Shangri-la (see Chapter 2). The GI-related tea marketing materials I discovered in the *didi's* office depicted the plantation as an Edenic garden space and highlighted the timeless, “natural” relationships between women and tea bushes. Darjeeling’s garden imaginary – where cultivation of all sorts is possible – has become part of the value of the tea itself. In an interview with a Tea Board executive responsible for the administration of Darjeeling’s GI, she explained that this history of distinction made the Darjeeling “brand” easier to “position”:

...it just so happens that Darjeeling has developed a market of its own...So, when we started off on the GI exercise the brand had actually already been positioned. Maybe because of certain activities that have taken place historically or because of the fact that it is a product with certain benefits and attributes which have...been liked by people.

The job of GI marketers, she explained, was to link people’s tastes—what they already liked about Darjeeling – to a specific place. She continued:

If somebody thinks that champagne is just a sparkling wine, then France will find it very difficult to protect champagne as a GI because America would say that Champagne has got nothing to do with origin and is just a sparkling wine and would taste a certain way and that's it. You need to communicate. You need to promote. You need to tell people what it's all about. You need to convey the fact that a GI has something to do with the origin, reputation, quality, characteristics...So, you have the legal side, you have the administrative side, [and] you have the side that's linked with promotion.

A promotional film distributed by the Tea Board of India to buyers, brokers, and retailers of Darjeeling narrates a British teashop owner’s trip to Darjeeling (Tea Board 2003). The movie opens with her sitting in her café in London, reflecting: “*I grew up thinking that Darjeeling was just a tea...*” Then with the exaggerated movement of a

cursor on a map, we follow her from London to the plains of Darjeeling, where she climbs aboard the “Toy Train,” the narrow gauge railroad that has transported tea and tourists since the 1860s, that brings her up the mountainside to Darjeeling town.

The next day, while shopping for tea in the market, she meets a tea plantation manager, Mr. Kumar. Over a pot of Darjeeling tea, the scratchy and stilted, dubbed-in voice of Mr. Kumar describes Darjeeling’s Geographic Indication status:

*“The reputation, the characteristics, of the renowned tea that has been produced over here are, essentially, attributable to the geographic location, climate, and even the soil...That’s the magic of Darjeeling.”*¹²⁵

Mr. Kumar whisks her down to a tea plantation. They stop on the side of a plantation access road. Grabbing a handful of wet dirt, Mr. Kumar explains, *“This is the soil that produces the sweet brew of Darjeeling...see?”* The teashop owner gingerly pinches the soil. As they walk behind a large group of female laborers, Mr. Kumar continues: *“Tea leaves are hand picked by tea garden workers, 70% of whom are women. Perhaps it is the warmth of their touch that gives the brew such sweetness.”*

Mr. Kumar and the tea buyer watch the women, clad in bright red *chaubundis*. (Red is the color of fertility and *chaubundis* are the “traditional” female dress of a united Hindu Nepal—see Chapter 6. For the record, I usually saw them wearing men’s button down shirts to work, never *chaubundis*, which the tea workers mocked as the dress of

¹²⁵ This echoes the definition of Geographical Indication in Article 22, paragraph 1 of the TRIPS agreement, which reads “Geographical indications are...indications which identify a good as originating in the territory of a Member, or a region or locality in that territory, where a given quality, reputation or other characteristic of the good is *essentially attributable* to its geographical origin” (http://www.wto.org/english/docs_e/legal_e/27-trips_04b_e.htm. Accessed May 30, 2012; Italics added).

old ladies, porters, and “backwards” Nepalese farmers (See Figure 5.4).) As the rains start, the women in the film break out into trilled folksongs, mimicking a Bollywood musical aside. The women smile ear to ear while they toss handfuls of green leaf into the baskets strapped to the top of their heads. Rhythmic claps punctuate the song as well as their tea plucking movements.



Figure 5.4: Tea plucker in *chaubundi* (excerpted DTA [n.d.]

Later in the film, the tea buyer muses: *“I started...exploring the mountains that are home to rhododendrons, wild orchids, and a thousand other flowers. Oh! And the birds...some six-hundred kinds. When you drink a cup of pure Darjeeling, you drink all of this in.”*

We see the tea buyer later that afternoon, writing in her journal on the verandah of her Raj-era palace-turned-hotel. Excerpts from her journal refer not to the tea, but to

both the people and the environment that produce it: the “breathing mountains,” musical brooks, ” “hardened exteriors,” “smiles of genuine people with genuine pride.” After a long sip of amber tea, she remarks: “*Mr. Kumar made me realize the significance of the laws protecting Darjeeling tea. It is thanks to these laws that the flavor of pure Darjeeling has worked its magic for me.*”

In the film’s descriptions, the environment of Darjeeling – the rains, the mists, the loamy soils, and the beautiful Nepali women – are integral to the taste and quality of Darjeeling tea. In the promotional film and other materials, the viewer-consumer is reassured that the environment is not only natural and pristine (despite their application, agrochemicals never figure into discussions of the *terroir* of any product) but also populated by state-of-nature female workers who have such an idyllic work environment that they are compelled to dance and sing throughout the day. (In fact, as I noted in Chapter 1, dancing is better understood a way for workers like Bishnu and Jethi to entertain themselves through the drudgery of tea work. Dancing, too, was a form of ethnic performance mandated by the GJMM, see Chapter 6.) These features are what tea planters, Tea Board officials, consumers, and even tea workers refer to when they discuss Darjeeling tea’s value and its *terroir*. The use of “garden” in GI literature reminds consumers and producers of Darjeeling’s origin as a British hill station, a site of social and environmental reproduction. The imaginary of the plantation as “garden” evokes culturally embedded mythologies of Shangri-La and mountain purity. For

Darjeeling tea to assent to the realm of Geographically Indicated products, Darjeeling's colonial legacy had to be repackaged, not removed.

From Plantation Labor to Traditional Knowledge: *Terroir*, GI, and Intellectual Property

Statements about the need to “protect” Darjeeling were contextualized by explanations that the Darjeeling tea plantation system was in “crisis” and that the market for Darjeeling tea was struggling. During the colonial era, there was a built-in market for Darjeeling tea and all Empire-grown teas. Those who like the lighter taste of Chinese tea favored Darjeeling tea (by the time Darjeeling was growing tea, Chinese tea was harder and more expensive to come by). After Independence, Darjeeling tea planters continued to sell their teas abroad and as the Soviet Union developed, so did Soviet demands for tea. In the postcolonial years, the majority of the lower grade Darjeeling teas were auctioned off to buyers in Kolkata for direct shipment to the Soviet Union. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, the Secretary of the Darjeeling Tea Association explained to me, plantations had a great deal of tea and nobody to buy it. Planters and owners had never had to market their tea, he explained to me. Darjeeling tea planters were not getting the prices at auction they once did and the district spiraled into a decade of decreasing yields, closed gardens, and starvation deaths. Despite the downturn, Darjeeling, as a place, remained evocative of a distinct luxury and refinement.

Anthropologists have long been concerned with what people eat and do not eat (Levi-Strauss 1969; Douglas 1966), food procurement and nutrition (Richards 1939; Lee 1979), and foodways and consumption practices (Counihan 1999, 2004, 2000; Mintz 1997, 2006). In recent years, anthropologists have pushed beyond questions of what food is and how people obtain it to questions of taste. As Amy Trubek (2008: 6) explains:

Taste is the difference between food as a mere form of sustenance and food as parts of life's rich pageant, a part of sociality, spirituality, aesthetics, and more. Taste unifies the myriad means humans have devised to make food do much more than what makes us able to move, to survive, as a species.

But how do we learn taste? Anthropological studies of local and *terroir*-based products emphasize how products with *terroir* are made through “traditional” knowledge practices, skill, and artistry, even if such traditions are invented, socially constructed (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992, see also Ulin 1995 for a discussion of Southwest French wine), or what Heather Paxson (2010) calls in her study of American farmstead cheese, “reverse engineered.” In this literature, French wine, artisanal cheese, heritage pork, *foie gras*, and other *terroir*-based products are produced as crafts, not industrial goods. Implicit in the production of these products is an affective relationship between a farmer and his or her product. These are associated with a distinct place, set of traditional knowledge practices, and small-scale craft production. *Terroir* has been associated with movements against the globalization of the food system, and the conservation of sustainable, local practices. The locally-bounded craft of artisans contrasts with the regimented (and arguably place-less) labor of industrial agricultural workers. Wage

laborers (and issues of political economy, more generally) almost never make it into these visions of geographically indicated food production.

Despite the fact that social scientific agro-food studies tend to look at structural inequalities in the commodity chain, with particular attention to agricultural labor (e.g. Guthman 2004; DuPuis 2002; Friedburg 2004; see also Introduction), recent social scientific studies of the territorial distinction of food, particularly those done by anthropologists, have taken a more ideological approach. Deborah Heath and Anne Meneley (2007) frame *terroir* as a dialectical relationship between production and consumption as well as between ways of doing (techne) and ways of knowing (technoscience). Heather Paxson (2006) notes that what makes Vermont farmstead cheeses and other “slow foods” taste *good* is related to the values embedded in explanations for why these cheeses are *good* to make.

On Darjeeling plantations, wage laborers are too visible to be ignored, and the Tea Board is faced with reinventing *industrial* production as *craft* production – a process done in small batches by skilled artisans – not “coolie” labor. Tea laborers pluck, prune, and maintain bushes year-round; there is not a fixed harvest season as in coffee or wine. Robert Ulin (2002) has conducted fieldwork with cooperative winegrowers in Southwest France and explored how their labors in the wine industry are important to how they articulate their identity. In the film I just discussed, the beauty (delicate, light) of the people and the environment was coupled with delicate, light tea bushes. GI legislation creates legal boundaries that turn Darjeeling and similar commodity-

producing regions (Champagne, Bourdeaux, Comté, Parma) into discrete “homelands” for traditional knowledge, repackaged as “intellectual property.”

Among the intellectual property rights claimed by the Indian Tea Board is the “traditional knowledge” of the “skilled workers” living in the region. As one brochure explains:

The crafting of Darjeeling Tea begins in the field. Where women workers begin plucking early in the morning, when the leaves are still covered with dew. The spirals of walking women gradually twist, then unfold [*referencing the motion of steeping tea leaves*] to form a line. The tea is picked fresh every day, as fresh as the crisp green leaves can make them. The tea bushes are mystical messages on the Earth’s canvas. A tale of excellence, brewed cup by cup, produced by the loving care lavished by the workers. Caressed to state-of-the-art perfection by unchanging tradition...The earth sings for you in Darjeeling. The women pluckers smile and, with the radiance of their joy, the sun rises over the gardens. Behind them, set against the rosy dawn sky, loom the snows of Kanchenjunga (DTA n.d.).

Both soil and people are intertwined in the *terroir* of Darjeeling. Darjeeling was, after all, one of the only places in the Empire where the environmental conditions allowed for the cultivation of the more fickle *camellia sinensis* (the Chinese variety of tea) bush. Elsewhere in India, *camellia assamensis* (the indigenous Assam variety of tea), which was far stronger and blacker, grew abundantly (see Chapter 2).

What anthropological studies of *terroir* show us is how ideas about “traditional knowledge,” like ideas about organic and fair trade, are bound up uncomfortably in luxury consumption and class politics—what Pierre Bourdieu (1984) calls “distinction.” Organic, local, GI and other products with *terroir* tend also to be luxury products, associated with exotic places and refined tastes. The cultural caché of Darjeeling as a place is important to its success on the international market. Consumers and

connoisseurs regard Darjeeling tea, with its light smoky flavor, as the “Champagne of teas.” The Tea Board of India’s new marketing materials are educational and instructional, not only in the how-to details of brewing, steeping, and storage, but more importantly about how to enjoy Darjeeling tea and appreciate it as a luxury good. As Brad Weiss (2011) showed in a study of “local” “heritage” pork – specifically the Ossabaw Cross – in North Carolina, these tastes must be learned. In the Piedmont region of North Carolina, this learning took place in farmers markets, restaurants, and exclusive tasting events and was transmitted by trained specialists in the dietary habits of pigs and in the growing genre of “meat science” (2011: 446). As Weiss explains, “The Ossabaw Cross (and its taste) is an amalgam of animal husbandry, marketing strategies, and social networking” (2011: 452).

Similarly, Darjeeling’s GI promotion posters instruct consumers about how to “fine tune” their senses to the brew. The poster the office *didi* gave me explains:

If the fine flavor of Darjeeling Tea passes you by at first go, don’t lose heart. It took us over a century to perfect the delicate art of Darjeeling Tea. You might have to allow it to grow on you. To fully appreciate the heavenly aroma and taste, treat your cup of Darjeeling as the finest of wines. Take a whiff before you take a sip. Roll the mild liquor (sans milk and sugar, ideally) around you tongue. Wait for the faint hint of the celebrated bouquet, following the signature *warm-sweet-mellow* taste. Once your senses are fine-tuned enough to discern the distinctive Darjeeling flavor, it will be a lifetime obsession – as it has been with connoisseurs around the world. To begin this journey of romance, just raise your cup...with finesse (excerpted from Tea Board poster, author’s personal collection)

Julie Guthman’s (2004) ethnography of California organic agriculture in *Agrarian Dreams* describes the lives of laborers under industrial production. She highlights that despite being perceived as “farming in nature’s image” (Soule and Piper 1992, quoted in

Guthman 2004: 2) alternative agriculture schemes such as organic farming are wrapped up in the processes of industrial agriculture its consumers see it challenging. This “agrarianist vision” is central to organic agriculture and the sociopolitical salience of the owner-operated farm, despite the fact that organic agriculture in the US (like organic tea production in Darjeeling) is highly industrialized and depends on ethnically marked and marginalized laborers (Latino labor in the US, Nepali labor in Darjeeling) (Guthman 2004: 9-12).¹²⁶

The depiction of the tea plantation as “garden” in the film and other promotional materials is part of what I deem a *Third World agrarian imaginary* in which low-paid workers, recast as “small farmers” are possessors of geographically distinct “traditional knowledge.” (This imaginary of Third World rural agricultural life resonates with Raymond Williams’s [1973] observations in *The Country and the City* of the mythical characterization of rural life as simple, natural, and pristine.) The imaginary of plantation as “garden” is derived from histories of botanical conquest and the experiments of the East India Company (see Chapter 2). GI depends on the assertion of a “natural” convergence of environmental conditions (the loamy soils and misty slopes) with this traditional knowledge. This vision is perhaps more culturally salient with the growing popularity of territorially distinguished, fair trade, organic, and otherwise

¹²⁶ The roots of an agrarian imaginary can be seen in the writings of Thomas Jefferson. In *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1853: 176), Jefferson writes: “Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God...whose breasts he has made his particular deposit for substantial and genuine virtue... Corruption of morals in the mass cultivator is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example.”

socially and/or environmentally consciously labeled commodities, stoked in popular media by food activists, revolutionaries, and celebrity chefs.

The Boundaries to Taste: The Production of Overproduction

On a winter day in 2008, I was having a cup of tea with the Secretary of the Darjeeling Tea Association in his freezing cold concrete slab office. He usually wanted to talk about tea tourism projects, the hegemony of tea bags, and whether or not some planters liked him or not, but today we were talking about Darjeeling's GI status.

"Do you see Darjeeling becoming the next Champagne... or Scotch?" The secretary asked me, tapping the ash of his cigarette onto the saucer of his teacup.

I tried to answer diplomatically, but he cut me off. "Well it will." He said emphatically. "It has to be. We are making so much progress. [But] We are having real trouble in the American market...It's just tea bags over there! Did you hear what we did with the Republic of Tea? They are big tea bag producers, no? Well, they were selling this blended tea as 'Darjeeling Midnight' or 'Darjeeling Sunset' or something like that. It only had a handful, a small percentage, of real Darjeeling tea in it. And I am sure that they bought the cheapest thing that they could find. Well, we...along with the Tea Board, stopped them from using 'Darjeeling' to sell their blended tea.'¹²⁷

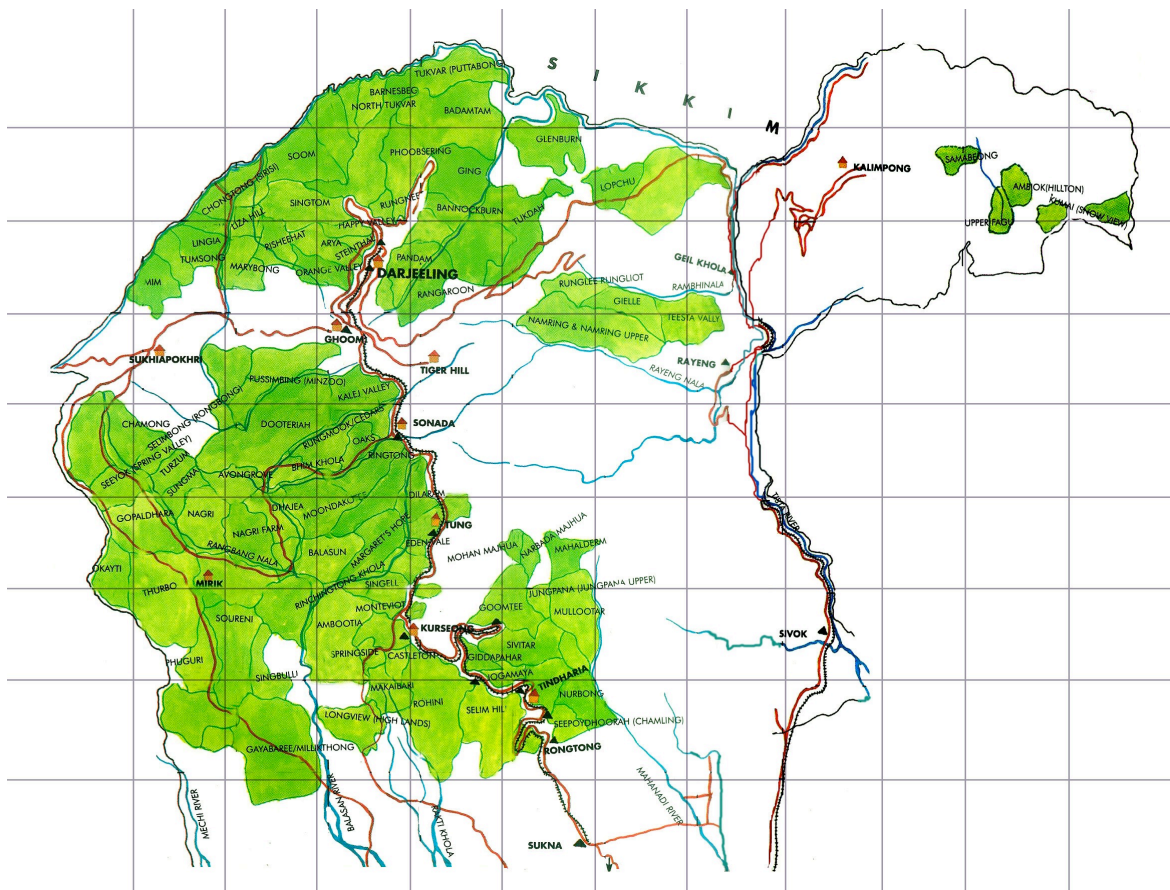
¹²⁷ The Tea Board of India has been successful in controlling the use of the word "Darjeeling" in fifteen legal battles from South Asia, to France and the US. In the US, the Republic of Tea sold "Darjeeling Nouveau," which contained minimal (if any, it was argued) Darjeeling tea. The Republic of Tea lost the case, as it was not able to prove that US consumers viewed "Darjeeling tea" as a generic type of tea that could be sourced from any region, as opposed to tea from Darjeeling, India. [Source: www.lexorbis.com, accessed March 21, 2012 and verified by Tea Board of India officials.] The Republic of Tea was forced to pull Darjeeling Nouveau from the market.

“How did you do that?” I asked.

“Well, it was through court battles and the like... The Tea Board has lawyers, you know, and that is their job. Tea retailers need to know that they just can’t use Darjeeling whenever they want --- It’s our intellectual property! It needs to be used properly. If you call a tea Darjeeling,” he paused to take a sip of tea, “it has to be from one of the...87 gardens. For too long, unscrupulous blenders have just mixed up whatever common teas they like and slap ‘Darjeeling’ on the label to help it sell better. It is just like Champagne: you can’t call any old bubbly Champagne. Champagne can only be from Champagne; Scotch only from Scotland. Though...” he laughed. “They say that there is more Scotch whiskey produced in India than in all of Scotland!”

In order to achieve a legal geographical distinction for Darjeeling, the physical boundaries of Darjeeling as a place had to be defined. The 1999 GI Act defines “Darjeeling” as produced on one of 87 plantations in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal (See Figure 5.5). GI makes Darjeeling and similar commodity-producing regions (Champagne, Bordeaux, Comté, Parma) into governable ecosystems. GI depends on the cordoning off and defining of a distinct ecosystem in which a unique *terroir* can be experienced. GI defines a Darjeeling ecosystem – complete with antique tea factories, Nepali laborers, tea bushes, mist, loamy soils, and the Himalayan foothills – as a “garden,” a traditional space of production. This narrative of a pure and contiguous ecosystem works to define Darjeeling’s *terroir* – and what it is *not* – as an attempt to purify and protect the product (see Cronon 1995). Furthermore, the papers and

bureaucratic power (both national and international) of Geographical Indication have circumscribed the physical borders of Darjeeling and helped redefine plantation, or *kamaan*, labor as the “traditional knowledge” of the people, particularly tea plucking women, who lived in the region. Ideas of nature and identity were literally written into the Geographical Indication of Darjeeling.



**Figure 5.5: Map displaying 87 tea plantations (in green) considered "Darjeeling"¹²⁸
[see also Figure 0.3]**

¹²⁸ Map available on the DTA's website: www.darjeelingtea.com (Accessed March 21, 2012).

GI and the concept of *terroir* necessitate approaching the “environment,” broadly conceived, as an “ecosystem” in which a particular *terroir* is materialized and can be experienced: the laborers, soils, birds, and whatever else all work to maintain a kind of imagined homeostatic equilibrium in Darjeeling tea production (and purity).¹²⁹ As one brochure explains:

As Champagne cannot be manufactured in any place other than the Champagne district of France (even though the grapes used are the same kind)...in the same manner only tea grown and produced in the defined area of the Darjeeling district of the State of West Bengal, India can be called DARJEELING tea. Any tea grown in any other region from the same sort of tea plants cannot be called Darjeeling tea, a rare coveted brew, which is desired globally, but is only grown in India (Tea Board poster, author’s personal collection).

Unlike Champagne, the GI to which Darjeeling planters constantly refer, the political boundaries of the Darjeeling district of West Bengal do not match the boundaries of the Darjeeling GI (See Figure 5.6). Darjeeling is the name of a district of West Bengal that encompasses far more tea plantations than are included as “Darjeeling.” The political boundaries include both hills and plains (or Terai), both of which are dominated by tea plantations. In the definition of the Darjeeling GI, however, the “hills” are central. During the colonial period and years after, all plantations within

¹²⁹ Ecosystem theories in anthropology were inspired by Eugene Odum’s *Fundamentals of Ecology* (1953), which highlighted the ecosystem as the basis unit of analysis in ecology. The goal of the ecosystem approach was to understand macro-level organization, function, and interdependence in natural systems (Moran 1984: 6). Odum refers to an ecosystem as a set of all things in a given habitat and the relationships between these elements. This conceptualization also assumes that nature tends toward order, harmony, and diversity. Species in an ecosystem evolve together in sets of symbiotic relationships, working together to control and manage the habitat. Increased development of these symbiotic relationships enables the ecosystem to become more stable. Ian Scoones (1999) has described the problems with homeostatic visions of nature and also why they have appeal for public policy.

the district were considered to be “Darjeeling” plantations.¹³⁰ Nepalis, almost exclusively, staff the hill plantations of Darjeeling. In the plantations in the plains of the Darjeeling district, *adivasis* (“indigenous” or “aboriginal” inhabitants) serve as the majority of the labor force, accompanied by some Nepali workers.



Figure 5.6: Political boundaries of the Darjeeling district¹³¹ [see also Figure 0.2]

¹³⁰ For decades of ITA Bulletins, which I consulted in Kolkata in 2009, plantations within the Terai region of Darjeeling were considered to be Darjeeling gardens.

¹³¹ Photo credit: www.calcuttaweb.com (Accessed March 21, 2012).

Nepal, which lies only a few miles from many Darjeeling tea plantations, has a similar climate, slopping mountain tea fields, and Nepali laborers. Nepal tea, grown in the region adjacent to Darjeeling shown here, however, is not produced on plantations. Darjeeling's GI, as the Darjeeling Tea Association Secretary and numerous Darjeeling planters told me, exists in large part to protect Darjeeling from Nepal. They, along with tea retailers argued that Nepal tea did not have the same *terroir* as Darjeeling. It is a "lesser tea," they explained. Darjeeling and Nepali tea taste similar, come from the same species of bushes (*camellia sinensis*), and are grown and processed in similar climatic and geographic regions.

Planters said that tea retailers continue to pass off Nepal tea, often mixed with other teas, as "Darjeeling." Darjeeling had to be "protected" from this blending. The Secretary of the DTA often claimed that there were twenty (sometimes he would go as high as thirty or forty, for effect) tons of Darjeeling produced each year, but only ten tons actually grown and manufactured in Darjeeling. Planters, tea officials, and *Tea Boardko kaagaj* repeated this mathematical mantra. This mantra worked to create a coherent and plausible narrative of over production, albeit completely unverifiable.

This narrative of over-production is a key argument for the aggressive protection of Darjeeling's geographical indication. One Canadian tea buyer I interviewed, who buys both Nepal and Darjeeling tea and markets them separately, maintained that this "myth of overproduction" was a deliberate strategy to stimulate demand for Darjeeling tea. He and other tea buyers argued that Nepal tea was just as

good – grown in the same environmental conditions with younger bushes, with an added bonus: Nepal tea was cheaper because it was not “Darjeeling.” The plantation is central to what Darjeeling tea is and its distinction as a product. The plantation system is the main difference between Darjeeling and Nepal tea. The “heritage” of plantation agriculture is part of the *terroir* of Darjeeling tea.

Nevertheless, talk of a limited number of “gardens” bounded by discrete borders not only produced the impression that “true Darjeeling” was rare, it also gave a physical location to the “traditional knowledge” on which the Tea Board’s claims to intellectual property were based. TRIPS legally wrote the traditional knowledge of tea pluckers into the Darjeeling landscape and at the same time made the knowledge of marginalized Nepali tea workers the property and patrimony of the Indian nation state. There is no denying that tea plucking is an acquired skill. Most of my research among tea laborers that did not take place while cooking, eating, and drinking tea in villages took place in tea fields plucking tea. The workers spent six days per week, on some gardens seven, from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. walking the rows of tea bushes. Their job was to comb the tops of the bushes for the supplest, youngest shoots of tea, plucking two leaves and bud from each (see Introduction). The report of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO 2011), an agency of the United Nations that manages global patents, defines Darjeeling’s GI with reference not only to the 87 gardens, with their “perfect soils and environmental conditions for tea cultivation,” including wind speed, clouds, fog, and amount of sunshine, but also with reference to the “traditional knowledge” of the

laborers. The report states, “Because the tea bushes in the Darjeeling region are the rare *camellia sinensis*...two leaves and a bud must be picked. The traditional knowledge the women possess ensures that they can...pick Darjeeling tea while being careful to protect...the bushes from any undue stress...the traditional knowledge and production practices... differentiates Darjeeling tea from other teas...”

This report, which is strangely ethnographic in places, hides another story. The Tea Board claimed that part of the uniqueness of Darjeeling as a tea-growing region was the dominance, or even exclusive planting of the *camellia sinensis* bush – the Chinese variety of tea – the finer, lighter, and exotic *jat* (variety) of tea. *Camellia assamensis* – the Assam, or indigenous Indian variety of tea – on the other hand, had long grown wild in the jungles of Northeast India and later cultivated by the British on plantations across the Empire. The monocropped landscape of Darjeeling tea was not so homogenous.

My ethnographic work with tea laborers not only taught me how to differentiate between the smaller, coarser leaves of the *camellia sinensis* (the Chinese variety of tea) from the glossier, verdant, and more prolific leaves of the *camellia assamensis* (the Assam or indigenous Indian variety of tea) (despite planters’ claims to the contrary, Darjeeling plantations contained both *jat* of bushes), it also helped me understand how the subversion of ecological and political borders is essential to the making of Darjeeling tea. *Camellia sinensis* is of course a Chinese import, brought to India for cultivation after the Opium Wars (see Chapter 2). Darjeeling was favored for tea because its climate was seen as similar to that of southwest China. While the plantation model was imported

from other parts of the British Empire, the laborers, as I described in previous chapters, were mostly voluntary migrants from Eastern Nepal. The plantation as they and their descendants know it was not an idyllic, timeless “garden,” but a historical construction, the *kamaan*, a site of landless, wage labor. The *kamaan*, then, remains essential to the success of Darjeeling.

Since the 1950 Peace and Friendship Treaty (see Chapter 3), India and Nepal have had an open border (GOI 1950). So while the fluidity of the boundary between India and Nepal (and friendship between the former Nepali kingdom and the British Raj) was essential to solving what British planters called the “Labor Question,” that fluidity continued into the time of my fieldwork, even as GI was attempting to legally protect Darjeeling from Nepal. Laborers knew that Darjeeling’s bounded *terroir* was permeable and that the geographic purity of the tea was manipulated because they maintained their own kin connections to tea workers in Nepal. Among the women with whom I worked, trips to Nepal were not uncommon. The most frequent reason plantation women traveled across the border was to find marriage partners for their daughters. Given the dearth of jobs in Darjeeling, plantation women would be often be married into the families of eastern Nepalese (for more on the political implications of this process, see Chapter 6). Women from Nepal, too, would sometimes come to the plantations as newly wedded wives. Men and women from eastern Nepal would also migrate to Darjeeling in search of low-wage work, as porters or construction workers. My tea plantation respondents found the red *chaubundis* in GI marketing materials particularly

humorous because they knew to be the dress of newly arrived migrants from Nepal, favored by elderly grandmothers.

Like young women, trucks of “green leaf” tea would often arrive on plantations from outside of both the political and the GI boundaries of Darjeeling. Knowing of my interests in the circulation of green leaf between plantations, female workers would whisper to me that *that truck* was coming from Pashupati, the nearest border crossing between India and Nepal and *that tea* was from the “*baris*” (“dry fields”) of Nepal. They often, with much disgust, explained that it was cheaper for management to buy *hariyo patti* (“green leaf”) by the kilogram from either closed gardens and tea-growing cooperatives in Darjeeling, but not included in the 87 Darjeeling gardens, or from Nepal tea *baris*, where they would not need to pay what planters called “labor costs” mandated by Indian industrial labor laws (see Chapter 4).

Through GI law, labor is portrayed as “belonging” to a place that has, like many borderlands, always been a crossroads of botanical, human, and technical migrants. Indeed, nearly every aspect of contemporary Darjeeling was imported. By insisting on the hardening of borders, GI has thus converted plantation labor into traditional knowledge, which has become the intellectual property of the Tea Board of India.¹³² By rendering wage labor into traditional knowledge, and a plantation system into a

¹³² The Tea Board of India does not always win the lawsuits they raise against parties they deem to be misappropriating the Darjeeling name. In 2011, they took the hotel chain ITC (owner of several Sonar-labeled hotels across India) to court. The ITC Sonar Bangla Hotel in Kolkata operates a tea shop within the hotel, called the “Darjeeling Lounge.” The High Court ruled that “Darjeeling” was not the sole property of the Tea Board of India (just across town from the hotel) and that the hotel could continue to run the tea shop under the name. (See <http://spicyindia.blogspot.com>, accessed March 21, 2012.)

network of “gardens,” GI elides the permeability of the very border on which Darjeeling’s product distinction has historically depended. The ability of people and plants to go back and forth across porous Himalayan borders is what made it possible to make Darjeeling in the first place. Recall that Manesh, whom I introduced at the start of this chapter, was the descendant of a *sardar*, a Nepali labor recruiter, who ensured the stable supply of labor on Darjeeling gardens by going back and forth across the border to coerce and collect marginalized Nepali farmers. By making all this fluid circulation into bounded *intellectual property*, GI renders the fundamentally unequal and ethnically divided plantation system into a traditional “garden” heritage.

Heritage and the Performance of Place

From its early days as a British Hill station, Darjeeling has been both a productive landscape and a tourist destination (see Chapter 2). In the postcolonial years, Darjeeling was an escape for the affluent of Calcutta. Satyajit Ray’s (1962) film *Kanchenjunga* described the place of retreat in upper class Bengali society and reaffirmed Darjeeling as a space of luxury, romance, and refuge. Darjeeling, with its clean mountain air, is still considered a place of purity.¹³³ Darjeeling served as a tangible Shangri-la. This image is still so powerful that the main characters in Wes Anderson’s popular movie *The Darjeeling Limited* (2007) did not even need to reach Darjeeling. The mystique of the place was palpable just through the reference. Instead, the traveling brothers in the film

¹³³ During my fieldwork in Kolkata, many people I interviewed in Kolkata articulated a decline or an adulteration of Darjeeling’s purity at the hands of the Gorkhaland agitation (see Chapter 6).

arrive at a mountaintop Shangri-la, where their mother has retreated to a peaceful (and sexless) existence.

After Darjeeling received GI status from the Government of India in 1999, planters and bureaucrats started tapping into this touristic image of Darjeeling to market their product. As the Tea Board bureaucrat explained above, Darjeeling already had a “brand,” or cultural caché. The tea just needed to be “promoted.” As I describe in early chapters, Darjeeling had long been considered a refuge from the heat and disease of the plains: a touristic space away from everyday India. Today, depending on what she is looking to find, a tourist can engage with the *Kanchenjunga*, fair trade organic, *kamaan*, garden, and Third World agrarian imaginaries (all at once, or discretely). In recent years, tea plantation tourism has boomed.¹³⁴ Plantations are converting bungalows into tourist lodging and encouraging day visitors to see tea production and experience the Darjeeling distinction for themselves. They can, as a *New York Times* travel reporter writes, “compare styles and improve their palates” and immerse themselves in “a teetotaler's version of a Napa Valley wine tour, but with no crowds” (Gross 2007).

Planters realized that the commodification of Darjeeling as a place, through the inclusive work of branding and selling the plantation and its multilayered imaginaries, was wildly successful. During my fieldwork, tea planters had begun ripping up tea

¹³⁴ The GJMM and the state of West Bengal signed an interim settlement July 2011. Since then, the agitation has subsided and tourism is on the rise. Tourism is the second largest industry in Darjeeling behind tea. In Darjeeling, between 2008 and 2010, hoteliers, porters, drivers, restaurant owners, and many others frequently lamented that there were very few foreign and domestic tourists in town because of the frequent strikes and blockades called by the GJMM.

bushes to make room for tourism projects (for which they need to receive written permission from the Land Reforms Department, as discussed in Chapter 4) – a far more lucrative venture than tea planting. They were selling more than just tea. In order for the plantation to be itself consumable, it had to be remade further, from relic of an oppressive colonial past to proud regional “heritage.” The production of the taste of place required the collapse, not only of *kamaan* and garden, but also of production and consumption. The “heritage” element to Darjeeling’s GI hedged against accusations that Nepal has the same climate, but it also contradicted the “garden” depiction, since the laborers are the relatives of Darjeeling’s colonial servants, and nobody wants to be reminded of the unpleasant aspects of colonialism. Natural climate and colonial labor, while in tension, served as the talking points of planters and the marketing brochures.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s (after the first Gorkhaland agitation), tea plantations were struggling, many closed while the labor and environmental conditions on others deteriorated. During this time, and over a decade before Geographic Indications or fair trade certification, one planter in particular, Rajah Banerjee, reinvented his plantation, Makaibari, drawing on agrarian imaginaries, New Age spirituality, and the language of luxury, one tourist, one television appearance, and one cocktail party at a time. I began my fieldwork at Makaibari, trying to understand he lived experiences of fair trade and organic production, but I quickly realized that Makaibari was not a typical Darjeeling tea plantation and that the environmental and

social sustainability I had heard and read so much about existed on the levels of discourse and marketing, not in plantation villages and fields.

Makaibari was certified “organic” in 1988. At first, Rajah received resentment for subverting marketing trends and the traditions of Darjeeling tea production, but by the time I arrived in Darjeeling in 2006, planters were eagerly adopting international certifications and cultivating direct buying relationships. Darjeeling’s GI marketing materials echo the strategies and rhetoric Rajah used for over fifteen years to find new and more lucrative markets for the tea produced on his otherwise marginal (in terms of *vaastu* and altitude) plantation. He propelled the Geographical Indication of Darjeeling on both macro- (through work and advocacy with the Darjeeling Tea Association and the Tea Board) and micro-scales (through work on his own plantation). Rajah’s work has framed the way the Darjeeling *terroir* is defined and remade the way that Darjeeling tea is valued, bought, sold, and circulated. In a multifaceted fetishization project, he turned the workers and the environment into consumables through plantation tourism. In the process, he fetishized himself and the Raj-era planter, as well as the workers and the soils, as elements critical to Darjeeling’s *terroir*, all consumable in a cup of Darjeeling and knowable by experiencing that cup while on the plantation.¹³⁵

In early 2000s, Rajah turned an abandoned soap factory, outside of the plantation land adjacent to his bungalow, and its guest bungalows into a guesthouse, called the Eco-Lodge. Plantation tourism projects are a new phenomenon. Even on my first trip to

¹³⁵ West and Carrier (2004) highlight that the ecotourism experience, despite being marketed as something “authentic” and outside of capitalist flows of consumption, is very much a capitalist act of consumption and fetishization of poor people and the “natures” in which they live.

Darjeeling, Rajah was *the only* plantation owner to grant me a pre-arranged stay. Since their inception, plantations have been largely closed to the public, but international certifications have raised their visibility. Makaibari is also one of the few plantation factories on one of the two main roads in the district. Every day, tour groups filtered in and out. If they were lucky, they would have an audience with Rajah himself, a captivating storyteller.

I would follow some of these tours around the factory and tasting room to hear Rajah wax to visitors about the “rhythms of nature,” the “terrestrial infirma,” and how they have become “harmonious” at Makaibari. He peppered narratives about tea manufacturing with memorable and provocative one-liners, such as “they are looking for favor in the balance sheet, not flavor in life” (a biting indictment of other tea planters). If a guest asks for sugar or milk, Rajah would chastise him or her - “Would you put milk in your glass of Champagne?” From the large tasting room at the factory, he would spread a proto-type of the marketing messages that would become central to Darjeeling’s Geographical Indication. Rajah successfully sutured the Shangri-la refuge imaginary to the historical legacy of colonial tea production, by remaking his plantation as a “heritage garden,” where experiences, sounds, smells, and sights, including the sight of plantation labor, were readily available for purchase.

To each tour group and tea buyer, he made sure to deliver his most popular and mesmerizing monologue, about becoming a tea planter:

My intention to return to the family plantation was for a short holiday. Touch base with my folk, soak up the tranquility of the mystical Himalayas, and return

with renewed vigor to pursue my frenetic life. Man proposes and God disposes.

My father...adroitly gifted me a thoroughbred and a gun, saying "Son, you look weary, ride, shoot and relax now. Have a long holiday."

I accepted the horse with delight, and careened around the precipitous bridle paths, without a care in the world. It was unbridled pleasure to race around the non-existent mountain slopes, the wind sweeping the hat away, guiding the magnificent charger, over terrain that none would dare to ride on. I paid the price a few days later, when I was flung off. That fall altered my life irrevocably.

The split second between the saddle and crash to the ground was a spellbinding one. I was in a timeless, spaceless zone. A tunnel of light with an incredible intensity and clarity. The woods orchestrated a melancholic yet powerful symphony that bewitched me with a soulful "save us, save us," chant. It was eternal. I felt the impact of hitting the ground, and watched the nearby pluckers rushing to me, picking me up, asking solicitously of my well being. I was in a stupor--completely disconnected--with the intensity of the visage I had experienced. It was real, yet it was not. I smiled wanly at the concerned ladies, assured them that my bones were intact, remounted my stallion, and trotted him back in a state of contemplative confusion. I just couldn't fathom my experience.

The extraordinary revelation pursued me constantly, and towards dusk I realized that I had to remain at Makaibari to crack the riddle.

My parents were delighted when I announced my intentions to extend my sojourn that night over dinner. Doubly delighted that I would try my hand at planting tea. Of course they had not the faintest clue why. Thus began the greatest voyage of my life-- a life that led me to unravel the three critical questions that assail all of us. Three questions that all of us quietly sweep under the table and hope it would remain dormant. Where do we come from? What are we doing here? Where do we go?¹³⁶

On Makaibari and on other Darjeeling plantations with tourism projects (the number of which is steadily increasing), workers performed *terroir* for tourists – posing for pictures, letting tourists borrow their *taukoris* for their own pictures, describing how “peaceful” the plantation was, showing them remnants of the British presence, or even

¹³⁶ I have quoted this directly from Rajah Banerjee's blog, though I heard this story told to almost every visitor and tour group (<http://makaibari.blogspot.com>, accessed March 21, 2012).

singing a song or two. Workers saw the revitalization of the plantation – the revitalization of the *kamaan* – through new marketing schemes and tourism projects as allowing them to stay in their villages on the plantations. Before the market upturn, plantations closed and women were forced to find work in town, breaking rocks and portering luggage – employment which netted them more money than plantation work, but work that was not seen as desirable because it took them away from plantation villages and their children. The revitalization of the tea industry through GI stitched the home-work duality of the plantation back together (whereas fair trade, despite a few tourism projects, threatened these linked aspects of plantation life, as I described in Chapter 4). Workers knew that international consumer demand, both on the plantation and off of it, was critical to the stability of the gardens.

Beginning in 2008, I made regular visits to laborers at Kopibari (introduced in Chapter 1), a plantation that had been closed for three years prior, and “sick” for several years before that. A prominent owner had recently bought it and pushed this plantation through fair trade and organic certification. He intended to turn Kopibari into a tea resort. Tourists who visited the garden were given tours of the tea-processing factory, a coal-fired plant whose machines, the tourists were told, dated to the British era. (Coal, too, is an important element of Darjeeling’s *terroir* and heritage. Planters claim that coal-operated machinery imparts Darjeeling’s special “muscatel” taste). Tourists were also given the opportunity to meet and talk with laborers, including a retired tea plucker who called herself the “five second lady.” She would invite tourists into an old one-room

village shack, which she had converted into a small café and demonstrate the “proper” way to brew and drink Darjeeling tea. She spoke remarkably good English and could prepare a cup, she said, in just “five seconds.” (She collected ration tea to sell and brewed broken Darjeeling leaf for tourists. If you swish that grade of tea in hot water for five seconds, the brew will remain light.) As she drank a cup of the five-second-tea with visitors, she would extol its health benefits and remind them that the new owner was selling to Harrod’s department store in London. She would also remind them that the proper way to consume Darjeeling was lightly brewed, with no sugar or milk. It was an “acquired taste”. (She also liked to say that because this tea was organic, you could brew the tea three times before throwing out the tea leaves.)

Out of the earshot of tourists, workers on this plantation mocked the five-second lady for being “pretentious” and opportunistic, as she charged on a sliding scale depending on how much she thought a given tourist could pay. The price per cup hovered around Rs. 50 (in 2010, the *daily* wage of plantation workers was only Rs. 63). The five-second lady was able to make this kind of revenue from tourists on a daily basis. As I mentioned in Chapter 4, tourism projects at Kopibari and other plantations tended to exacerbate economic inequality on the plantation.

On off days, workers would go up to town to the bazaar and see the faces of Darjeeling tea workers – of women just like them – plastered onto billboards. They were smiling, dressed in *pukka Nepali* (“really/totally Nepali”) clothes: in red *chaubundis*,

arms outstretched, handing the implicit consumer a cup of light amber tea; something that, unlike the five second lady, they would never drink (See Figure 5.7).



Figure 5.7: Billboard outside of the Darjeeling Tea Association, 2009 (note: women in red *chaubundis*)

Workers were consumers of tea. In fact, drinking tea (often with milk and sugar) was part of how labor was reproduced. Tea was food for Darjeeling tea workers. Throughout the day, workers sipped on sugar or salt tea from liter-sized reused XXX Rum Bottles (the rum or whiskey that originally occupied the bottles was often jokingly called *bishesh ciyaa* – “special tea” – as black tea, rum, and whiskey shared a similar caramel hue). Most female Darjeeling tea workers had access to low-grade broken leaf

Darjeeling tea (produced on that factory, but not deemed fit for international circulation), which they received as part of their food rations – 350 grams every month. This only supplemented their monthly tea purchases. On afternoons and weekends, I would sit with female workers as they would blend this ration tea into a strong, dark brew mixed with milk and sugar. They knew that Darjeeling tea was “expensive” and that a cup of Darjeeling tea in the United States cost more than they made in a day. Tourists and tea buyers who visited the plantation told them this. Messages of these high prices spread through the kin networks in and across Darjeeling tea plantations.

Since Rajah Bannerjee began reinventing Makaibari, other Darjeeling plantations have converted old bungalows into high-class accommodations, reminders of the spatial and class divisions of the *kamaan*. At Glenburn Tea Estates, for example, a double occupancy room complete with bed tea, laundry, picnics, bird watching, and day trips to Kalimpong and Darjeeling ran between \$400 and \$500 a night. In *Vanity Fair on Travel's* “Best of 2010 List,” the “Best Cuppa” goes to: “The Glenburn Tea Estate, [a] classic old colonial...The Raj lives on in rosy English porcelain teacups, the bungalow so perfectly verandahed and white-rattan-chaired it could have been a set for *The Jewel in the Crown*”¹³⁷ (Mather 2010: 16). A review of Glenburn Tea Estate in *Condé Nast Traveller* reports:

[The bungalow] stands as an unselfconscious reminder of an era when graciousness effortlessly prevailed...The guests who stay now are given the opportunity to see the day-to-day workings of the estate...and its labor-intensive routines (which don't appear to have changed in centuries)...We hiked for about

¹³⁷ This was a 1984 British television serial about the last days of before Indian Independence.

three hours each morning, happy in the knowledge that a soothing massage with green-tea oil was available upon our return. Prakesh, our delightful walking guide, kept a watchful eye on us, making sure we had enough to drink as we sweated our way up and down narrow, dusty paths that took use past clusters of brightly painted houses, the odd village shop, numerous shrines and groups of immaculate school children eager to practice their few words of English...Everything thrives in this fertile place: sugar cane, bamboo, and rubber...Visiting Glenburn is like arriving in a little corner of heaven – and almost as remote (Blackburn 2006: 70)

The organic and fair trade certified Chamong group recently introduced Raj bungalow tourism on Tumsong Tea Estate (the group is gradually extending the project to each of its thirteen plantations). The Tumsong tourism website explains why this plantation is special: “The tea plants here grow very slowly and flavour the entire estate with their aroma. The locals believe that the goddess Tamsa presides over this serene landscape and in fact, the locals refer to Tumsong as ‘the Garden of Happy Hearts.’ Come find out why.”¹³⁸

Rajah, too, desired to convert his modest “Eco-Lodge” and the surrounding area into a “seven-star resort.”¹³⁹ He explained to me that tourists wanted a colonial experience, and that in order to compete with other plantations he needed to provide this for them. The production of the Darjeeling-*terroir*-imaginary through tourism projects has become far more lucrative for plantation owners than actual tea production.

¹³⁸ See <http://www.chiabari.com/locations.html> [Accessed February 25, 2012]

¹³⁹ This project has been sidelined because of a land dispute. As I mention above, the Eco-Lodge was on the site of an old soap factory, *not* on the plantation. While the Land Reforms Department granted permission to convert over 20 acres from tea to tourism, this arrangement was something that he could do to the plantation leasehold. The soap factory is on municipal land, and the residents of the village, which Rajah took over through an unofficial eminent domain-esque rationale, are currently petitioning for squatters’ rights. I have followed this land dispute since 2006.

During my fieldwork, domestic Indian tourism remained the backbone of Darjeeling town's leisure industry, where Bengali tourists would dress up like tea laborers, complete with red *chaubundis*, ornate gold jewelry, and *taukoris*, posing for photographs in front of tea bushes. The plantations, however, catered almost exclusively to international consumers. These tourists, too, worked to perform *terroir*. I interviewed not only visitors to the five second lady's tea café but also visitors to the Makaibari Eco-Lodge, featured in the *Times* travel supplement (Gross 2007). As one visitor put it when I asked her why they came to that particular garden, "We drink their tea, and we wanted to know more about it." These tourists traveled to Darjeeling to consume Darjeeling tea in Darjeeling tea *gardens*. But they also wanted to see the material elements of *kamaan* – the factory, the antique machinery, the hand plucked tea, and the bungalows. In Darjeeling, these colonial legacies of the *kamaan* were discursively recast as "heritage." These material symbols of British colonial development and domination over the tea industry are essential to both the high market value of Darjeeling tea and the tourist experience. "Heritage," too becomes consumable in "a cup of Darjeeling." Tourism is a confirmation that Darjeeling plantations are not imaginary – there are aspects of both the "garden" and the *kamaan* that can be experienced materially. While GI media makes the plantation hyper-real, tourism sutures the experience of consuming tea to that of consuming place.

At the Makaibari Eco-Lodge, visitors could not only learn to drink tea from Rajah, a fourth generation planter, but also help laborers in "volunteer projects" such as

repainting houses and building latrines (tasks that the owner is required to perform under Indian labor law). The tourist experience worked to make GI's "garden" imaginary material. Agrarian imaginaries rest on a nostalgic vision of agricultural life and labor. By literally re-building plantation villages and residing in Raj bungalows above them, tourists materially reproduced the *kamaan*.



Figure 5.8: Tea buyers taking picture of women sorting processed tea, Kopibari Estate, 2008

***Terroir* and the Darjeeling Distinction**

Kamaan and garden; industry and refuge, are just two of the dualities that the Darjeeling plantation embodies and that the work of Geographical Indication reconciles

and repackages. The Darjeeling plantation is also both home and work; it is both of India and a place separate from India; and a site of both production and consumption. Planters used *terroir* and Geographical Indication to yoke these dualities into a coherent image of a palatable place and product. An ugly colonial past was sterilized into a garden “heritage.” This process fetishizes the very conditions of production. Workers were attuned to this. After all, the conversion of wage labor-time into a commodity crop, and also into a marketable, visible “traditional knowledge” constituted a double-alienation. Both the culturally constructed “nature” of the garden and the labor relations of the *kamaan* became the intellectual property of the Tea Board. At Saagbari Tea Estate (a pseudonym), village activists described the promotion of tourism (and the potential conversion of their village into a resort) as “turning the plantation into a zoo.” “Our job,” one man said, “is to produce tea, not to entertain visitors.” Nepali tea laborers were ambivalent about GI. They were aware of the unequal conditions of tea production, but they were nevertheless proud of their identity as the laborers who produced the world’s most expensive tea.

Despite this double-alienation, which was well-understood among tea workers, ideas about geographical distinction also circumscribed the possibilities for a historical, labor-based claim to belonging. In the next chapter, I analyze these claims through an analysis of the Gorkhaland movement, the regional separatist movement led by Nepali tea plantation residents, and which was resurgent during the years of my fieldwork. If anything, GI’s revitalization of the tea industry and of the uniqueness of the region

helped reinforce the idea that Indian Nepali or “Gorkha” identity was intimately tied to a history of tea plantation or *kamaan* labor. The plantation, as I suggested above, encapsulated a series of dualities, among them home and work. Darjeeling plantations were for laborers not just work places but literally the sites of their homes and villages. To some extent, then, the continued distinction of tea on the global market was in the interest of Gorkha sub-nationalists. If, as Kamala said in Chapter 1, with the achievement of Gorkhaland, “Darjeeling tea would become *Gorkha* Darjeeling tea,” then conditions for laborers might improve.

Chapter 6: *Nostalgia for “Justice”: Gendered Visions of Subnationalist Politics and the Revitalization of Darjeeling Tea*

Four days after I left the field in the summer of 2010, I was driving with my husband to Connecticut from Wisconsin to see my parents. We stopped overnight somewhere in rural Pennsylvania. The wireless internet at the hotel was down, and the receptionist told us to go next door to McDonald’s. McDonald’s had free internet, and mooching off of it was what “everyone in town” did. We sat down at a table between a group of gossiping old ladies and an Amish family. This experience so far was already somewhat surreal.

Then I opened my email.

Gruesome pictures – forwarded to me from people all over Darjeeling – of the assassination-by-*khukuri* (a curved knife and “traditional” weapon of Gurkha soldiers) of Madan Tamang bombarded me. Madan Tamang was the owner of Meghma Tea Estate (discussed in Chapter 3), which straddled the border between India and Nepal. Meghma was not included in the list of the 87 Geographically Indicated Darjeeling tea plantations I discussed in Chapter 5. And Madan did not want it to be, he told me. Madan was not like other Nepalis in Darjeeling. He did not grow up on a tea plantation, nor did his parents. He grew up in a large farmhouse on the land that became Meghma Tea Estate. Although the 1950 Peace and Friendship Treaty between India and Nepal meant that all Nepalis had reciprocal citizenship rights in both countries, Madan, as the owner of land that included the border, was a “dual citizen” – a *flexible* citizen, in Aihwa Ong’s (1999) terms – in a much more palpable sense. His claims to Indian and Nepali belonging were

strong in that he owned land in both countries, but they were tenuous for the same reason. University educated and well-traveled, he did not serve in a Gurkha regiment or an army battalion of any kind. Instead, he became a successful real estate developer in the area and a prominent politician. In the 1970s, Madan succeeded his father as President of the All Bharatiya (India) Gorkha League (ABGL), a Congress-party affiliated group and the oldest political entity representing Gorkhas in India. He broke with the ABGL in the late 1970s and joined Subhas Ghising in what became the first Gorkhaland agitation in 1980s. Later, he broke with Ghising and with the agitation, rejoining the ABGL. When I knew him, Madan relished the role of dissenter. Indeed, Madan's embrace of life-in-opposition might have cost him his life.

In the days that followed Madan's death, on blogs, emails, and in phone calls, my Darjeeling friends talked about how they felt betrayed; non-violence, after all, was supposed to be at the heart of this permutation of the Gorkhaland movement. Everyone knew someone who died in the 1986 agitation, and they did not want to experience that kind of loss again.

Some others, however, posted that Madan was the only obstacle to obtaining Gorkhaland.

Referencing his privileged upbringing, GJMM politicians routinely denigrated Madan as "not a real Gorkha man." As a child of wealth and privilege and not of the plantations or the army, Madan did not have the background to be a "proper" Gorkha. Madan was chastised in GJMM rallies for not being *hamrai ho* ("of the people;" literally

“distinctly/quite ours”). Almost all other Darjeeling politicians grew up on tea plantations (and until he and the GJMM took over in 2007, Bimal Gurung’s wife plucked tea at Tukvar).

“Madan-*daju* (older brother) is pretentious,” women would tell me at rallies. “He thinks that he is better than us.”

Others, however, respected his soft-spoken, centrist approach to politics. Madan and the ABGL maintained that the only way get “development” in Darjeeling was to work from the center. At one GJMM rally, a female supporter said to me with a hushed voice: “Well you know, we need someone like him. These men (pointing to the stage), they are good at what *they* do. They get attention, but they can’t talk in Delhi, or even Kolkata [meaning that they did not speak Hindi or Bengali] ...maybe he could just be an advisor.” Women, in particular, echoed this sentiment.

From Class to Ethnicity to Nation: Language Recognition and the First Gorkhaland Movement

In 1980, Subhas Ghising, the child of a tea garden, and his Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) joined forces with the Pranta Parishad, a group founded by Madan Tamang, in a movement to push for the autonomy of the Darjeeling district from the state of West Bengal and the formation of a separate state within India.¹⁴⁰ The Gorkhaland movement gathered steam in the early 1980s, and Subhas Ghising quickly

¹⁴⁰ Tamang disbanded the Pranta Parishad in 1990, forming the Gorkha Democratic Front. In 2001, the Democratic front merged with the ABGL, with Tamang as President.

became its most commanding voice. The GNLF broke with the Pranta Parishad in 1984, and in 1986, the Gorkhaland agitation began in earnest. In that year, Ghising dispatched a group of supporters to the town of Kalimpong. There, they publicly burned a copy of the 1950 Peace and Friendship Treaty. They were subsequently shot by policemen. The state's violent reaction to the protest sparked a two-year revolt that changed the contours of Darjeeling politics. As long as the Peace and Friendship Treaty existed, Ghising argued, Gorkhas would always be treated like Nepalese nationals – migrants – not Indians. Gorkhaland was a culturally and linguistically-based movement for both regional autonomy *and* recognition of Nepalis' rightful citizenship within India. Gorkhaland supporters claimed that all other Indian states were drawn along linguistic lines, but Nepalis were literally left off the map of independent India.

In 1924, Nepali intellectuals in Darjeeling founded the Nepali Sahitya Sammelan (Nepali Literature Association), which was the first institution to use the term “Nepali” to identify people who spoke the language but lived outside the kingdom of Nepal. By the 1930s, the word “Nepali” had crept into the vernacular and catalyzed the construction of a cohesive “Nepali” identity (Hutt 1997: 114). The Nepali language is the basis of Nepali ethnic identity outside of Nepal and a central factor for self-identification with the what has become known as the Nepali Diaspora community (Chalmers 2007: 97; Hutt 1997, 2003). Hutt (1997: 103) explains that there are problems with using the concept of diaspora to describe Indian Nepalis, because the consolidation of Nepali identity occurred after the formation of the contemporary kingdom of Nepal. Gorkhas,

like Sikkimese and Nepalis living in Bhutan before 1992, did not want to think of themselves as part of a diaspora. They were Nepalis, but not of Nepal. Gorkhas thought of themselves as part of India. As I explained in Chapter 3, class-based movements were one attempt by Gorkhas to assert themselves within India, but like other groups within this so-called diaspora, Gorkhas in Darjeeling turned to language in the 1970s and 1980s to secure their identity. Ironically, as Hutt argues, the more secure Nepalis became in their linguistic and cultural identity outside Nepal, the more *insecure* the “dominant political orders” within which they lived and worked became about their presence (Hutt 1997: 102). The shooting of the treaty protesters in 1986 seems to affirm this.

After Independence in 1947, leaders of the Nepali Bhasa Andolan (Nepali Language Movement) fought for decades for language recognition on state and local stages. In 1961, Nepali became an official language of the Darjeeling district. In 1977, the national constitution was amended to include Nepali as a “Scheduled Language.” Ghising referred to both the successes and failures of the Nepali Bhasa Andolan as justification for a separate state of Gorkhaland.

The first Gorkhaland agitation was strongly rooted in the language movement, but it also had a material basis (for a thorough history of the movement, see Subba 1992). By the mid- to late-1980s, there were many men living on tea gardens, as opportunities for males to work off of the gardens subsided. In particular, the Gurkha regiments, in both the British and Indian armed services, curtailed recruitment of Nepalis. A vision of the unemployed, wayward, dangerous Gorkha man was popularized

in Kiran Desai's (2006) bestselling novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, which is set in Kalimpong during the Gorkhaland agitation. One of the main characters, Gyan, is a young educated unemployed Gorkha male, who Desai paints as naturally servile and unreflexively swept up in the violent agitation for Gorkhaland. Darjeeling intellectuals criticized her unsympathetic characterization of Gorkhas in the local press. These critiques centered on Gyan's flatness as a character who had two skills: to serve and to agitate (In my office, I have an entire file dedicated to local critiques of Desai, her writing, and her place within larger structures of Gorkha oppression).

In the time depicted in *The Inheritance of Loss*, between 1986 and before 1988, the Marxist Left Front controlled the West Bengal government, and for a time, it seemed that the Congress Party government of Rajiv Gandhi might support Gorkhaland as a hedge against the Left Front (Banerjee, Bagchi, and Mitra 1988: 17). A standoff between Gandhi's national government and the West Bengal government over how to deal with the GNLF, however, opened space for the outbreak of violence. In February 1987, GNLF activists burned the national Police Station at Mirik, and late that spring, strikes and violence reached a boiling point. GNLF opponents were attacked and sometimes even decapitated. The Central Reserve Indian Police arrested, shot, and beat militants, burning villages in the name of a crusade against insurgency, and the government officially invoked the Anti-Terrorist Act to justify its response (Banerjee, Bagchi and Mitra 1988: 18-19; Subba 1992: 136-140).

Even though the planters were the objects of subnationalist aggression in the 1950s and 1960s, planters actually backed the 1986 movement in hopes of breaking the hold the Communist Party of India (CPI) and its powerful labor unions had on the region. Partly as a result of this support and partly because of a splintering of the movement, Ghising made linguistic and national recognition, rather than workers' rights or plantation reform, a central pillar of his eventual reconciliation deal with the West Bengal and Central Indian governments. In place of a separate state, which Gandhi declared early in the agitation to be out of the question, a tripartite peace agreement between the state of West Bengal, the Central government, and GNLF led to the formation in 1988 of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC). The formation of the Hill Council effectively ended multi-party politics in the hills. The DGHC, headed by Ghising, would become the dominant local political force in Darjeeling for the next 20 years. It had the power to levy taxes and regulate transportation and infrastructure, but with no support from the state or central governments, and no power whatsoever over the plantation system. Ghising promised at the time of the 1988 reconciliation – and continually throughout the 1980s and 1990s and early 2000s – that statehood remained the ultimate goal of the GNLF, but faith in his leadership waned by the time my fieldwork began.¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ By the end of the first Gorkhaland agitation in 1988, GNLF politicians and planters had succeeded in marginalizing the power the Communist party had in Darjeeling. GNLF unions replaced CPI unions. These new unions were not accountable to any larger regional or national political structure. While the Congress and Communist parties maintained a nominal presence on plantations after 1988, since the end of the agitation, the GNLF unions have comprised the overwhelming majority.

In October 2007, Bimal Gurung, Ghising's deputy, parleyed the success of Prashant Tamang, a Nepali *chowkidar* (security guard; another job that Nepalis were deemed to be adept at in a colonial taxonomy of labor)¹⁴² from Darjeeling living in Kolkata, in the "Indian Idol" singing competition, to marshal Gorkha patriotism and revive the Gorkhaland movement. He called on all Gorkhas, those in Darjeeling and those working and living further away (and even some who lived in Nepal) to phone and text their support for Prashant Tamang, whose mother still worked in a local luxury hotel. If a Gorkha won "Indian Idol," Gurung maintained, the belonging of Gorkhas in India would be affirmed (Middleton 2011). Ghising supported the "Indian Idol" campaign, but with little enthusiasm. When Prashant Tamang won the competition, Gurung used the success of the campaign to argue that Ghising's long tenure at the head of the Hill Council had diluted his enthusiasm for the advancement of the separatist cause and the development of Darjeeling.

At this time, Ghising was an ardent supporter of Sixth Schedule, or legally protected, status for all ethnic groups in Darjeeling, including various Nepali *jatis* (Tamang, Gurung, Lepcha, Rai, Limbu, Sherpa).¹⁴³ Written into the Sixth Schedule was legal language that a separate Gorkha state could never be formed.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² In a colonial taxonomy of labor, the work of being a *chowkidar* was deemed suitable for Nepalis. It is a stereotypical job for migrant Nepali males in urban centers across India.

¹⁴³ In the early 2000s, ethnic and caste organizations became increasingly powerful on the Darjeeling political stage. These ethnic organizations (*samaj*) began organizing to gain "Scheduled Tribe" status. Under the 6th schedule, tribes and castes can be approved for government-sponsored advancement; they are literally "scheduled" for advancement. The 6th schedule movement replaced a pan-Gorkha nationalism with ethnic identity politics with tribal identity. "Tribalness" (e.g. "Gurung-ness," "Sherpa-ness," or "Tharu-ness") temporarily superseded "Gorkha-ness." Ethnic identification was still important and Darjeeling

In February 2008, less than a month after I arrived in the field, Gurung had managed to oust Ghising from the Hill Council. Without Ghising, the DGHC lost any authority it ever had. Gurung and his party, the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM), began calling regular strikes in Chowrasta, the plaza at the center of Darjeeling town, site of the Victorian-era Bandstand, the British-built pedestrian “mall,” and within a stone’s throw of nearly all the major tourist hotels. At the rallies, Gurung and his deputies encouraged activists to shift priorities from Sixth Schedule status to separate statehood, Gorkhaland. One thing that Gurung did not change was the unitary authority of Gorkha leadership. Like Ghising, Gurung and his party enforced their authority with threats and acts of violence, attacking or vandalizing the property of those who did not acknowledge the supremacy of the GJMM in Darjeeling politics.

residents (though not many plantation workers) were active in their local *samaj*, Gorkhaness was a political concept. Tribal identity was less charged. By highlighting their “tribalness” instead of striving for equality with the Brahman elite, Nepalis in Darjeeling were following a national trend (see Middleton 2010, 2011; Shneiderman 2009).

¹⁴⁴ A clarifying note about recognition and the Sixth Schedule seems necessary. I began my dissertation research in Darjeeling in a fascinating but heart-wrenching period. When I was in the field, the quest for Gorkhaland and the plight of Indian Nepalis was what people wanted to talk about. If I had conducted this work before 2007, it would most likely have been framed much differently. Campaigns for tribal recognition through Sixth Schedule would have provided the political context, as they did when I first came to Darjeeling in 2006. In fact, there are several dissertations (Middleton 2010, Sen 2009, Shneiderman 2009, Booth 2011) that account for the years leading up to October 2007 and Bimal Gurung’s campaign to crown Darjeeling’s own Prashant Tamang as Indian Idol. These anthropologists all concluded their fieldwork by the end of 2007. I was one of the only scholars to witness the resurgence of the movement and explore how tea laborers and townspeople (as well as men and women) had different understandings of the kind of transcendence or development Gorkhaland represented. I can only hypothesize that on tea plantations, Sixth Schedule concessions were not as evocative as Gorkhaland. Workers with whom I spoke did not understand the concessions of the Sixth Schedule and what it would do for them. The work of Sixth Schedule recognition was done largely in town *samaj* offices. The legally and bureaucratically fraught process seemed less comprehensible to tea workers. More affluent Gorkha men, I maintain, dominated *samaj* participation. I hope that in coming years, I can talk with tea workers about how they compare Gorkhaland and the Sixth Schedule as two forms of (heretofore unattained) national recognition. It was quite taboo to talk (let alone favorably) of the Sixth Schedule from 2008 to 2010.

Amid this turmoil, Madan Tamang and the ABGL remained a small but vocal internal opposition, first to the Hill Council and later to the GJMM. Madan saw himself working to bring plurality back to local politics. “India has a multi-party system,” he explained to me, “It is our [the ABGL’s] job to be the voice of the ‘multi’.” He critiqued the GJMM’s tactics and pleaded with the public to question what the achievement of a separate state of Gorkhaland would bring. As Madan told me, he saw his political function at the local level as creating accountability. The Hill Council failed, he explained, because it never delivered on its lofty promises of development.¹⁴⁵

Labor and Ethnicity; Place and Justice

In the rest of this chapter, I want to explore the relationship between gendered labor history (or, rather, nostalgic visions thereof) and Gorkha ethnic identity. As I was told time and again, Madan did not carry himself in a way becoming of a typical Gorkha male. These statements took awhile for me to comprehend, but after going to dozens of GJMM rallies over the course of my fieldwork, it started to make sense. During my fieldwork, Gorkha maleness was tied to not only military service, but also stereotypes of heroism and aggression. With greater frequency, men carried *khukuris* (or at least said

¹⁴⁵ The ABGL has long supported Darjeeling joining the former Kingdom of Sikkim, a Nepali-speaking Indian state, of which Darjeeling used to be part (see Chapter 2). The ABGL had been active in town and on gardens since before Independence. The ABGL was loosely backed by the Congress Party, India’s ruling party that supports national unification.

In mid-1980s, during the first Gorkhaland agitation, Subhas Ghising’s GNLF displaced the powerful Communist backed unions and politicians. The GNLF (which dominated from 1986-2007) is not affiliated with any national party. The Gorkha Janmukti Morcha GJMM is not backed by any national party, but GJMM leaders did run Jaswant Singh, a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader for Darjeeling’s Member of Parliament (MP).

that they would). Male politicians banged on the podium; they screamed. In fact, they screamed and banged a lot. The more politicians screamed and fist-pounded, the more the crowds cheered. Madan, by contrast talked calmly in a refined oratory cadence. He told stories and talked about contingencies. He did not bang podiums; he did not scream; and he never threatened to hold a *khukuri* to the throats of those opposing him (though this was a threat commonly voiced toward him by GJMM politicians). Being a Gorkha was about being brave, loyal, and industrious. “Don’t listen to *Madan daju*.” Bimal Gurung would often scream at rallies. “...He is only going to confuse you.”

That Madan had never toiled in tea and that as the owner of borderland, he could always go “back to Nepal” meant that many workers never really identified with him. In this chapter, I use Madan’s murder as a starting point for what I call a “labor theory of ethnicity,” a Darjeeling discourse about belonging that highlighted work-related qualities. Being at once a brave and loyal soldier and an industrious laborer were part of Gorkha ideas of ethnicity.

Labor identity, I argue, is key to Gorkha notions of “justice.” Gorkhas come from several *jatis*, but in Darjeeling, these tribal identities (as I discuss below and described in Chapter 3) melded into an identity that corresponded to British cultural taxonomies. In early colonial Darjeeling, various Nepali *jatis* became homogenized into “Nepali coolies.” Scholars in other South Asian colonial contexts (e.g. Breman 1989; Daniel 2008; Daniel, et al. 1992), notably Jayeeta Sharma (2011) and Piya Chatterjee (2001) in their studies of Indian tea in Assam and the Dooars, have documented this condensation of labor-

based and ethnic identities. The condensation of labor and identity has even made into popular historical fiction. Amitav Ghosh's ethnographically and historically-inspired fictional depiction of colonial consolidation and the plantation economies of opium and sugar in *Sea of Poppies* (2008) and *River of Smoke* (2011), describe a similar homogenization of class, caste, and regional identity in Mauritius and West Bengal.

Outside of South Asia, scholars have also described the ways in which ethnic and class identities merge in industrial labor contexts (e.g. June Nash [1979] and Michael Taussig's [1983] studies of South American mining and geographer Don Mitchell's [1996] history of migrant labor in the making of the California agricultural landscape; see also Ortiz 1999, 2002; Mintz 1960; Moberg 1997; Roseberry, et al. 1995). In his study of fruit plantations on the Costa Rica-Panama border, Phillippe Bourgois documents the interplay of material "occupational" and ideological "ethnic" hierarchies, whereby Kuna and Guyami peoples were, respectively, successful and unsuccessful at exploiting "Indianness" for upward mobility in the plantation economy (Bourgois 1988: 330). Conceptions of class and ethnic identity merged to create a form of "conjugated oppression." In Darjeeling, too, as I showed in Chapter 3, mobilizations on ethnic and class lines have been fluid and interchangeable – a kind of conjugated belonging. Material and ideological conditions of tea work influenced how Gorkhas positioned themselves in relation to the state and to capital. My examination of the latest version of the Gorkhaland agitation builds on this literature, showing how the moral policing of

men's bodies and the micropolitics of marriage as experienced by women further blurs the distinction between class and identity politics.

A certain vision of the Darjeeling landscape was also central to a pro-Gorkhaland politics. In the years since Independence, Gorkhas have worked to make a colonial landscape a national landscape; they have worked to make Darjeeling's "imperial ruins" (Stoler 2008) and colonially-rooted industries (tea, timber, rubber, and cinchona) part of the material basis of Gorkhaland. These ruins and resources were part of what Gorkhas referred to as Darjeeling's "heritage," much as the plantation owners I described in Chapter 5 sold the "garden" as a site of "heritage." Ironically, for Gorkha activists, a *separatist* movement that took land rights at its core offered a more just means of *connection* to India, as well as a more equitable form of political and economic citizenship.

The float in Figure 6.1 appeared at a rally held on Phulpati in October 2009, the seventh day of the Dashain, or "Pujas," the yearly month-long celebration of the Hindu pantheon, marked by feasts, family visitation, and parades.¹⁴⁶ Pujas were a time of year when people trekked to the homes of their maternal kin. To mark the occasion, Gurung and the GJMM mandated that all Darjeeling residents dress in "traditional clothing." During my fieldwork, there were several days or stretches of time in which people had to wear "traditional clothing."

¹⁴⁶ In Darjeeling and Nepal, Dashain is a Buddhist-Hindu holiday.



Figure 6.1: "Let Us Protect Our Heritage:" a float at a 2009 GJMM rally. It depicts the "toy train," a whitewater raft, mountaineering, a tea leaf, the Clock Tower (hidden), and a red panda.

For Gorkhas, this meant *chaubundi choli* for women and *daura sural* for men. A *chaubundi choli* is a wrapped and tied top with a *saree*-like wrapped skirt bottom, usually made out of cotton in a red and white geometric print. A *daura sural* is a solid colored long shirt and fitted pants combination, resembling a *kurta*. These garments were symbolic of the united Hindu Nepal, and when they were first mandated during the 2008 pujas, few in Darjeeling knew how to make them or where to obtain them. All Darjeeling residents were eventually subsumed under the GJMM diktat. Cultural heterogeneity was not something that GJMM politicians wanted to engage with directly, so if you did not self-identify as a Gorkhas (or were not from a commonly accepted

Gorkha group), such as Lepcha, Tibetan, or Marwari, during the first few traditional dress diktats, you may have not participated. This became unacceptable to the GJMM, and during the 2009 Pujas, *every* Darjeeling resident was forced to dress in the “traditional clothing” of his or her ethnic group. To enforce this, the GJMM dispatched its own police force to throw black paint on those who did not participate. Marwaris wore full *kurtas*; Tibetans wore *chubas*; and Gorkhas wore their “traditional dress” for the entire month (and for other briefer periods after October 2009).

For many Darjeeling residents, *chaubundis* and *daura surals* were local symbols for Nepali “newcomers” and temporary migrants, not symbols with which they readily identified. Longtime residents, forced to don these garments, would joke to one another, “Go get me a gas cylinder!” Before 2008, *daura surals* were associated with male porters and transmigrant laborers while *chaubundis* were the quintessential dress of elderly women back in Nepal (and more recently that of the models in GI marketing materials; see Chapter 5). The GJMM ended up bringing seamstresses and tailors from Nepal to supply the demand for the mandated clothing. During Puja, a new joke arose. It was said that the owners of pay toilets were making extra money, because the garments took so long to take on and off. One-rupee “short” visits to the toilet were fast becoming two-rupee “long” visits. Arguments between needy toilet visitors and toilet attendants became commonplace in town.

Party politicians consistently cited two reasons for the wardrobe: first, to show to the rest of India that Gorkhas were a united people, distinct from others in West Bengal,

and, second, to regulate the behavior of wayward Gorkhas. The Pujas were a high tourist season in Darjeeling, when an influx of Bengalis from the plains and international tourists would visit the hotels, parks, and tea plantations. The GJMM used the occasion to display Gorkha unity and discipline. “If you wear a *daura sural*,” Bimal Gurung said in a rally, “You will not drink and smoke...You will read and study...and be reminded that there is work to be done for your land.”

Tea workers knew that such dress was part of a larger language of Indian subnationalism: a set of cultural performances needed to “gain legitimacy,” in female tea workers words, in Indian politics. Clothing was part of that work of national legitimation, but workers maintained that a history of labor and service was also important. While traditional dress emphasized imagined unity and moral discipline (Anderson 1983; Foucault 1995), the float in Figure 6.1 highlighted key symbolic aspects of the Darjeeling *built* environment and signified the material bases of a labor-theory of belonging. The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, or “Toy Train,” built by migrant Nepalis, carried tea down to the plains for transport on to England. River rafting and mountain climbing, at the center of the float, were popular tourist activities that capitalized on the rugged mountain landscape. The image of the raft complements that of the Red Panda, the iconic endangered species of the Eastern Himalayas. Nepali men, whose ancestors worked with the British as hunting and expedition guides, now served as trekking guides, hiking up the mountains of the Himalayan interior with international outdoor adventure tourists (see also Ortner 1999). Darjeeling native Tenzin Norgay, along with

Edmund Hillary, was the first to summit Mount Everest. Locals celebrated Norgay's birthday and marked the rock where he trained. Norgay grew up in a Sherpa *busti* adjacent to Aloobari, the oldest tea plantation in Darjeeling. Finally, the tea leaf – the iconic two leaves and a bud – sat as a reminder of the area's real economic engine. Behind the *chaubundi*-clad woman is the "Clock Tower," the home of the Darjeeling Municipal offices and icon of British architecture.

In the rest of this chapter, I discuss how Gorkha ideas about labor and identity, wrapped in a discourse of "justice," informed visions of regional revitalization and reform. Understandings of revitalization were gendered; male and female Darjeeling residents differently recalled and deployed nostalgia for the tripartite plantation moral economy, between labor, management, and the agro-environment (see Chapter 1).

"Sons of the Soil": Gorkhas, Primordial Ethnicity, and Labor-Based Identity

While the organic and fair trade movements and Geographical Indication, which I described in previous chapters, drew heavily on nostalgia for the gentleman planter and the tea "garden" to naturalize the relationships between tea and labor, the Gorkhaland agitation I witnessed used a parallel discourse of agrarian belonging to "naturalize" the connections between Indian Nepalis and the *kamaans* on which they worked. In particular, they used a mimetic strategy that drew on nostalgic discourses about British-Gorkha relations to comment on contemporary Gorkha relations to the Indian state (Taussig 1993). Men and women in the movement performed gendered Gorkha

identities based in colonial imaginings of Nepali-ness. They consciously used the past to articulate and justify calls for “justice.” Nepali plantation laborers had no legal claim to the land on which they lived and worked. Although nearly half of Darjeeling’s plantations were fair trade and/or organic certified, and Geographical Indication was shoring up a market for “authentic” Darjeeling tea, during my fieldwork, tea workers drew not on the rhetoric of these production practices when conceiving of ethics and value, but on a more holistic vision of empowerment they called, using the English word, “justice.”

Like the rest of this dissertation, the events I recall in this chapter occurred in an era in which environmental commodities have become globally powerful material vehicles for social and economic change. Whereas the last two chapters have examined the articulation of global economic and environmental discourses with local history, this chapter examines the articulation of local experience with national and regional ones. I use gendered experiences of life during the second Gorkhaland agitation to show how a seemingly universal concept, “justice,” is made “practically effective” when people engage it in particular, place-based histories of cultural and economic encounter (Tsing 2005: 8). But, as Tsing highlights, the movement of things and ideas on the global scale shapes specific engagements with universals. Justice was a vehicle of connection. Tea workers in Darjeeling used “justice” as a way to position themselves in postcolonial national and regional politics. Fair trade and organic, as I show in Chapters 4 and 5, take agricultural environmental commodities (coffee, tea, sugar, and bananas), the

production of which are inextricably linked to colonialism, and revalue and circulate these commodities as “fair,” “natural,” or “sustainable.”

I argue that women and men in the Gorkhaland agitation performed belonging in different ways, reflective of a gendered division of labor in tea production and in the historical construction of the Darjeeling landscape, but for both women and men, justice signified the revitalization of moral economic relationships between labor, capital, land, and, in the post-independence era, the nation-state.

On a rainy monsoon afternoon in the center of Darjeeling town, a GJMM politician screamed through a crackly PA system to a sea of men and women huddled under bright umbrellas:

Daju, Bhai, Didi, Bahiniharulai (Older and younger brothers and sisters)! We were the servants of the British, their gardeners and maids. And we made their famous tea – Darjeeling tea – the most expensive tea in the world. Even today, despite corruption by Indian businessmen who took over the tea industry and the whole town of Darjeeling...Darjeeling does not belong to Bengal. It belongs to us! We built it! Our grandfathers built the railroads and planted the tea; we are *sons of the soil* [in English]...

Banging on the podium with his closed fist for emphasis, the next speaker echoed his fellow politician: “We should not remain in Bengal. Kolkata [the capital of West Bengal and center of Indian tea trade] takes, takes, takes. They take our tea and they auction it in Kolkata, but that money never comes up here...The British replanted bushes and invested in medical facilities, but these Indian owners do not reinvest...” This speaker, voicing the concerns of many other politicians and residents, went on to talk about the important role Gurkha regiments played in the making of both the British Empire and of

Darjeeling: “We served in the British army – we are the famous and brave Gurkhas – Bengal cannot take that from us, but they did take our land. We were the servants of the British; we built this land and this tea industry. Darjeeling tea is our tea; Gorkhaland is our dream, our destiny.”

These nostalgic narratives resonate with those described by other anthropologists, including Bissell (2005); Stewart (1988); and Piot (2010). Ira Bashkow notes a similar nostalgia in his (2006) study of the surprisingly positive construction of the category of the “whiteman” among Orokaiva people in Papua New Guinea. Orokaiva were “not inclined to think of their ancestors as having been compromised by the power of others...To the contrary, consistent with colonialism’s nostalgic revaluation, many indigenous stories appropriate it, representing it in terms of relationships that the ancestors *elicited* from whitemen by virtue of their worthiness” (Bashkow 2006: 60). The Orokaiva, like the Gorkha leaders I describe below, saw the end of the colonial period not as the close of an era of exploitation, but as a starting point for “moral” decline. In addition, nostalgia provided a framework for the Orokaiva to understand their place in the new, multiethnic, post-colonial Papua New Guinea. Orokaiva were “far less concerned with being discriminated against by whites on racial grounds than with being discriminated against by other Papua New Guineans on ethnic or regional grounds” (Bashkow 2006: 61). Nostalgia for the colonial past, then, was a commentary on the inequities of the postcolonial present.



Figure 6.2: The Nari Morcha

The *Nari Morcha* (the GJMM's women's wing, see Figure 6.2) marched out of the same rally, chanting in call and response:

*Hamro bas bhuumi*¹⁴⁷ *pharkai diye...pharkai diye...pharkai diye*
Hamro bas bhuumi pharkai diye...pharkai diye...pharkai diye
 (Our subjugated land, give it back...give it back...give it back)

Hamro maato pharkai diye...pharkai diye...pharkai diye
Hamro maato pharkai diye...pharkai diye...pharkai diye
 (Our soil, give it back...give it back...give it back)

¹⁴⁷ *Bhuumi* is a politically charged word, borrowed from Hindi (*bas bhuumi*, literally translated as “sat upon land”). I translate it here as “land,” or “place” (in congruence with Basso’s [1996] descriptions of places as made through stories and human interactions). “*Bhuumi*” is evoked in subnationalists and other political movements across India. That *bhuumi* (a key concept in movements for autonomy in India) accompanies *maato* (a Nepali word associated with farming) in this chant is significant. *Maato* connotes actual, physical dirt and soil. That Gorkhas are calling for the return of both conceptualizations of land – in its *bhuumi* (political) aspects and its *maato* (material) aspects, speaks to the significance of agricultural life and labor in the movement for Gorkhaland.

We want justice... justice...justice
We want justice... justice...justice [in English]

Nostalgia was central to the political rhetoric of the Gorkhaland movement. In my field recordings, the Gorkhaland agitation and activists' claims to being "sons of the soil" referenced relationships between Nepali workers, British planters and the Darjeeling landscape. Such primordialist language has been documented in other Indian subnational movements,¹⁴⁸ but during my fieldwork, such cries oscillated between referencing the ancestral belonging of Nepalis in Darjeeling and the historical construction of the Darjeeling landscape by Gorkhas. "Sons of the soil," an evocative English phrase, positioned Gorkhas as both the indigenous inhabitants *and* the rightful inheritors of Darjeeling. This marks a definite shift from the tactics of Gorkha activists in the 1960s and 1980s, who routinely burned tea factories and other imperial facilities as a form of protest. For tea workers and their families, separating the history of Gorkha labor from belonging made little sense. In fact, when I told tea workers about my interview with a GJMM organizer who denied that Nepalis *ever* migrated to work on Darjeeling plantations ("Gorkhas are *true* sons of the soil," he kept repeating), they chuckled and explained that he had to say this "to be legitimate." Appeals to primordialism, they insisted, were useful in the larger field of Indian subnational politics.

Despite claims to primordial identity and belonging, visions of Darjeeling reform were historically grounded. The future of Darjeeling plantations was continually

¹⁴⁸ For an example of primordialist claims in subnationalism in Assam, another tea growing district of India, through "the soil," see Nag 2002.

understood in terms of an idealized past in which relationships between workers, management, and the land were imagined as in harmony. In addition to stories about the building of “facilities” (see Chapters 1, 2, and 3), tea laborers, planters, and Darjeeling town residents all told stories about 19th century land acquisitions, colonial officials, infrastructure construction, and other key moments in administrative history. These stories answered important questions: How did we get here? Why is Darjeeling tea special? Who has rights to Darjeeling’s land and resources? Important to these narratives was that, together, Nepali laborers and British officials made the forested “wasteland” of Darjeeling productive (discussed in Chapter 2).

Tea workers and plantation residents I interviewed interwove the concepts of “Gorkhaland” and “justice.” Gorkha men traced their belonging in India to military labor. For them, justice, through Gorkhaland, could right the moral economic relationships between tea plantation land, labor, and management. In Chapter 1, I introduced Kamala, a tea worker, and her son, Vikash. While we were drinking tea that afternoon in the shade, they continued their explanation of the links between service and statehood:

Kamala: When we get our land, we can say that we are Indians. Land is important for us...Without it, we are not regarded as Indians. We say that we are Gorkhas - Gorkha Nepali from the British time - who came a long time ago, but stayed here. Everyone got their separate state. Why don't we have our state?

...When the Britishers left they had given the state only to us Nepali. At that time, our leader could not rule by himself, he had taken the help from Bengal and suddenly the leader died and then Bengal said: “Darjeeling is ours.”

Vikash: We died for India. We died on every border of this country. That is why we want our own land – this land – the land we built.

Kamala: That is why we want justice! ...Those who protected the country should have rights.

Tea laborers drew on contending (nostalgic) visions of the past when they called themselves “sons of the soil:” both to separate identity, one rooted in a history of colonial labor and to primordialist claims of indigeniety, the latter of which had been engrained in over 20 years of political rallies. But in conversations with me about justice and plantation reform, workers drew not just on ideas of ethnicity or indigeniety but also on labor and environmental history.

Darjeeling tea workers neither lamented nor embraced tea’s colonial past; instead, they used nostalgia as a commentary on present-day conditions. In particular, nostalgic descriptions of men’s labor in the colonial period recognized tea’s relationship to the rest of the agro-environment. In the imperial ruins of Darjeeling, Nepali workers saw the remnants of a stable moral economy and productive tea industry. Workers believed that they could revitalize these ruins, but not with international certification schemes or fair trade premiums. Justice in Darjeeling depended upon an awkward but unavoidable engagement with the colonial past. Gorkhaland activists continually highlighted that Gorkhas’ connection to Darjeeling was forged not only through a history of labor, but also through relationships of care – of service and loyalty to the British, to the land, and in the case of women in particular, to family. Nostalgia for the past is key to understanding tea workers’ political actions.

In different ways, British (as I described in Chapter 2) and Nepali moral economic narratives constructed people and land as belonging together. Gorkhas assented to

British colonial taxonomies of labor that painted them as loyal servants and dedicated workers – people perfectly suited for the building of a British refuge (people who were also losing control over their homes in Nepal). For Gorkha tea workers, narratives about the ascension and development of Darjeeling explained not only why they belonged on this land, but also why Gorkhas deserved rights to govern it. Nepalis and the British built Darjeeling together, and after the exit of the British, they believe that they deserved autonomy. Nepalis knew that the story of Darjeeling could not be told without Gorkhas *or* the British. Educated Darjeeling elites frequently recounted these stories in locally published books (e.g. Yogi 2009; Biswas 2009, Biswas and Roy 2003; Biswas and Roka 2007; Lama 2009; Wangyal 2002, 2009).¹⁴⁹ Full texts of various treaties were republished (in English) and made available for reasonable prices. These paperbacks and the stories they contained narrated the history of Darjeeling to prove that Darjeeling should be independent.

Gendering Gorkhaness: Disciplining Men

“Be Conscious, Save Darjeeling Tea!”—motto, Darjeeling Tea Management Training Centre

“The tea gardens in Darjeeling are in a deplorable condition. They need love. To get back our lost glory is also one of our objectives.”—President, Darjeeling Tea Management Training Centre (July 4, 2008)

¹⁴⁹ I am not arguing, following Benedict Anderson (1983) a kind of “print culture”-based identity in Darjeeling, though it would be an interesting thread to follow. Jayeeta Sharma (2012) does explore the role of print culture in the making of tea elites in Assam.

In Chapter 3, I recounted a discussion between two senior planters who, when thinking about contemporary instability on the plantation, blamed the Gorkha men: men who, “at the drop of a hat, would hold a *khukuri* up to your throat.” These planters remembered their planter colleagues being thrown into tea drying ovens by striking Gorkha laborers during the days of labor unrest in the 1960s and 1970s, and they recalled attacks on non-Nepali managers in the first Gorkhaland agitation in the late 1980s.¹⁵⁰ One of my closest planter friends had a noticeably mangled right hand. You couldn’t miss the sight of scar tissue and blunt missing fingers as he packed his pipe at the Planters’ Club, but when impolitic visitors asked him about how he got his injury, he replied, diplomatically, “I put my hand where it didn’t belong.” Years after those days of unrest, he was hesitant to discuss the details.

In conversation and even in public political rallies, Gorkha men assented to the characterization of them as industrious, but sometimes violent and dangerous. Gorkhaland leaders, like the planters I interviewed, were well aware that there were few jobs for Nepali men in Darjeeling, and that male unemployment was a key motivation for their rank and file supporters. The (sometimes educated) unemployed male was a central figure of both Gorkhaland agitations. To support male Gorkhas, the GJMM during my fieldwork launched several campaigns aimed at what the party called “development.” For the party, development meant, in large part, finding work and controlling wayward Gorkha boys through job training, particularly in the tea industry

¹⁵⁰ As I noted in Chapter 3, management ended up supporting the first Gorkhaland agitation, as a way of breaking Communist Party-backed unions.

and in a quasi-official Gorkhaland police force. These strategies hinged upon a desire to harness the sometimes “unruly,” but nonetheless “powerful,” fierce, and loyal Gorkha male subject that British colonial racial taxonomy constructed, and that Indian-born Darjeeling residents both feared and respected (see Chapter 3). Job training strategies underwritten by the GJMM became the party’s way of integrating colonially-derived male labor roles, particularly tea plantation work and military service, into its subnationalist vision. The party’s vision of the new Gorkha man, then, relied on colonial ideals. In the discourse of “inheritance” outlined in public political rhetoric, Gorkhas saw themselves – men in particular – taking on *new* roles, as managers and leaders. Rather than questioning the tea plantation structure or the racial association of Gorkha men with a penchant for violence, Gorkha activists tried to insert themselves in new ways within the structure and those racial associations.

From the colonial period to the present, the ability of Gorkha men to advance in the tea plantation economy has been severely limited. As I explained in Chapters 1 and 3, the British believed that Nepali men were suited to both manual labor (clearcutting, road building, and factory work) and army service, but they almost never allowed them to work in management positions on plantations. If there were non-British managers on plantations in colonial days, these were usually Bengali, Punjabi, or of other non-Nepali ethnic extraction. This exclusion continued after the takeover of plantations by Indian companies in the post-colonial period. Gorkha activists, like the planters I quote in Chapter 3, saw the forced out-migration of Gorkha males as one of the principal crimes

of post-colonial plantation management. In the absence of any investment in infrastructure (no new roads had been built for decades, and much new construction was done by low-paid Biharis), males had little choice but to leave the district in search of work.

In the summer of 2008, former Nepali assistant plantation managers, with support from the GJMM, founded the Darjeeling Tea Management Training Centre. The Centre's Advisory Board was loaded with GJMM supporters. Bimal Gurung was given the title of "School Patron," while Gurung's chief deputy, Amar Lama, was named "Legal Advisor." The Training Centre's goal was to prepare Gorkha boys to work as managers on tea plantations. Gurung, in a classic display of unilateral political power, permitted the Centre to be housed in a stately old Holiday Home on the main road to Lebong, where many British colonial officials and tea barons had once lived. The home was the property of the State of West Bengal, and though Gurung had no official power to seize it, no one contested the move.

At the inauguration of the Management Training Centre in July 2008, the Centre's President drew on plantation history as he outlined its purposes:

...[T]he reason why we are starting such a tea management institute in Darjeeling is out of necessity, because since 1820...planting and cultivating was done by our ancestors only. But our people are still laborers, and they [non-Nepalis] are still occupying the executive posts. But today most of our [Nepali] young brothers and sisters are educated. They are all competent. Our brothers and sisters can outshine the outsiders. We need such people. So if we open such an institute here, then such youths will get an opportunity. The [non-Nepali] outsiders just come and make money. They do their jobs and quit. Then they go to another garden. But if we have someone from here, he will love his place. And if he loves this place, the tea garden will be well.

The President invoked not only Darjeeling's colonial history but also what I have called a plantation "moral economy," whereby Nepalis "cared" and "loved" the land on which they worked, in exchange for facilities and – in the Gorkha rendering – an inherited right to increased responsibility and control over that land. "And all of us here believe that one day we will have our Gorkhaland," the Centre's President added, "Then we will be the caretakers."

The President was the one of the few Gorkhas who had succeeded in becoming a tea manager, working on Namring Tea Estate, a small, remote garden on the Nepal border. In his classes, he told his 45 students to be more than economic stewards, "You should not only think about the people in the tea garden but...the future of the tea garden." The tea school mimicked the University courses I also attended at North Bengal University and the Birla Institute in Kolkata (see Chapter 1). Courses of study included "Field Management;" "Nursery" (the propagation of new tea bushes); "Maintaining the Old Tea Bushes;" "Cultivation" (including weeding, hoeing, forking, and irrigation); "Manufacturing and Tasting"; "Office" (budgeting and record-keeping); and "Driving." Labor relations comprised another key course category. The President explained,

[L]abor always sees the management as its enemy. That ruins the relationship for everyone. So we have to work towards repairing their relationship and to bring them together. Their relationship affects the working of the garden. So, I think only our local boys can mend this relationship, in my opinion. They can manage their own household matters better...We are looking for someone who understands our pain.

Gorkha managers-in-training thus had a practical goal, to get work that kept them in Darjeeling, and also a moral goal, to right what they and their teachers saw as a deteriorated relationship between labor and management. Neither the party nor the Centre desired to overturn the plantation system. In fact, they envisioned improvement via a return to the “glory days” of mutual care between labor, management, and the agro-environment.

Tea Management Centre students came largely from tea garden villages. Their mothers, aunts, and sisters worked as tea pluckers – the *ama* (mother) to Darjeeling’s tea bush *nani* (children). Thus these boys understood first-hand that the mutual relations of care between labor, management, and the land had broken down. Even Darjeeling Gorkha men who were able to get work with tea companies found it impossible to stay close to home. For example, my friend Sanjay, who grew up on a tea plantation in Kurseong and managed to finish University, was one of the only Nepalis in his class to find employment with a tea company. When he requested a posting in Darjeeling, he was denied and dispatched to Assam. His superiors explained that “Nepali women would never take orders from one of their own.” After a few years in Assam, Sanjay took his saved earnings and returned to Darjeeling, where he opened up a cyber café. The ranks of Centre students were filled with such stories: young Nepali men who managed to find educational and work opportunities, but whose skills actually pushed them away from their homes. The nostalgic discourse of the Gorkhaland movement,

which emphasized the connection between Nepalis and the “soil” of Darjeeling, was especially resonant with these aspiring tea managers.

Managers wanted not only to improve labor-management relations but also relations between people and plants. The President liked to tell stories about these relationships:

...I sometimes feel that even the bushes here recognize [their] own people. They may say – “Ah! Look. My own relative is here. He knows me and will look after me.” When outsiders come, they may say – “Look! Here he comes to suck the life out of me,” and they may get startled. If they had life they would have said something like this.

Let’s take an example. One man had some problem in his eyes. So he was very worried. He did many things to treat the eye. He went to South India and to Delhi. He spent thousands of rupees, yet he did not get well...And at last a doctor from a tea garden cured him. He found a small splinter in his eye. So he took it out. The big doctors had thought that he has some big problem. We too do not have a big problem. They think of all these big schemes to take care of the garden, when all they need is something simple and basic. Our local people have been taking care of the garden for ages. They can do it, but they have not been given any opportunity so far. There was a boy who worked in a sweatshop – he got an appointment as the assistant manager. Then there were few boys who were working at the hardware store – they too have become assistant managers. These people have never seen tea bushes. But our people who have been raised in the plantation since birth, but still have no chance. But we believe that if we have local people, the lost glory will come back. This is our prime motive.

Since the decline of the tea industry began in the 1970s, waves of improvement projects had come and gone from Darjeeling, from biodynamic certification, to International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movement (IFOAM) “model farms,” to fair trade, to Geographical Indication. As I explained in previous chapters, none had solved the problems of land degradation and continued unemployment. Gorkha managers asserted the connections to the land they had forged over generations of tea labor as potential

sources of plantation revitalization. The goal, as the President said, was a “return to lost glory.” This nostalgic objective, mirrored in the Gorkha discourse of “heritage” and “sons of the soil,” gave a political slant to the Centre’s curriculum.

Beneath it all, however, was a sense that Gorkha men thrived when they cared as much for themselves and their neighbors as for the bushes. The Centre had a moral and disciplinary code. Smoking, drinking, and gambling among students were prohibited, and though most students were adult men, their parents were invited to discuss their courses with Centre staff. A nostalgic idea of the Gorkha man’s moral discipline was woven into the GJMM’s rhetoric, and enforced among men at the Tea Management Centre as well as the Gorkhaland Police, a quasi-governmental force founded in 2009. Crucially, both institutions combined self-consciously “traditional” ideas about Gorkha masculinity with a developmentalist rhetoric of community improvement. Ideas about Gorkha manhood rooted in colonial taxonomies combined with newer ideas about national autonomy and cosmopolitanism (see, for comparison, Ewing 2008).¹⁵¹

In Chapter 5, I introduced Manesh, the descendant of Nepali labor recruiters, or *sardars*, who was something of a self-appointed wise-man on his plantation. He was also an elder statesman in his neighborhood’s GJMM organization. When the new party formed, he eagerly took this position, he explained to me, because he had a penchant for telling moral stories. He considered himself fairly un-influential before the formation of

¹⁵¹ Ewing (2008) provides a thorough case-study of the fluid relationship between “traditional” honor and modern manhood among Turkish migrants in Germany. This work contributes to a longstanding anthropological literature on manhood and masculinity in a variety of geographical contexts (see, for example, Gutmann 1996; Bourgois 2002; Gill 1997; Hansen 1996; Boellstorff 2004).

the new party, but he felt now that his voice (which was usually quite judgmental) could be heard. His cause in 2008 was youth alcohol consumption. Party leadership dispatched him to spread messages of social control: that the only way Gorkhaland was to be achieved was through the disciplining of young men. Manesh proudly sent his nephew (who grew up on the same plantation that Manesh did) to the Tea Management Centre, but after the first year of courses, the Centre's momentum began to slow. It became clear to students that despite the zeal of their teachers (and the party that backed them), most plantations would still not hire them.

In the winter of 2008-2009, the GJMM began looking to a new outlet for youth. Newspaper advertisements invited young boys and girls to try out for the Gorkhaland Police (GLP). The GLP began as a group of "social workers," who were supposed to roam the town helping the elderly, cleaning parks, and watching out for inappropriate behavior, particularly public drunkenness. Response to the early recruitment advertisements was overwhelming. By mid-2009, the GLP had begun training young men and women not only to how to help their neighbors but also how to fight in hand-to-hand combat, to perform military-style calisthenics, and to march in formation. The musically inclined were encouraged to play in a GLP brass band. GLP members were given shiny new uniforms (one that mimicked an army uniform for dress occasions and green and yellow tracksuit for everyday wear [see below]), and their marches at Gorkhaland rallies often followed (and mimicked) those of the elderly veterans of the Gurkha rifles, the all-Nepali Army regiment of the British army (see Figures 6.3 and 6.4).



Figure 6.3: Veterans of the Gurkha Rifles, in formation at a September 2008 GJMM Rally in Chowrasta. They are wearing suit jackets over their *daura surals*.

By late 2009, male GLP regiments were regularly seen marching around downtown Darjeeling, wielding large wooden batons (*lathis*). Militant Hindu groups across India, such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), also favor large bands of *lathi*-wielding youth.¹⁵² The women GLP members were rarely seen outside rallies such as the one pictured in Figure 6.4. The men, however, gained a reputation for severity. They began intimidating those they saw

¹⁵² The Gorkha Janmukti Morcha GJMM is not backed by any national party, but GJMM leaders did run Jaswant Singh, a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader for Darjeeling's Member of Parliament (MP). Singh won by a landslide as the only GJMM-backed candidate. Singh was recently who was temporarily expelled from the party in 2009 after writing an arguably sympathetic biography of Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan. Singh served in the Indian army. His party, the BJP, is known not only for general Hindu fundamentalism, but also as supporters of small state governments (as opposed to the Congress Party who supports national central governance). The GJMM selectively associates with the BJP and its political philosophies.

smoking, drinking, or even publicly displaying romantic affection. Nepalis in Darjeeling, accustomed to holding hands with friends, lovers, and spouses, found themselves afraid of showing even that small amount of physical closeness.



Figure 6.4: The GLP in tracksuit uniforms in Chowrasta, September 2009.

By the end of that year, even Bengali tourists, who came to Darjeeling largely to relive the romantic imaginary of films like *Kanchenjunga*, walking through the streets with wives and girlfriends in a courting embrace, began experiencing intimidation at the hands of GLP members. The GLP, drawing on the Gurkha regiments' reputation for discipline and loyalty, sought to enforce bodily and moral codes of conduct on the

district's inhabitants and visitors. Importantly, while the Gurkha regiments were nearly always led by non-Nepali officers, the GLP was an all-Nepali force, led by former Gurkhas. During the height of the second Gorkhaland agitation, the GLP acted as a moral and physical vanguard, publicly manifesting the bravery and loyalty that politicians recalled in their ancestors.

The Tea Management Centre graduated its first class (about half of the original 45 students) of tea managers in May 2009. I did not hear much from them over the monsoon season. In September of that year, I made my way out to Lebung to check in on the progress of the second class. To my surprise, the gate was locked. I climbed over it and was greeted by a shirtless GLP cadet brushing his teeth. He was clearly as surprised to see me as I was to see him. Knowing that some Institute students lived in the house during the school year, I asked him, "Are you in tea management school?" (Perhaps their discipline had slipped a bit.) He responded with incredulity: "This is a barracks," he explained. He had never heard of the Tea Management Centre. The GLP, sometime during the monsoon, had taken over the mansion and remained there until I left Darjeeling in May 2010.

Women in Gorkhaland: the Politics of Home and Work

Although women were included in the GLP, their numbers were much smaller than those of men, and none lived in the barracks. While a nostalgic image of the brave, loyal, and morally grounded male Gorkha represented the imaginary future envisioned

by the movement, it was the suffering female tea laborer who represented Darjeeling's harsh reality. The Tea Institute and the GLP were attempts to bring the male image to life, and even to impart the Gorkha male ethic onto women. Though some women were involved in these new institutions, their most palpable presence was in the women's wing of the GJMM, the Nari Morcha. The Nari Morcha were generally mothers (over twenty-five), and according to Gurung's diktat, every house had to have a "Nari Morcha member" (any able-bodied older woman) present at the rallies. Still, the Nari Morcha's most active members were not rank and file tea pluckers. In fact, though most of the women with whom I worked supported the movement, few had the time or inclination to trek uphill to town for political rallies. Plantation workers were excused from rallies that took place on weekdays, and plantations were almost never subject to general strikes. Most rallies took place on Sundays, when plantation women would often send their younger daughters to attend.

I asked Manesh, the moralizing son of *sardars*, why, in a movement that was so clearly dominated by men, the Nari Morcha played such a prominent role in the Sunday rallies (see Figure 6.5). "You know my wife," he told me. "What would I do without her? She keeps me organized! Nepali women are strong – much stronger than we are!" I suppose I agreed, as I worked with so many plucking women who had husbands who were absent (many men worked away from the plantation in army regiments or in cities, remitting money home), drunk, or otherwise *buro* (old, unproductive). As I began studying the connections between Gorkhaland and women, I noted not only that the

women activists of the Nari Morcha served as important political operatives but also that non-activist women were drawn into the movement, not because of its moral and military rhetoric (and not because they considered themselves, as Manesh intimated, moral guardians), but because they saw the promises of more jobs and plantation revitalization as a direct benefit to themselves, their children, and the future of Darjeeling.

At most rallies, the Nari Morcha were the first to arrive and the last to leave. They would march around town, up the hill via a circuitous route from the bazaar to Chowrasta, the town square.



Figure 6.5: A Nari Morcha ward marching into a rally in Chowrasta.

But their work began days before the rally began. In fact, if I wanted to know the date and time of the next rally, then I always asked my women friends. Nari Morcha activists were each responsible for “wards,” relatively small subdivisions of Darjeeling town. Plantations were divided into “branches” (*shaakhas*), usually one to two per plantation, each with its own Nari Morcha organizers. These organizers would go from house to house, or simply call or SMS their contacts via cell phone, reminding them that each household must have at least one family member representative at the rally.

Those who did not attend would be assured of a visit from Nari Morcha organizers and their cohorts. These visits were couched as caring and concerned. My friend Omu, a storekeeper in Darjeeling town, regularly skipped the rallies. Her brother had been active in the first agitation and was held prisoner by the Indian Central Reserve Police Force, which was sent by the Central government to suppress the Gorkhaland movement. Omu’s brother was arrested and chained to a building just south of Chowrasta. For weeks, Omu brought him food, until the Central Reserve Police finally freed him. Shortly thereafter, Omu’s brother committed suicide. Omu still believed in the idea of a separate state, but when the second agitation started, she became disillusioned. She wanted no part of the zealotry that had swept up her brother. She told me that people didn’t remember the turmoil that took over the district just 20 years earlier. But when she failed to attend a rally, Nari Morcha organizers would visit. They would start by inquiring about her health and that of her mother. But conversation quickly turned to the subject of loyalty. Was Omu *not* a supporter of Gorkhaland? Did

she *not* want Darjeeling's children to have a better future? This last question stung Omu particularly, because her ward organizer would quickly follow it by saying, "Oh, right. You don't have children."

The Nari Morcha promoted political discipline through an idealized, maternal ethic of caretaking. For these women leaders, and on plantations in particular, participation in Gorkhaland was about children and the reproduction of Darjeeling families. In Chapters 1 and 5, I discussed the duality in plantation life between home and work. Plantations were sites of production and reproduction. In order to keep their houses, food rations, and other "facilities," (all the things that made the plantation "home" liveable), women felt compelled to continue plucking. Plantation jobs were passed down from generation to generation. This meant that each woman needed a child who was willing and able to stay in the plantation village both to care for her in her old age and to take her job in the field.

Women also needed to locate and secure suitable marriage partners for their female children. The *sardar* system I described in Chapter 3 had produced a situation in which most plantation villages consisted of a majority of people from a few extended kin networks. Finding suitable marriage partners for plantation daughters, then, could be a challenge. I worked in a plucking group at Kopibari with Pratima and Kanchi, who were also next-door-neighbors in their village, at the foot of the valley floor, two hours' walk from Darjeeling town. Pratima and Kanchi both had several daughters, two of whom were close in age. Both were married in the winter of 2009 and 2010. I was invited to

the wedding of Pratima's daughter Sonam. Pratima had decided that Sonam, her youngest daughter, would be the daughter to whom she would pass her plucking job when she retired. But Pratima could not be assured that Sonam would be able to take it unless she married the right person: someone who had prospects close to Kopibari and who could support Sonam until Pratima was ready to retire.

The ceremony was held in the plantation community house. The women of the plucking group and residents of the village prepared vats of stewed vegetables, meats, and seasoned *daal*. Someone had brought a sound system for singing and dancing. Pratima and her husband were relatively well-to-do. Her husband worked in the factory at Kopibari, and she had made good money as a porter and rock breaker in town during the three years in which Kopibari was "closed." Pratima was pleased with the match. Not only was Sonam genuinely in love with her new husband, but he was also a child of Kopibari. He had a class ten education, which meant that he had been able to secure part-time employment as an office worker in town. Sonam would be able to take Pratima's plucking job, and if something befell her or her husband, Sonam would be nearby to help.

Sonam was not able to attend the wedding of Kanchi's daughter, Durga. Durga was the middle of three daughters. Unlike Sonam, Kanchi was not planning to pass her plantation job on to Durga. Durga needed to find a match with someone whose family could absorb her. As it turned out, the best suitable match for Durga ended up being not in Darjeeling but in Nepal, in Ilam, where Kanchi's distant cousins lived. That winter,

Kanchi and her family made the two-day trip to Ilam for Durga's wedding. Kanchi was happy for Durga, but the distance was unsettling. Long-distance marriages were happening with more and more frequency, as male plantation residents – especially those who had managed to get some formal education – migrated out of Darjeeling. This meant that in order to find a good husband, a girl might have to migrate as well, sometimes to Nepal, but perhaps more often to Kolkata or Delhi, where Nepalis could find work but still endured the prejudices of being perceived as outsiders in their own country.

Women thus saw in Gorkhaland a promise for more satisfying home lives. Pratima and her friends had sons whose expensive educations did not land them jobs in town; they also knew plenty of men, young and old, who had turned to drink or gambling when work in the army or in construction dried up. The revival of Gorkhaland, then, promised the revitalization of satisfying, local intergenerational relations, village life, and interfamilial alliances. Women I interviewed saw their futures in the lives of their children, and they understood Gorkhaland less as a potential political salvation than as a rescue for fractured families. The viability of their homes was thus tied to the viability not only of the plantation but also to that of the Gorkhaland movement. Though they worked to ensure that some of their children managed to make their way off of the plantation, they knew that they could not afford to give them all secondary education, money for travel, and other opportunities. As in the colonial era, women saw plantation work as a family affair. There would be no point in passing jobs on to children if all the

children were forced to move to other cities. Women's motivation for involvement in geopolitics, then, was work and family based. Dress, language, dance, and the other trappings of ethnic performance held much less sway for them than did the ability to perform the everyday tasks of reproducing their families.

The Tragedy of Madan Tamang

To date, no one has been convicted of Madan Tamang's assassination, witnesses said that he was attacked by two GJMM *gundas* (thugs) on the Nehru road, just steps from my apartment and near a teashop where I had met with Madan just a couple of weeks before his death. The witnesses all said that the men who stabbed Madan used *khukuris*. The *khukuri* appears on the Gorkhaland flag and *khukuri* pins are common male adornments (see Figures 6.6 and 6.7). Madan did not wear *khukuri* pins. Over the summer after he died, two things became clear. First, no one would ever know who exactly killed him. Second, Madan's death marked the beginning of the end of the second Gorkhaland agitation.

No one familiar with the Gorkhland movement was uncertain, however, about *why* Madan died. As both a political leader and a resident, he represented an alternative vision of Gorkha empowerment, one based less in histories of work and class and ethnicity than in a placeless liberal democratic ideal of reasoned debate among educated citizens in a modern public sphere (Habermas 1962). Someone with *khukuri* saw this alternative vision as a mortal threat.



Figure 6.6: The GJMM flag displayed on the Chowrasta stage – note the three symbols: the sun, mountains (Kanchenjunga) and the crossed *khukuris*. These three things symbolize the strength (mountains), longevity (sun), and bravery (*khukuris*) of the Gorkha people. The *khukuri* symbolism was alternatively described to me as a reminder of the “capabilities” of the Gorkhas.

In late 2011, the GJMM agreed to the formation of a replacement for the Gorkha Hill Council. The Gorkha Territorial Authority, headed by Bimal Gurung and resembling the Hill Council in almost every aspect, is designed to act as a semi-autonomous overseeing body for the Darjeeling district within West Bengal. Few of my friends in Darjeeling, on or off plantations, are satisfied with this outcome. Despite the fact that almost everyone agrees that Madan’s murder was a tragic and unjust act, the dream of Gorkhaland remains strong. In this chapter, I have suggested that despite the charisma of leaders like Madan Tamang, Bimal Gurung, or Subhas Ghising, Gorkhaland remains a

salient idea for Darjeelingers because it evokes nostalgia about the material relationships between Nepalis, the British, and the landscape that enable a distinct vision for the future. The case of Gorkhaland and the short life of its second incarnation reinforces a connection between the consolidation of ethnic identity through agricultural labor. Though other anthropologists have identified such a connection (e.g. Bourgois 1988, 1989; Moberg 1996, 1997), including in the Indian tea industry (Chatterjee 2001; Sharma 2011), it has seemed to fade away in discussions of Indian subnationalism.



Figure 6.7: Khukuri pins on *topis* (hats). This pin is a popular adornment for men.

During my fieldwork (2008 to 2010), Gorkhaland politicians actively denied the history of Nepali labor migration to Darjeeling. This was a deliberate political strategy to naturalize Indian Nepalis' claims of belonging in India. Like GI marketers, Gorkha politicians publicly traded on the perceived "naturalness" of Gorkhas in the tea landscape. While Geographic Indication strives to reshape the way that international tea retailers and consumers perceive, define, and value Darjeeling tea, I suggested in Chapter 5 that these marketing messages masked workers' understandings of the tea plantations' historical presence on the landscape. Similarly, while Gorkha politicians publicly appealed to a primordialist language in political theatrics, my examination shows how the local success of these performances relied upon a consent from Darjeeling residents that was based as much on a sense of historical time as on timeless belonging.

Conclusion: *The Darjeeling Distinction: Land, Labor, and the Politics of Place*

In his analysis of “distinction,” Pierre Bourdieu (1984) described economic and social relationships between embodied and sensory taste, aesthetics, and the logics of the market. Bourdieu was largely interested in the consumption of luxury commodities, and his study helped spur a considerable literature on “the social life of things,” the circulation of commodities, and the selling of culture (Appadurai 1986; Miller 1998a, 1998b; Kirszenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Marcus and Myers 1995; Steiner 1994; Clifford 1997). This dissertation has examined a largely unexplored side of distinction: industrial production (c.f. Collins 2003).

Bourdieu noted a mutually reinforcing relationship between the field of production and the field of consumption (1984: 231). In the Introduction, I asserted a relationship between agricultural practice, regimes of value, and visions of justice. Drawing on Appadurai (1986) and Myers (2001), I noted a tension between “qualitative” and “quantitative” value. Darjeeling has always been an exceptional place and product, imbued with ideas of luxury and class distinction that Bourdieu calls “taste.” For Bourdieu, tastes reproduce economic inequality but do not follow the strict quantitative logic of economic value. Rather, they constitute a meeting of what Appadurai, following Simmel, calls the *desires* of consumers and the material conditions of the market (Appadurai 1986: 4). Both Darjeeling tea drinking and hill station life as lived by tourists (and in a bygone era, British colonials) are consumptive acts that reaffirm the refinement of the consumer. But, Bourdieu argued, taste exists in a mutually

constitutive relationship to systems of production, whereby changes in the consumptive field induce changes in the productive field, and vice versa (1984: 231). Following this insight, I have suggested that workers not only play an active role in the distinction of commodities, but also in the construction and reconstruction of the *place* of those commodities. In agricultural contexts, it is place that ties labor most firmly to distinguished commodities. I have thus used history and ethnography to bring local and regional perspectives on production to bear on ideas about global market distinctions. This approach shows how political movements like Gorkhaland intersect with consumer-driven social movements like organic and fair trade, and legal distinctions like Geographical Indication. None of these movements questioned the luxury distinction of Darjeeling tea or of the Darjeeling district. Indeed, they all aimed, in different ways, to *sustain* that distinction.

Sustainability is a concept around which environmental and social justice activists, development experts, and marketers converge, yet precisely what is being sustained is never clear. Sustainability is never about radical change; rather it entails strategic, incremental changes to established structures, systems, or institutions. For example, colleges and corporations make overt strides toward more environmentally sustainable *practices*, “greening buildings,” reducing waste, and – tellingly – seeking certification from third parties to affirm a commitment to lower environmental impacts. None of these changes alters fundamental hierarchies or institutional *ethos*. In the preceding pages, I have described how fair trade and organic advocates, GI promoters,

and Gorkhaland activists all couched Darjeeling's *distinction* – as tea and place – as that which needed sustaining. Using selective memories of the colonial conditions of production on the plantation, an agrarian imaginary of a precapitalist past, and moral economic ideas about the past *and* future relationships between labor, land, and management, each called for incremental—but no less significant—changes to the conditions of life in Darjeeling. While Gorkhaland's calls for statehood may not seem incremental, activists did not demand a wholesale demolition of the plantation system. Instead, Gorkha activists wanted to put Nepali men in positions of management, and to localize the tax revenue from tourism and tea: revenues that depended upon the Darjeeling distinction.

The distinction of Darjeeling as a place and a commodity began long before any of these more contemporary processes. In Darjeeling, the entry of all of those contemporary movements was predicated upon a shared view of the region as “in decline.” Each of those movements, then, was couched by its proponents as a strategy for the revitalization of Darjeeling and its tea industry. In Chapters 2 and 3, I described the historical basis of Darjeeling's distinction as a special place with a special labor force and environment. According to both British and Nepali accounts, together, Nepali laborers and British officials made the forested “wasteland” of Darjeeling productive. While the British articulated conquering the wasteland as the result of rational experimentation (Arnold 2006), Gorkhas saw themselves as doing it through cooperation, service, and labor. Darjeeling's unique liminal classification as “wasteland”

within the Imperial geography of colonial India allowed for distinct moral economic relations between laborers and colonial planters to emerge. In both British and Gorkha narratives, the *tabula rasa* of wasteland classification permitted a unique moral economy and a unique set of human-environment relations that hinged on an ethic of care. This exclusion and marginality was key to making Darjeeling tea *Darjeeling tea*.

In the story of the development of Darjeeling, workers described its decline. I used the concept of moral economy to explore workers' understandings of "decline" in plantation working conditions in recent years and visions for the rejuvenation of Darjeeling. Workers and planters both evoked nostalgia for the past in which environmental and social relationships were stable. These nostalgic visions informed understandings of the potentials for the revitalization of Darjeeling tea and the Darjeeling district.

Nostalgia and Stability

For tea laborers, class and political identity as well as senses of environmental belonging were forged through tea plantation work and the histories of land, labor, and commodity production. Discourses of fair trade, organic, and "justice" were all corrective responses to processes of capital "accumulation by dispossession" (Luxemburg 1913) that defined Indian plantation agriculture. Workers under these certification regimes, however, were enveloped into new and more *flexible* forms of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 1989). Instead of discursively separating labor reform from

environmental sustainability, “justice” in Darjeeling bundled these aspirations together. For Nepali tea laborers, justice was articulated in moral economic terms in which monetary and non-monetary remuneration were both important, but also in terms that made land central. Ironically, it is in the seemingly progressive age of geographically indicated, organic, and fair trade production that this three-way relationship between labor, management, and the agro-environment established in colonialism and embedded in Darjeeling’s imperial ruins, has once again become politically and socially relevant through the agitation for Gorkhaland.

In Chapter 1, I invoked the concept of “reverse imperialist nostalgia” to show how on Darjeeling tea plantations – inherently unequal systems – workers and planters maintain ambivalent affective relationships with the colonial past. As I have argued here, nostalgia for an agrarian past, one marked by a balance between land, labor, and management in a “naturalized” landscape, served multiple purposes. Planters, politicians, and pluckers alike used nostalgia to comment on and critique the conditions of Darjeeling plantations in the present as well as to imagine the plantations’ future. Drawing on Crapanzano’s (2004) concept of the imaginary “beyond,” I identified the multiple futures produced by a surprisingly uniform nostalgic grammar. In Darjeeling, nostalgia was central to the imagination of Darjeeling’s futures, plantation homelands with satisfying “facilities,” and Gorkha visions of “justice.” As I argue, nostalgia also framed a tripartite moral economy of the plantation.

While other ethnographers of nostalgia (e.g. Bissell 2005; Stewart 1988) have emphasized the diversity of forms that longings for the past may take, my study highlights that planters, pluckers, and politicians drew on a limited repertoire of nostalgic images and ideas. Insofar as they were concerned with plantation reform, these actors' nostalgic discourses hinged on a few common themes: the gentleman planter of *industri*; a "natural" symbiosis of labor and tea bush; and, most vividly, a consistent reference to the material conditions of production, which I have glossed, following Stoler (2008), as "imperial ruins" and later "heritage." Though my findings diverge with some anthropological interpretations of nostalgia, it should perhaps not be surprising that a multiplicity of futures has emerged from a limited set of material and symbolic referents (see Raffles 2002). These findings highlight the importance of landscapes and human-environment interactions, mediated by colonial productive forms, in shaping post-colonial presents and futures.

Workers' descriptions of the stable moral economy overlap with planter's descriptions of a stable accumulation of capital. For most of the 19th century, as I described in Chapters 2 and 3, the British stably accumulated wealth and maintained a willing labor force in the Darjeeling hills as a result of the way they structured their plantations. In her analysis of the differences between industrial wheat farms and family wheat farms in the United States, Harriet Friedmann (1978) elaborated a theory of accumulation that hinged upon the idea of *reproduction*: "Reproduction occurs when the act of production not only results in a product, such as wheat, but also recreates the

original structure of social relations so that the act of production can be repeated in the same form" (1978: 555). For Friedmann, industrial reproduction depended on the stability of a wage relation between the buyer of labor power on one side, and the seller of labor power on the other. The British Empire successfully cultivated this relationship in India, making it the most financially successful colony in the Empire for over 100 years.

As I described in Chapters 2 and 3, the social relations that defined capitalism reproduced themselves in a stabilized way through extensive colonial bureaucracies and paternalistic labor recruitment practices and welfare structures. Also, colonialism in India facilitated the extraction of products for a global market, which reproduced social relations between consumers of Darjeeling tea in London and sellers of tea and their labor power in Darjeeling. Workers explained that the non-monetary forms of compensation – "facilities" – not wages, were crucial to a stable moral economy (and thus stable accumulation of capital). Nepali and British mutual (albeit differently motivated) conceptualization of Darjeeling afforded a stable regime of accumulation to emerge: one that workers described as based upon mutual care and not domination.

Friedmann's focus on the stable accumulation of capital is central to a "regulation approach," which is a valuable tool for exploring how institutions influence the flow of capital and shape economic and social relationships. Regulation theorists, drawing on Althusserian Marxism, emphasize the role of institutions, such as families, laws, and bureaucracies, in perpetuating people's willingness to participate in fundamentally

unequal systems of production and consumption. Following Althusser, regulation theorists see institutions and regulatory social mechanisms, “ideological state apparatuses,” rather than individual agents, as drivers of social reproduction (Althusser 1971). While recognizing that capitalist systems, resting on uncertain and unequal arrangements between labor and capital, tend toward crisis, regulation theorists are interested in the long periods of time when capital is accumulated stably. These unwavering periods are called “regimes of accumulation.”

Regimes of accumulation shape agricultural practices. The regime of accumulation is stabilized: 1) at the individual level, by *habitus*, people’s willingness to embody shared social values evidenced in daily practices of movement, labor, and social interaction (Bourdieu 1977) and 2) at the institutional level, by a *mode of regulation*. The mode of regulation includes wages, tax policies, international agreements, laws, unions, and other things that help reproduce capital accumulation. Instead of focusing on the *habitus*, regulation theorists scale-up their analysis to an institutional level to focus on modes of regulation that enable the stable accumulation of capital. Modes of regulation define a particular relationship between production and consumption and characterize a particular regime of accumulation. Combined, however, attention to *habitus* and *mode of regulation* lead to an understanding of what I call “agricultural practice.”

A crisis in a regime of accumulation implies a failure of regulation, the consequence of a deterioration of a mode of regulation and an institution’s ability to

stably accumulate capital (this resonates with Thompson [1971] and Scott's [1976] visions of moral economy, which is often framed by acts of resistance when certain ethics and relationships erode). The fall of the colonial regime of accumulation in British tea production resonates with the collapse of the Fordist regime of factory production in the United States, the original object of analysis for regulation theorists. What separated Fordism as a distinct regime of accumulation was that capitalists recognized the link between mass production and mass consumption, which led to "a new system of the reproduction of labour power, a new politics of labour control and management, a new aesthetics and psychology, in short, a new kind of rationalized, modernist, and populist democratic society" (Harvey 1989: 126). Fordism hinged on the ability of the workers to purchase the products they produced. The disintegration of Fordism was caused by two factors. First, transactions became more international. Fordism was a "rigid" nation-centered regime; production and consumption were spatially linked. Second, factory owners were not making enough money from production because they were paying their workers high wages and providing welfare through, for example, pensions and health care (Harvey 1989: 142).

Much like the collapse of Fordism, the collapse of colonialism and colonial tea production was instigated by the financial infeasibility of the project. When British companies left India, they turned to remaining British colonies in Kenya and Sri Lanka to supply their domestic demand. The tight relationship between tea production in India and consumption in England was broken apart. During the colonial era, the British

controlled all aspects of production and marketing. After India gained Independence, the British slowly turned their Darjeeling tea plantations over to elite Indians, who quickly found that they did not have enough capital to maintain the plantations. The last British planters and their companies left in the late 1960s, at which point the industry is said to have “collapsed.” After the fall of the colonial regime in India, new Indian plantation owners from outside Darjeeling had a surplus of tea and less people to buy it.

Revitalization, Justice, and Sustainability

Colonialism did not leave India with a strong government, but it did leave it with the infrastructure necessary for a vibrant tea industry. Even after the British left, regulatory institutions that were central to the colonial project, namely labor codes and tea auctions, remained. In 1951, shortly after independence, India’s central government drafted the Plantations Labour Act, which imported colonial labor policies into the constitution of independent India. The Plantations Labour Act continues to guarantee plantation workers’ social welfare, insisting that owners provide workers with housing, health care, food rations, and schooling for their children. It is the positive legacy of an otherwise exploitative colonial regime. During the production crisis that lasted from the 1960s until the late 1990s, tea continued to be sold at auction in Kolkata, much like it had for the past 100 years. Many tea plantation owners gained the attention of fair trade certifiers because their adherence to the Labour Act made them viable candidates for fair trade certification (see Chapter 4). Since Darjeeling tea’s ascension to the realm of

fair trade, organic, and geographically indicated (GI) products in the early 2000s, the industry has witnessed a resurgence: closed plantations have reopened and tea is fetching higher prices.

Workers and planters had disparate visions of what would correct the imbalances in Darjeeling and understandings of what would right “decline.” As William Cronon (1992) explains, the key to a good story is the ending:

What distinguished stories from other forms of discourse is that they describe an action that begins, continues, over a well-defined period of time, and finally draws to a definite close, with consequences that become meaningful because of their placement within the narrative. Completed action gives the story its unity and allows us to evaluate and judge an act by its results. The moral of the story is defined by its ending: as Aristotle remarked: ‘the end is everywhere the chief thing’ (Cronon 1992: 1367).

In the second half of this dissertation (Chapters 4-6), I described three distinct narrative endings. Each of these narrative endings – one envisioned by fair trade (Chapter 4), one envisioned by Geographical Indication (Chapter 5), and one envisioned by activists in the Gorkhaland agitation (Chapter 6) – was marked by longings for an imagined or nostalgic past and visions of a future in which workers would transcend the current conditions of production.

These narratives too, each posit a contending understanding of sustainability, within a shared idea about Darjeeling’s luxury distinction as a product and a place. For those who embraced them, fair trade/organic, GI, and Gorkhaland were all means for rescuing Darjeeling, its environment, and its people from decades of decline and for ensuring the continued distinction of Darjeeling as a place and a product on national and

international markets. In Chapter 4, I described how the planters who sought fair trade certification took advantage of Fair Trade certifiers' ignorance about Darjeeling's plantation past. Planters saw fair trade as a means of disassociating tea with the colonial plantation past and as a way of giving cheap grades increased market value and distinction. The market for fair trade is a "tea bag market." Most fair trade Darjeeling tea comes in boxes of tea bags, and bagged tea is of generally lower quality. Fair trade planters in Darjeeling perceived a new market for this old product, and they also saw in fair trade certification a way to divest themselves of their colonially derived responsibilities to labor under the guise of social justice and empowerment. Fair trade certification thus meant changes in *agricultural practice*, via the formation of joint bodies and the subversion of the Plantations Labor Act, and the emphasis on direct trade; the import of a new "socially responsible" concept of the *value* of plantation labor and of tea; and hence a vision of *justice* that hinged on individual entrepreneurship instead of plantation patronage.

Chapter 5 describes how Tea Board of India bureaucrats and planters used Geographical Indication to create a more sustainable market for Darjeeling tea. GI sought little in the way of changed *agricultural practice*. Instead, GI marketers trumpeted the timelessness and "naturalness" of plantation production through invocations of "traditional knowledge" and *terroir*. GI advocates drew deftly on *regimes of value* to stoke the desires of domestic and international consumers. The "mystical," fertile, and caring plantation woman; the soil that provided an ecologically ideal home

for tea, and the historical “heritage” of plantation production all went into producing *terroir*. GI’s *vision of justice* was a nationalistic one. As a legal protection, geographical indication shielded the product and the place from imitators. The beneficiary of this protection was, in GI discourse, the Indian state and its people. Thus GI engaged with plantation history, in the form of heritage, and national international politics, in the form of legal protections, in ways that Fair Trade did not; however, GI left working conditions largely untouched.

One of the purposes of the Gorkhaland agitation I described in Chapter 6 was to create sustainable and equitable relationships between workers, management, and the agro-environment. As I noted in Chapter 3, the Gorkhland and the plantation labor movements have been intertwined for most of the past 70 years. Female Gorkhaland activists looked to selective memories (or imaginaries) about the plantation past to rectify deteriorated domestic conditions, particularly the breakdown of plantation families. The oppressed tea plantation *mother* was a role they knowingly inhabited. Women saw in Gorkhaland’s calls for Nepali sovereignty over the district a chance to more stably reproduce plantation families. Thus, for women, *agricultural practice* needed to change at the administrative level where the relationship between the state and business was most important. For men, mobility within the plantation system and in the district at large was paramount. The Tea Management Training Centre and the Gorkhaland Police both drew on old ideas about Gorkha identity and ties to land to envision new forms of work and citizenship. *Justice* for Gorkhaland activists was about

multiple forms of control: over the conditions of employment, over the regulation of Darjeeling's main industry, over the environment in the form of reinvestment and rebuilding of infrastructure—the “imperial debris” of roads, houses, and water systems—and over the form in which the Indian state recognized its Nepali nationals.

The overarching message of the stories I narrate in this dissertation is that the plantation labor process complicates notions of labor alienation. Though Gorkha tea workers were self-consciously outsiders – and sometimes couched as “alien” subjects within India – they saw labor as *connecting* them to place, nation, and even to the wider tea commodity chain. Gorkhas' senses of belonging were born out of the paradox of plantation life. The plantation, as I suggested at several points throughout the dissertation, was a site of both work and home. Claims to labor rights were thus concomitant with claims to rights over land and political sovereignty. These historically and place-based senses of belonging were precisely what fair Trade, organic, and GI certifications failed to acknowledge. The irony is that these international certification regimes, designed to sustain both labor and the agro-environment, were largely meaningless to the workers they purported to help. The workers themselves believed that a righting of the relationships between labor and capital, between Gorkhas and the state, would begin with *care*. Justice, then, was as much an affective discourse as it was a material one. Just as discourses about taste and distinction conjure up ideas about the class dimensions of emotion and feeling – perhaps obscuring the ugly material conditions under which commodities are produced – discussions of social justice in

agriculture often obscure the complex affective connections between people, land, and plants. This dissertation has attempted to bring these connections to light, rooting a global commodity in both the imaginations, environments, and lived experiences of the people who make Darjeeling tea.

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