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The Darjeeling Distinction: Labor and Justice on Fair-Trade Tea Plantations in India

By Sarah Besky. Berkeley, CA:
University of California Press, 2014.
xxxi + 233 pp. US\$ 29.95. ISBN 978-
0-520-27739-7.

The Darjeeling Distinction aims to narrate the “social life of some of the world’s most expensive and sought after tea” (p 2). Drawing on extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Darjeeling—on plantations, in institutions and towns, and at political rallies—Besky discusses contending visions of justice proposed by different actors influencing plantation life: fair trade, geographical indication, and the Gorkhaland movement. Through a “Third World agrarian imaginary” (p 29), geographical indication and fair trade obscure violent structures of the plantation system itself and fail to acknowledge the workers’ own vision of justice, which is described as a “tripartite moral economy” (p 32). The book is divided into 5 chapters that discuss (1) the making of Darjeeling, (2) the tripartite moral economy, (3) justice according to geographical indication, (4) justice according to fair trade, and (5) justice as imagined by the Gorkhaland movement.

Chapter 1 takes the reader on a tour through Darjeeling town while deconstructing the seeming naturalness of the surrounding landscape and describing the making of a productive tea plantation industry during the British colonial period. At the beginning of the 19th century, three factors helped tea cultivation in Darjeeling to succeed: a favorable climate, free land (the colonial administration classified Darjeeling as “wasteland,” p 54), and available labor (mostly Nepali minorities that had fled the Gorkha monarchy). In the British “cultural taxonomy of labor” (p 55), these Nepali migrants were

seen as industrious and loyal. The book argues that different perceptions of the plantation landscapes are still visible in “linguistic ruins” today (p 56). For example, the Nepali word for plantation, *kamān*, used by workers, is connected with the oppressive plantation system, while the English word *garden*, used by tourists, officials, and planters (plantation managers) to describe plantations, suggests a peaceful coexistence of workers and plants.

Chapter 2 outlines the central idea of the book, that plantation workers’ own understanding of (social) justice is a tripartite moral economy integrating labor, management, and the agro-environment. The chapter describes how workers contrast the intensification of tea plantations, which they describe as *bisnis*, with the time before the 1990s, which they describe as *industri*. *Industri* bears a nostalgic connotation and signifies the care of planters for their plantation workers, exercised through nonmonetary compensation, welfare, reinvestments, and the provision of facilities (*faciliti-haru*). The 1947 Plantation Labor Act wrote this “care” into national law. *Bisnis*, in contrast, stands for the decrease of these relations in recent times. By describing how the life of a tea plant influences plantation life, Besky attempts to understand plantation life as experienced by workers from a multispecies perspective. She does this by drawing on the work of Anna Tsing (2012) and Sidney Mintz (1960). This part of the tripartite moral economy is not entirely convincing, as little ethnographic evidence is provided to support the argument. However, the chapter contributes to an understanding of how plantation work is a form of social reproduction.

Chapter 3 describes the making of Darjeeling as a *terroir* through its geographical indication status. Geographical indication pledges to protect Darjeeling tea, “helping owners [to] receive higher prices for ‘rare’ tea” (p 91). Billboards, put up by the Tea Board of India in Darjeeling

town, portray Darjeeling tea as a crafted product and not an industrial crop. Obscuring labor relations on the plantations, female plantation workers are depicted as caring guardians of the landscape (p 99). In this way, the “Third World agrarian imaginary” extends the social distance between consumers and producers. Besky argues that the notions of *kamān* and *garden* are blended in the image of Darjeeling created by geographical indication, and that geographical indication “occludes, rather than undoes, a long history of regional and social differentiation” (p 111). Justice according to geographical indication accredits rights and benefits to an undifferentiated group of producers of Darjeeling tea without questioning the plantation system. Besky also states that geographical indication “converts moral economic relationships, in which the lives of plants, pluckers, and management are linked in a dynamic system of care and concern, into static, repetitive, simulations of colonial nature” (p 112). Seen from a critical perspective, this statement seems to romanticize the (nostalgic) memories of *industri* by workers. A critical discussion of the term “care” would have helped to avoid this ambiguity.

Chapter 4 discusses the implications of fair trade certification for Darjeeling plantations. Like geographical indication, fair trade does not question the plantation system itself. Besky clarifies that fair trade is a “market solution to Third World poverty” (p 114) and does not consider workers’ visions of justice. Fair trade has actually undermined the Plantation Labor Act, as fair-trade premiums are not used to provide a better income for the workers but instead “cover up to 50 percent of the costs of facilities mandated by the Plantation Labor Act” (p 121). In the context of debates around ethical trade, Besky questions if a plantation can be fair and concludes that fair trade aggravates rather than alleviates “the tensions of plantation life” (p 134).

Chapter 5 attempts to understand visions of justice of plantation life as understood by the Gorkhaland movement. Since the 1980s, this movement has strived for territorial sovereignty and created hope for the future of Gorkha tea workers, who form a large part of the supporters. The chapter describes how Gorkhaland politicians re-narrate the colonial past to form a Gorkha identity but fail to provide an alternative concept to current plantation management. Consequently, justice is understood in ties to, and sovereignty over, Darjeeling land. Besky argues that it is due to the “contradictions between primordial and historical understandings of the relationships between Gorkhas and land” (p 140) that the movement has failed to achieve justice.

In the conclusion, Besky presents her main critique of geographical indication, fair trade, and the Gorkhaland movement, stating that “none of these movements asked how workers themselves understood their

own powerlessness” (p 173). While workers see the shift from *industri* to *bisnis* as the reason for the decline of reciprocal relationships on plantations (care for the landscape by workers in return for *faciliti-haru* by the planter) and thus in the plantation system itself, geographical indication, fair trade, and the Gorkhaland movement involve “a disciplined forgetting of the colonial histories [...] that remain fundamental to the functioning of plantations” (p 176).

Besky’s book offers a deep insight into contemporary plantation life in Darjeeling. Her detailed description of the many stages and perceived meanings of tea production is an important critical contribution to ongoing debates on ethical trade. The concept of a tripartite moral economy elucidates how workers perceive justice (if possible) on plantations. Yet, the “agro-environment” part of this concept is not completely convincing, as there is too little ethnographic evidence on human–

plant relationships to develop a “multispecies perspective.” Moreover, in this context, it is at times not clear whether the workers or the researcher use a romanticized image of the past. Nevertheless, the book provides an important ethnographic contribution to the implications of long-distance trade and the deconstruction of different visions of justice in ethical trade.

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