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FROM ILLEGAL TO ORGANIC: FAIR TRADE-ORGANIC TEA PRODUCTION
AND WOMEN'S POLITICAL FUTURES IN DARJEELING, INDIA

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

**FROM ILLEGAL TO ORGANIC:
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My dissertation is an ethnographic engagement with the localized effects of emerging global ethical regimes like Fair Trade. It explores the meaning and materiality of Fair Trade as it unfolds among women producers in Darjeeling's tea industry. It looks at how the specifics of agricultural commodity production premised on organic and Fair Trade stipulations can influence the bargaining power of marginalized women producers in formal and informal production settings. Grounded in anthropological theory and methods, this project contributes to recent debates among feminist scholars on issues of work under neoliberal production systems and women's political agency, interdisciplinary research on global alternative trade, south Asian labor ethnographies and scholarship on social justice.

While Fair Trade-organic production is looked upon by its founders, activists, and participating NGOs as an antidote to the problems of corporate

globalization, this project investigates such optimism ethnographically by examining whether Fair Trade is indeed effective for marginal producer groups, and if so, under what conditions this is the case. To do so, my dissertation compares how engagement with the Fair Trade movement has influenced the autonomy and livelihoods of two different groups of women working in the Fair Trade organic tea industry in Darjeeling, India—plantation workers and small scale farmers. I found that women tea farmers (independent farmers growing organic tea in their own land) tend to be more politically active than women plantation workers (wage laborers), even though the plantation workers have a long history of labor activism. My in-depth ethnographic research shows that women tea farmers are more effective in connecting their struggles against economic and cultural domination to the goals of the Fair Trade movement. They become more active in community affairs and undertake new business ventures by combating middlemen. In contrast, women plantation workers, despite their prior labor activism, are relatively incapable of mobilizing the Fair Trade movement to their own benefit, in spite of having their own informal networks. Key reasons for the difference include the different institutional structures of collective bargaining, access to resources (land), existing gender ideologies of work, and gendered community histories of political involvement in previous movements.

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List of Abbreviations:

CPIM	Community Part of India, Marxist
DGHC	Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council
DTA	Darjeeling Tea Association
DPA	Darjeeling Planter's Association
EFTA	European Fair Trade Association
FLO	Fair Trade Labeling Organization International
GNLF	Gorkha National Liberation Front
IMO	Institute of Market Ecology
GI	Geographical Indications
WTO	World Trade Organization

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Introduction

Remaking human rights in the vernacular is difficult. Local communities often conceive of social justice in quite different terms from human rights activists.

(Sally Engle Merry 2006:1)

Women from our villages are famous in other parts of the world. The white people come and make films on us, take our photographs to many countries, but it is here in our villages that no one cares for us.

(Rajni, a woman tea farmer)

This dissertation ethnographically compares how multiple politics of recognition manifested through global ethical regimes and local ethnicized labor politics impact women's political agency in Darjeeling. In recent years there has been a proliferation of the politics of recognition (Fraser 1997, Ong 2006, Merry 2006).¹ At the global scale we find movements like Fair Trade, which are organized to recognize the rights of small farmers/producers within global trade. On the other hand there are situated, local politics of recognition – like the ethnic politics of recognition among Nepali tea producers in Darjeeling – that shape local institutions in which producers work and through which they

¹ Early scholarship on the “politics of recognition” concentrated on the efforts of marginalized groups or citizens within a nation to gain public recognition and prominence (Taylor 1992:34). The formulation was used to highlight the limitations of liberal justice systems, under which people belonging to specific cultural groups were not respected or represented in public institutions. Fraser (1997), through a discussion of the “recognition-redistribution” dilemma, challenged the contours of the liberal democratic models of justice. For her “politics of recognition” was expressed in the “New Social Movements” which made identity politics the centerpiece of struggles. Recently, in her article in *New Left Review* (2000), she also talks about the proliferation of “politics of recognition” through the transnational human rights framework. In anthropology, engagements with “politics of recognition” have concentrated on exploring the intersection of culture and political economy in the emerging movements for justice (Alvarez et al 1998, Hodgson 2002, Li 2001). I use Fraser's formulation of the “politics of recognition” to characterize the market-based movements that try to address political economic differences through recognizing a particular class of producers as worthy of empowerment. I examine how these new movements for recognition intersect or not with localized struggles for recognition and economic and social justice.

exercise their rights. The dissertation addresses how women tea plantation workers (wage laborers) and women tea farmers (small landholding farmers) navigate these different systems of recognition. As it emerges from the ethnographic findings in this dissertation, in Darjeeling, ethnic politics has on the one hand shifted worker-centric politics in plantation unions, and on the other hand it has facilitated the legal ownership of land among the regions' small tea farmers. These differences at present impact how women plantation workers and tea farmers can demand justice and articulate their existing struggles with the Fair Trade movement.

The global movement for Fair Trade is aimed at recognizing the vulnerability of small farmers in global production and reinstating the rights and dignity of workers.² Culminating in the formation of Fair Trade Labeling International – FLO (the master NGO in charge of global application of Fair Trade rules),³ Fair Trade draws from international human rights frameworks like the ILO convention on labor protection (Reynolds et al 2007), to produce just workplaces and sustainable communities through trade – not aid. Fair Trade is thus the face of a market-based justice movement to correct the inadequacies of global free trade. Its remedial principles of justice are based on tenets of ethical liberalism – equality (Reynolds et al 2007). Proponents of Fair Trade emphasize that “empowered subjects” can be produced through creating sustainable and

² The Fair Trade movement started to protect the rights of small farmers in the global economy. Recently it had also started working with plantations to make them compliant with the Fair Trade vision of justice (www.fairtrade.net).

³ I describe the details of Fair Trade organizations in chapter 1.

profitable connections between local producers and global citizen consumers in the west. It also promotes organic farming techniques as part of its sustainability drive. In Darjeeling, most Fair Trade certified producer organizations are also certified organic.⁴

But how well do Fair Trade's rules and expectations articulate with the existing structures of rights and justice in places of production? Is there a disjuncture between these universal notions of rights and their local applications, as Merry suggests? While Fair Trade product sales seem to be growing every year (FLO 2007) and Fair Trade products fill the racks in supermarkets in the west, very little is known about how Fair Trade is received by producer groups. Absent from recent engagements with Fair Trade (Barrientos and Dolan 2006, Jaffee 2007, Lyon 2006) is a discussion of Fair Trade's imbrications with gendered struggles over resources and rights in producer communities. The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the meaning and materiality of Fair Trade as it unfolds among women plantation workers and women tea farmers in Darjeeling's tea industry, which has embraced organic agriculture and Fair Trade initiatives to keep up with demands in the world market.

The dissertation explores a peculiar paradox. Legal rights-bearing subjects (plantation workers) are not able to benefit from Fair Trade, whereas "illegal

⁴ I understand that in other places in the world, Fair Trade and Organic movements might not work together. However, FLO's website states that 85% of all Fair Trade certified products are also organic. (For details see www.fairtrade.net).

subjects" ("illegal tea farmers")⁵ are able to benefit from it. In Darjeeling's tea plantations, workers have collective bargaining rights, and each one of them is formally represented by a union. On the other hand, Darjeeling's illegal women tea farmers, who are perceived as mere housewives and lack legal rights to produce tea, have been able to derive benefits from Fair Trade. They are trying to create new structures of entitlement using Fair Trade, demanding justice and equality within their community and households. Therefore, this dissertation examines why certain subjects benefit more from emerging "technoethical" regimes (Ong 2006:24)⁶ – like Fair Trade – while others continue a bare existence in Fair Trade certified institutions. In spite of producing the same commodity, Fair Trade organic tea, women tea farmers (independent farmers growing organic tea in their own land) tend to be more politically active than women plantation workers (wage laborers).

In recent years anthropologists and other social scientists have been preoccupied with the question of transnational justice regimes and their effects on local realities. Social theorists like Giorgio Agamben (1998) argue that the modern movements of populations have created the existence of "bare life," stripped off rights and entitlements that they enjoyed in their originating nations. Critiquing Agamben, Aihwa Ong shows how transnational regimes of justice have burgeoned in recent years to bring legally bare subjects within the protective folds of justice regimes. As Ong writes:

⁵ I detail the history of illegal tea production in chapter 1.

⁶ Ong (2006: 24) uses this phrase to describe the efforts of new privatized humanitarian initiatives.

Increasingly, a diversity of multilateral systems – multinational companies, religious organizations, UN agencies, and other NGOs – intervene to deal with specific, situated, and practical problems of abused, naked, and flawed bodies. The nonstate administration of excluded humanity is an emergent transnational phenomenon, despite its discontinuous, disjointed, and contingent nature. (Ong 2006:24)

Ong takes on Agamben's idea of "bare life" to show how new multilateral ethical regimes create new languages and moral claims to bring rights-devoid citizens under a "universal humanity." Criticizing Agamben, Ong writes that "bare life does not dwell in a zone of indistinction" but occupies contested places and is organized by various institutions of a global justice regime (such as NGOs, corporations) into "categories of moral deserving humanity" (2006:25). The way naked and flawed bodies at particular global production sites – situated in specific production regimes – can create entitlements for themselves, or claim rights out of this transnational concern for universal humanity, largely depends on specific conditions of their naked existence. The conditions under which bare bodies are brought into the folds of global justice institutions reveal how certain bodies continue a somewhat bare "existence" while other ones can articulate their needs and desires with the emerging "techno-ethical" frameworks.

Both Ong and Agamben are concerned with the subjects whose rights are not legally defined. For Agamben, "bare life" cannot claim any rights because of their de-territorialized existence. Ong's focus is on efforts of "bare bodies" to claim rights using "techno-ethical regimes." In this dissertation, I take Ong's logic further by showing how "legal subjects" lose some of their power to claim

rights; they get de-territorialized. On the other hand, certain illegal subjects, use these “techno-ethical regimes” to gain prominence in their local communities, all working within Fair Trade certified institutions.

This difference results from the multiple forms of the “politics of recognition” (Fraser 1997) manifest in Darjeeling. On the one hand, sub-national Nepali ethnic politics among Nepali minorities in India have made plantation labor unions hegemonic. On the other hand, the global obsession with recognizing small farmers and their struggles within the Fair Trade movement have strengthened the cooperative movement from which women tea farmers derive benefits. These multiple “politics of recognition” have shaped the way women negotiate power by working through institutions of collective bargaining. Women plantation workers have organized themselves into informal savings groups – *Ghumāuri* – to cope with a situation where they cannot mobilize their legal rights to ask for a raise or improve their housing provisions.⁷ Similarly women tea farmers see their Women’s Wing as an organization parallel to the cooperative, and use it to address issues of inequality and male dominance within the cooperative. My in-depth ethnographic research shows that women tea farmers are more effective in connecting their struggles against economic and cultural domination to the goals of the Fair Trade movement. They become more active in community affairs and undertake new business ventures by combating middlemen. In contrast, women plantation workers, many of whom were

⁷ I discuss the changing concerns of unions in Darjeeling in both chapter one and chapter two.

politically active in previous nationalist and labor movements, are relatively incapable of mobilizing the Fair Trade movement to their own benefit. At both sites, women demonstrate creativity in negotiating structural power; however, women's narratives from the plantation and cooperative reveal that the former see a shrinking horizon for the effectiveness of their collective organizing. I could discern a sense of frustration among plantation workers because of their receding importance in labor unions. Women tea farmers, on the other hand, use Fair Trade to bolster their collective organizing efforts.

Plantation workers in Darjeeling find fewer opportunities to exercise their state-recognized rights within plantations. Most workers think of the plantation owners as their *sarkār* (government). They are governed by its rules which strip them of rights the state otherwise might guarantee them. Women plantation workers are further marginalized in unions, which have become preoccupied with party politics and the concerns of unemployed male youth. In spite of collective bargaining rights and territorialized citizenship rights (ration cards, voting cards), plantation workers are unable to mitigate their "bare" or vulnerable existence.⁸ Their daily conversations are layered with a desire to escape from their present circumstances and their inability to do so.

Reflecting on their situation, women plantation workers describe their existence as being similar to "tadpoles in water" (detailed in chapter five) living a

⁸ Although I take the concept of bareness from Agamben, I complicate his argument by showing how legal subjects can lose their rights under specific historical circumstances. I use the metaphor of "bareness" to draw attention the decreasing possibilities for women workers within the plantation.

disenfranchised existence. Their access to privatized multilateral systems of justice is mediated by the same people and institutions which have systematically made them vulnerable as workers, women and citizens in the first place. Regimes of gendered labor, lack of property rights, nepotism and decline in local employment opportunities combine to make them vulnerable. Plantation union leaders are mostly unaware of Fair Trade dynamics and the Joint Body has no active union representative. As a FLO regulation stipulates, all plantations' certified Fair Trade has to have a Joint Body – consisting of workers from all strata of the plantation hierarchy. Actual workings of the Joint Body are detailed in the next chapter, however, a common saying on the plantation is, “here everything is a secret,” alluding to the lack of transparency in these new institutions. What regimes of justice can do for producers largely depends on these local processes.

The situation with tea farmers is quite different. They are not bereft of vulnerabilities, but they have much more control over their lives, in spite of the fact that they are not recognized by the state as “legal” subjects, i.e. legal tea producers. Tea farming households own their lands and homes. They received legal land titles soon after the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) came to power in the late 1980s. This ownership of land has affected the confidence and expectations of members in this cooperative community. People consider themselves farmers here, even if they are doing the same tasks as plantation workers. Even if male tea farmers are migrating to different areas, they can

return to their own land. In spite of the fact that the land that women tea farmers possess is in the name of their husbands or other male relatives, women have a sense of de facto ownership of their property. Women tea farmers also have their own organization – Women’s Wing – that they see as parallel to the male-dominated tea farmers cooperative.

Evaluating the gendered impact of Fair Trade, organic production through a comparison between a cooperative and a plantation was informative because they have different institutional structures. Women plantation workers describe the plantation as *Zamindāri* or a feudal domain where their grievances mostly remain unheard. Such an oppressive milieu has given rise to covert practices of economic reciprocity called *Ghumāuri* among women plantation workers. In contrast, the tea farmers’ cooperative, which consists of elected members, provides more space for discussion and dissent among its male and female members in the decision-making process. Cooperative meetings are important arenas where gender hierarchies are questioned by Women’s Wing members through open altercations. The differing nature of women’s collectives in the plantation and the cooperative also influence the way the effectiveness of Fair Trade is judged by the two groups of women. Differing collective strategies in turn shape women’s engagement and expectations from Fair Trade and the way women tea farmers and plantation workers can exercise their political agency.

Fair-Trade gets re-interpreted in the actions of women tea farmers, who use these global discourses of Fair Trade and re-articulate its spirit and ideas. Unlike women plantation workers, women tea farmers unsettle the empowerment directives of Fair Trade by coining local terminologies of *swaccha vyāpār* (transparent, clean, pure or Fair business).⁹ Such re-articulation helps women tea farmers negotiate local and trans-local power structures to demand justice and equality in their family and community. Creative reinterpretation of Fair Trade directives provides women tea farmers the moral opportunity to rightfully enact their roles as successful entrepreneurs in the face of massive domination by local male middlemen in their communities. In the process, women tea farmers claim historical recognition for their labor in keeping alive the production and circulation of organic tea in Darjeeling, in a context where the local state still favors big plantations as legal producers and marginalizes small tea farmers as illegal. Such appropriations of Fair Trade by women tea farmers to carve out political and economic space within the community, I contend, is also an indirect critique of the global fair-trade discourse which tends to depoliticize the local. While Fair Trade has been able to create a new structure of entitlement among women tea farmers, women plantation workers remain relatively disenfranchised.

⁹ According to Ralph Turner's Nepali Dictionary (1966 edition), the word *swaccha* means clear, pure, transparent. Women tea farmers when trying to use and understand the word Fair Trade translated it as *Swaccha* as clean, fair, transparent, pure and sometimes used the Hindi word *safā*, which also means clean or pure.

Therefore within the existing literature on Fair Trade-organic production, this dissertation illuminates the gendered cultural politics of alternative trade. It examines how Fair Trade organic tea production can produce divergent outcomes for women engaged in the production of Darjeeling tea. The project also grounds the optimism around Fair Trade/organic production (which aims to foster improved working conditions and chemical-free sustainable agriculture) into the specific historical circumstances of the people and commodities.

Goodman (2004: 910) underscores the absence of detailed ethnography of the imbrications of these policies with local struggles over access to land and livelihoods in third world production niches. Also understudied are gendered regional disparities and contractual agreements. Therefore, according to Goodman, “there is a sore need for critical ethnographic field work in places and spaces of production” (2004: 909). Studies in the US and UK emphasize the economic and symbolic effects of the alternative food movement on western consumers and agricultural policies (Guthman 2004). Case studies from the third world (see Jaffee 2007, Raynolds 2002) are few, and the existing ones have not paid adequate attention to the gendered micro politics of Fair Trade certification.

This project is the very first ethnography of Fair Trade in South Asia to understand the effect of globalization on gendered resource politics in rural export niches.

Political Agency

While I argue that women tea farmers have more engagement with Fair Trade, and they appropriate Fair Trade for their own ambitions, I am not implying that women plantation workers have no agency in dealing with the challenges of their lives. It is because of the particularity of the historical moment that plantation workers cannot do much to benefit from Fair Trade in spite of a deep understanding of the inadequacies of their lives. Both groups of women are highly conscious of their position vis-à-vis the power structures in which they are embedded, but the more open structure of the cooperative and the absence of the fear of losing the job put them in a better position to bargain for a share of Fair Trade benefits. Women tea farmers are in a better position to exercise a greater degree of political agency, whereas women tea plantation workers, in spite of a high level of political consciousness and creative negotiation, find their opportunities to contest structural power decreasing. In the section below I explain what I mean by political agency and the intellectual roots of my understanding. This is followed by the broader theoretical underpinnings of my argument.

Both women plantation workers and tea farmers were exposed to the effects of patriarchy. Prevailing gender ideologies about tea farmers being “obedient housewives” and plantation workers as “hardworking but loose women,” accord them different vantage points to interpret how they face inequality in their communities. These dominant gender ideologies impact the

way they present themselves and think about their own capabilities, in light of the new agrarian and development initiatives in their communities. There is a key difference in the way the two groups of women think about themselves and their practices, discussed in greater detail in chapter five. Throughout this project, I have assessed women's political agency through close observation of their actions and an assessment of their subjectivities. Actions, such as sustained and engaged participation in community organizing, independent decision-making in the household and production relations, commitment to union and cooperative activities, and creative negotiation strategies with plantation management and middlemen, are some of the chief indicators of women's political agency. My claim that women tea farmers get more opportunity to exercise their political agency is also rooted in my close observations of their personal and public interactions.

However, I also argue that one cannot confine analysis of political agency to these actions alone and must analyze women's narratives of hope and indispensability, women's subjective reactions to the changing economic and political circumstances of their lives. Analyses of these narratives have helped me identify the specific contexts of women's action. Though narratives, I have learnt what women themselves see as enabling instead of imputing my own judgments about agency. Women at both sites are engaged in creatively negotiating power individually or by forming collectives, but women plantation workers have a sense of decreasing opportunity whereas women tea farmers see

Fair Trade as a new threshold of action. Women plantation workers' political agency is influenced by Fair Trade in a very limited way. Therefore, in my project, I have located political agency in the "structures of feeling" (Williams 1977) surrounding Fair Trade-organics and institutional structures not only in the ability of women to transgress existing cultural boundaries. Following Ortner (2005), I argue that political agency lies in the deep subjective understanding of the workings of power and women's efforts to navigate such constrictions in both public and private ways. The project takes note of both confrontational and interstitial politics. Conceptually, I draw from social theorists and anthropologists who have tried to theorize human agency in terms of either practices or subjectivities.

In an attempt to think about the possibilities of Fair Trade for women tea farmers' political life, I have drawn from social theorists and anthropologists' engagements with questions of power, action, and domination. For social theorists like Pierre Bourdieu, a subject's interiority can be deciphered from his/her actions. He gives close attention to human action, because for him human creativity can only be deciphered from social action. Social action is shaped by what he calls *habitus* (considering it is a way of being or a repertoire of social interaction). *Habitus* is what provides individuals a point of reference on how to present oneself, how to act. The realm of feeling and contemplation is significantly underemphasized in Bourdieu's repetitive narratives of

misrecognition. Every action is an exercise in maximization, gaining symbolic capital, so much so that for Bourdieu,

Subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know. The *habitus* is the universalizing mediation which causes the individual agent's practices, without either explicit reason or signifying intent, to be none the less "sensible" and "reasonable" (1977: 79).

Bourdieu's constant reiteration of actors' "inaccessibility" (see Ortner 2005) or impenetrability of the rationale of their own social action is rarely found in social situations. Both women tea farmers and plantation workers are not defined by complete acceptance or rejection of the social and institutional structures in which they are embedded. Women tea farmer's acceptance of Fair Trade is not without seeing how it might negatively impact them, and yet, they participate in its activities.

While Bourdieu directs his attention to conformity and maximization, Michel deCerteau concentrates on the practices of resistance. Like Bourdieu, de Certeau also concerns himself with the domain of action which for him stems from "effective consumption of being and becoming." Consumption hones a subject's capacity to navigate a system where larger strategies of knowledge and administration make a treacherous terrain for the subject to scale. To explain human actions (which for him are more centered on resistance), deCerteau uses the phrase, "ways of operation." For deCerteau, "ways of operating" are similar to "instructions for use," and "they create a certain play in the machine through a

stratification of different and interfering kinds of functioning” (1984: 30). What the “ways of operating” achieve for the subject in deCerteau’s formulation is clear from his writing,

Thus a North African living in Paris or Roubaix (France) insinuates *into* the system imposed on him by the construction of a low-income housing development or of the French language the ways of “dwelling” (in a house or a language) peculiar to his native Kabylia. He superimposes...and creates for himself a space in which he can find *ways of using* the constraining order of the place or the language. Without leaving the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him, he establishes within it a degree of plurality and creativity. By an art of being in between, he draws unexpected results from his situation (1984: 30)

deCerteau thus underscores the indexical use of common modes of social living as a way of resisting the work of larger hegemonic strategies. In spite of his efforts to understand resistance, deCerteau makes a distinction between “tactics” and “strategies.” Strategies for him are based on a deep understanding of hegemonic power. He says that tactics “does not therefore have the option of planning general strategy and viewing the adversary as a whole within a ...visible and objectifiable space. It operates in isolated actions” (1984: 37). Like Bourdieu, deCerteau fails to understand that the marginalized too might have the capacity of self-objectification (a discourse about discourse). The dichotomy between strategies and tactics is more situational, a matter of scale and not a question of the presence or absence of consciousness. Women tea plantation workers do not directly confront their managers or the union bosses, whereas women tea farmers have direct altercations with the male cooperative heads.

From the differences in action, one cannot theorize that women plantation workers lack a clear picture of their domination. On the contrary, as this dissertation will later reveal, the actions and silences of women plantation workers on certain issues are based on a deep understanding of their limitations as legal subjects, whereas women tea farmers' actions are based on their new found confidence in being able to sell their tea to plantations legally.

Unlike Bourdieu and de Certeau, Michel Foucault and Raymond Williams focus on how subjects are made in certain historical moments. Foucault does not mean that subjects are made through institutional governance or ideological maneuver. Subjects are not effects of power. Truth of existence and identity are not simply imposed but taken on, so much so that it becomes the subject's own pursuit of existence. The rationalization of power in modern societies is not just an imposition but such rationalization happens in a dialogue with the self – to understand “who are we?” Thus when Foucault talks about “immediate struggles,” he is talking about friction through which the self is constantly brought into being by the subject himself/herself. He writes that power in modern society,

applies itself to immediate everyday life that categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize him. It is a form of power that makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word “subject,” subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge (1994: 131).

It is this idea of self-knowledge of subjection that is most vital for an analysis of the effects of “techno-ethical” regimes on the lives of women plantation workers and farmers. Unions can work in particular ways because women plantation workers are equally concerned about the future of male youths in their lives and share the dream of having their own estate. In chapter four, I explore how plantation workers’ household relations and sense of self are shaped by men’s insecurities. Therefore, in contrast to Bourdieu’s position that individuals pursue certain time-tested ways of being (because of genesis amnesia), so much so that they lose sight of the larger processes at work, for Foucault the larger processes can work because the subject rationalizes them and in the process brings larger forces of knowledge and administration into being. Thus every disciplinary system has to impinge upon a subject’s self-knowledge, a possibility that he can realize as an option. Therefore, “transformations could not take place except by means of a working of thought upon itself; that is the principle of the history of thought as critical activity” (1994:60).

For Williams one can locate these oppositions or negotiations within hegemonic processes in the “structures of feeling” of everyday living. Here “structures” in the plural is a representation of the indeterminacy of social structures, and “feeling” is used to index the present experience, that which guides action. So “structures of feeling” are not something purely personal, emotional, or intuitive; it is social and tied to practice. He further states that “...

structures of feeling can be defined as social experiences in solution, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been *precipitated* [emphasis in original] and immediately available" (1977: 134). It is from this inadequacy of feeling, or reaction to change which Williams describes as "an unease, a stress, a displacement, a latency," which forms the core of practical consciousness (1977: 131). Williams here makes a powerful break from theorists who emphasize ideology or a culture as determining existence or interest (like Bourdieu). He provides a much more nuanced formulation of an individual's historical consciousness.

Women's narratives from Darjeeling are a testimony to new subjectivities that have emerged among women tea farmers and plantation workers in Darjeeling. These women try to use their "practical consciousness" to interpret their past, and their "structures of feeling" are shaped by a contemporary and historical consciousness. While the application of Bourdieu or deCerteau's concepts certainly help me understand some of the routine objectives of these women like planting, child rearing, and community relations, it does not help me grasp the element of change in their lives. These women's negotiations cannot be classified as conformity or resistance. Their complex subjectivities can only be explored through a close examination of their narratives and their specific styles of navigating power, applying Foucault but going beyond him to embrace insights from Williams and Ortner.

Gender and Globalization

Feminist engagements with neo-liberalism have taken two major directions. On the one hand, the increased feminization of the workforce has escalated controversy over the meanings and effects of women's work (Freeman 2000, Mills 1999). A second and more recent concern has been with the rise of transnational ethical regimes and their effects on women's agency at particular sites (Merry 2006, Ong 2006, Hodgson 2002). My dissertation contributes to both these lines of enquiry.

The situated understanding of women's political agency in Darjeeling contributes to existing literature on women's agency under global systems of production by exploring how women's collective organizing has different consequences within the same industry. The implication of industrialization for peasant economies (the agrarian question) has raised confounding questions about women's empowerment and autonomy. Proletarianization of rural folk should have translated into reality the liberal-Marxist dream of a world proletariat demanding its right social wage (Elson and Pearson 1981, Enloe 1989, Fernandez-Kelly 1983). However, that has not happened (see also Ong 1991). The transition from fordism to post-fordist flexible accumulation has turned out to be more destructive for the cause of women's liberation according to some feminists (see also Collins 2002, Kapadia 2002).

According to Ong (1991), the spatial control of postmodern regimes hinders the emergence of class solidarities among women working in non-

unionized spaces. Individual covert forms of resistance become prevalent, which for Ong are “cultural struggles” more than class struggles. In this dissertation, I show that individual covert forms of resistance are not just a result of the spatial politics of production, but also are related to emerging politics of recognition in workplaces in the global south, which has transformed the idioms of class struggle. As I mentioned earlier, the fact that legally unionized women workers cannot raise their concerns in unions is not just a result of male domination of unions, but has more to do with the de-legitimization of work-related issues as a valid union concern (as elaborated in chapter two). Patriarchy can work through the plantation hierarchy because of the specificities of ethnic politics.

The findings from the cooperative community provide a different rejoinder to feminist scholarship on women’s agency under neo-liberalism. One feature of post-fordist flexible accumulation has been the rise of “home-based work” (Kabeer 2000, Prugl 1999, Beneria and Roldan 1987). Beneria and Roldan show that outside the maquiladoras in Mexico, home work by housewives subsidized industrial capital. Therefore, class struggle ceased to be an outcome because “disciplinary schemes include power relations in the workplace and in society at large...division of labor, new techniques of power operate through controlling....the body, the shop floor, the state, and the public sphere – defining permissible and impermissible cultural forms in society” (1987: 285). In chapter three, I demonstrate how women use Fair Trade to make their invisible “home” work visible by using Fair Trade certification events.

One of the most revealing studies on women in the informal sector was conducted by Maria Mies (1982). In her ethnography among the lace makers of Narsapur India, Mies (1982) demonstrated how the production of exchange value by women was denied through the “housewifization” thesis (the idea that women’s work is insignificant, not wage worthy and done in spare time). This ideological barrier was created by capitalists to secure low wages. According to Mies, the stereotyping of women as only biologically productive helped capitalists (who according to her were also patriarchs) to justify their low wages in Export Processing Zones (EPZs). In Darjeeling, women tea farmers question their representation as “housewives” by demonstrating that they have always been entrepreneurs, even before development programs (like micro-credit) or Fair Trade funds started pouring into their communities. Before the commoditization of their “illegal tea” as organic, women were responsible for its manufacture and sale, which helped them meet many cash needs of their family. Their new business plan – *THulo yojanā* (*big business*) – enabled them to draw attention to the existing struggle over livelihood in their communities. The tea cooperative’s dependence on “housewives” for labor in producing tea and in spreading Fair Trade awareness and training provided women farmers a chance to question male domination in the cooperative.

Feminist scholars have generally focused on the negative consequences of capitalist production for women’s autonomy and control. They have documented the myriad ways in which women’s voices are silenced in union

protests (Fernandes 1997) due to “multiple patriarchies” (Chatterjee 2001:275). Kabeer argues that liberalization has further undermined the possibility of women’s mobilization in the post-colonial era, which remains “sporadic, limited and uneven” (Kabeer 2004:186), and concluded that the process of commodity production is debilitating for women’s political futures (Banerjee 1991, Collins 2002, Sen 2002 but see Mills 2002, Ramamurthy 2003 as exceptions). Chatterjee writes that investigations of women’s public political participation within plantation production systems have to explore the “informal” i.e. “small protests, usually excised from discussions of what are deemed ‘political’ activities” (1995:265). While this is representative of women’s efforts to subvert patronage systems in India, analyzing women’s efforts to occupy public space and positions becomes important to understand the effects of a transnational campaign whose very aim is to improve women’s lives and increase their participation in public life. Blanket terms, such as “neo-liberalism,” serve as a “black box” shifting attention away from what women conceive of and practice as effective political action.

A grounded effective understanding of women’s needs and their own political aims is important to understand how transnational justice regimes can strengthen these ambitions. Feminist scholars studying transnational justice regimes underscored the scalar politics of key actors (Merry 2006). However the historical particularity of the actors and their efforts to forge links with the networks still need critical exploration (see Hodgson 2002). Also understudied is

the role of specific gendered ideologies of work, land access, household production relations, and postcolonial agricultural developments (Gupta 1998) in facilitating the entry of women into these networks. The comparison between the effects of Fair Trade on the plantation and the cooperative also sheds light on the circumstances under which women producers can (or cannot) articulate their existing struggles with emerging justice regimes – like Fair Trade. Women plantation workers had very little knowledge of Fair Trade, and they saw it as the management’s concern. The existing labor unions were also unaware of Fair Trade certifications and activities within the plantation. In the tea cooperative, women were more involved in Fair Trade work, such as consciousness raising organic inspection, and found the opportunity to translate Fair Trade into their own struggles.

The differences in the layers of mediation between Fair Trade and women producers produced different outcomes of Fair Trade on women’s lives.

Subaltern Struggles in South Asia

This dissertation also engages and complicates notions of gendered subaltern struggle. In his recent book on the peasant roots of “fraternal” knitwear capital, Sharad Chari writes:

Working class women fight a variety of struggles across work and home, against multiplicity of forms of violence and neglect, with limited means of scaling the institutionalized means of political action.....Fraternal capitalists can link caste, masculinity and politics, so that some can go

global through new political articulations with tiers of government and multilateral institutions (2004: 98).

Chari's representation of informal sector women workers' labor appropriation is representative of research on the gendered nature of industrial capitalism in India, both in the formal and informal sectors. Kapadia (2002:33), and Sen (2002) also underscore the problems of "scaling up" when it comes to women workers. According to them, liberalization has further deteriorated the possibility of women's mobilization. The situation worsens as we go down the ladder of social hierarchy, making Dalit and minority women the most vulnerable. According to Sen (2002), collusion between the colonial state and local elites furthered this trend.

The difference in work and activism among tea producers in Darjeeling also reflects on the condition of women tea producers in the informal sector, which is rarely discussed in official discourse. Jan Breman (1996 and 2003), in his pioneering work on the informal sector, expresses measured optimism for the majority of India's workers who toil in the informal sector. The informal sector work is dominated by women (Breman 1996). Breman rejects the dualist mode of categorizing labor in India into the formal vs. the informal. Instead he sees a continuum between the two sectors. Darjeeling's tea economy reflects a similar situation, although plantations dominate research and policy discussions. The invisibility of the informal sector tea farmers serves the purpose of big plantations. However, the way workers can change their circumstances, even

within a single industry. Informal tea producers in Darjeeling are able to use Fair Trade to gain recognition for their labor in producing and keeping alive the production of organic tea.

Scholars like Spivak (2000), who have considered the political futures of marginalized women, have failed to capture the nuances of women's agency in India's informal sector – as this study in the informal tea sector underscores. In criticizing the development initiatives of the United Nations or NGOs, Spivak writes that the desire for ethical dialogue with the under-represented turns out to be another exercise in de-politicization because they have no “realistic plans for infrastructural change” (2000:123). Similar ideas are espoused by subaltern elite women activists such as Arundhati Roy for whom the “NGO-ization of politics threatens to turn resistance into a well-mannered, reasonable, salaried, 9-to-5 job” (Roy 2004:9). Such criticisms are also upheld by anthropologists. As James Ferguson writes,

By uncompromisingly reducing poverty to a technical problem, and by promising technical solutions to the sufferings of powerless and oppressed people, the hegemonic problematic of “development” is the principal means through which the question of poverty is de-politicized in the world today (Ferguson 2002 [1990]: 407).

For Roy and Ferguson, de-politicization is a peculiar outcome of a hegemonic neoliberal model of producing knowledge about people and institutions. What they call a-political and de-politicized is not an absence of politics but in reality a crude politics of signification which impinges on the space and language of democratization. This form of politics, according to Roy, appropriates existing

struggles, it bureaucratizes and traps the vitality of global and national civil societies in the propaganda of NGOs and equates resistance, dissent and alternative possibilities with the formation of NGOs. Hence the language of liberation is “butchered” (Roy 2004:1) and the “public/people” are caught in a difficult battle to secure their space of civil disobedience. My research analyzes the circumstances under which constituents can re-politicize ambivalent ethical initiatives, which might work through NGOs.

For Spivak, de-politicization creates a disjuncture between the “form” of empowerment and the “content” of it. While there is nothing inherently repugnant about the liberal “form” of national policies to alleviate subaltern poverty, the content of such efforts might not actually emancipate the subject. She therefore suggests that instead of teaching women the rote skills, it is beneficial for them to learn to write and express themselves. Thus, what is required is “enlightenment from below” - “a (ab) - use of the form of enlightenment” (2002[1992]:453). To enable this process of enlightenment from below, one requires a more grounded understanding of the subject and his/her needs (Spivak 2002 [1992]: 454, 456). My dissertation aims to look at the question of need and political agency by taking a grounded approach.

Events surrounding Fair Trade certification in Darjeeling could easily be read as an exercise in de-politicization because, as I stated earlier, multilateral justice regimes fail to capture the nuances of people’s lives and aspirations. Even critics of development and subaltern agency, such as Spivak or Roy, reduce the

vibrancy of subaltern desires and subjective states. Spivak writes that micro-credit is not a viable solution for women's empowerment because women accrue huge debts over time and the burden of debt falls on women. This is not an inaccurate understanding of the effects of micro-credit, but the use and appropriation of micro-credit on the ground in Darjeeling is much more creative and much more complex. Women's experience in returning micro-credit loans influences what they expect from Fair Trade.

Recent studies of development initiatives such as micro-credit from India also highlight the negative consequences of these development policies. In an excellent ethnography of NGO-led income generation schemes in Delhi slums, Luthra (2003) shows the unproblematic union between liberal feminist goals of income generation and neoliberal policies. The micro-credit based income generation programs taken up by national and international NGOs transfer the risk of failure completely onto the participating women. The NGOs promote the ideology of risk-taking and entrepreneurship among slum women who have few resources to begin with. Instead of providing a secure income generation program, they blame the failure of income generation programs on the failure of the poor women to do good business. Ironically, organizations such as OXFAM and UNICEF, which on paper oppose privatization and structural adjustment programs, fall prey to the ideological trap of neo-liberalism when they adopt policies of "self-employment" popularized by World Bank. However, women tea farmers in Darjeeling have used these loans to reduce their dependence on

middlemen, who normally charge very high interest. Micro-credit loans have increased confidence in business, which women want to further through monetary support from Fair Trade (detailed in chapter 3).

My dissertation also addresses a major framework in the historiography of labor in South Asia by challenging the overemphasis of the subaltern studies school on domination and culturalist explanations of resistance (see also Roy 2005, Sivaramakrishnan 1998) through ritual, songs etc. (Raheja and Gold 1994). It explores how subaltern women farmers embrace the Fair Trade discourse and associated organic commodity production as a tactic to negotiate existing structures of domination in households and communities. Women use Fair Trade to facilitate their entry into the local market. By making the gendered spatial politics of production and market access the pivot of understanding the everyday lives of the rural poor, I propose an alternative to the subaltern schools' domination-resistance model in order to focus instead on the subaltern's specific economic practices.

Privatized Justice

The dissertation is a critical reflection on how ethical regimes work. These transnational ethical regimes work through a network of field experts who are in charge of delivering and checking for justice in producer communities. Participant observation of their justice work and interviews with them at various points in this dissertation reveal how these experts interpret the standards of this ethical regime, what kinds of subjects they find deserving, and how they

interpret local histories of producer communities. In short, this dissertation has relevance for environmental justice scholars who want to understand the uneasy coexistence of uneven development and social justice initiatives in the global south. While Fair Trade-organic production is looked upon by its founders, activists, and participating NGOs as a sustainable antidote to the problems of corporate globalization, this project investigates such optimism ethnographically by examining whether Fair Trade is indeed effective for marginal producer groups, and if so, under what conditions this is the case.

Delivering justice via Fair Trade is a private affair. Adelman (2008: 511) writes about global human rights regimes and justice providing institutions whereby “the new global legality proffers the state as the giver of security and social justice, despite striking structural inequalities between the north and south.” Political and legal anthropologists in recent times have placed great emphasis on the state (Merry 2006) and elected legal bodies in delivering social justice, albeit its drawbacks. However, the Fair Trade movement has spawned an array of institutions and mechanisms that work through private institutions (such as NGOs) and non-elected experts who police operations and find deserving producers to bring them under the FLO umbrella. They try to make no connections with the state in countries in which they operate. However, this does not prohibit them from enjoying the useful externalities of state rules and boundaries, as we see in Darjeeling, between legal and illegal tea. The marketing companies can deliver specialty tea to the western consumers because the state

minimum wage for workers in Darjeeling's tea plantations is a little more than a dollar a day. Certified organic Fair Trade plantations can deliver organic goods because they can rely on the illegal producers, who do not have proper tea processing units.

In Darjeeling, plantation minimum wage is set by the Tea Board of India, which is a federal body. The original Plantation Labor Act was made in 1951 with subsequent revisions. However, most workers consider this wage to be very low. In all my observations with Fair Trade experts, a conversation with the state is never a concern. FLO is very much a social movement organization, but its negotiations are always with private bodies, such as other NGOs, plantation workers, and cooperatives but never the state. As a global movement, it deplores the low wages of tea producers and the plight of small farmers, yet wage is never a conceivable battle. It is rather ironic that the Fair Trade movement believes in economic justice—trade, not aid—yet the basic material of economic justice—a viable wage, is something they do not push in Darjeeling, thereby avoiding many procedural issues. The controlled contact of Fair Trade certifiers with workers during Fair Trade inspections, as I will demonstrate in chapter two, is another reason why critical issues are never brought in front of Fair Trade inspectors.

In this dissertation, I argue that the small tea farmers gain more from Fair Trade. However, they do so by getting into contracts with plantations. The state, which does not extend the Darjeeling tea label to non-plantation producers (such as tea farmers), makes plantations the gatekeepers for selling tea to small

farmers. The money from Fair Trade premium is also not enough for the cooperative to build manufacturing and marketing units, which are the two most important entities in making and selling tea, especially Darjeeling specialty tea. Even now tea grown outside plantations is considered illegal, and plantations at any moment might terminate the contracts if they desire. Plantations as partners of FLO want to maintain good relations with FLO to sustain healthy Fair Trade sales. Plantations are also invested in buying small farmer tea. Plantations very recently have started selling and marketing small farmer grown tea as separate from their own tea. In one plantation, they have a separate dryer and roller for small farmer tea because many plantations have been accused of substituting their tea for small farmer grown organic tea – calling the latter their own.

However, my interviews with key industry personnel reveal that the separate marketing is strategic, as plantations in Darjeeling want to do some careful image management by positioning themselves as partners of small farmers' movements. In the eyes of the state, this kind of an exchange is a violation of the Darjeeling label since plantations are supposed to be the designated spaces for Darjeeling tea production. Nevertheless, instead of working with the state to recognize these non-designated spaces as legal, FLO leaves it to local NGOs who are doing this critical work in conjunction with producer cooperatives. FLO and plantations both benefit from this lack of negotiation with the state since farmers remain in a precarious position. Many structural issues remain outside of this privatized ethical regime.

Significance

In recent years, engagements with globalization have centered on understanding production and protest politics under the current global neoliberal regime (Welker 2009). In the age of “market triumphalism” (Peet and Watts 1993) where markets are not only reorganizing economies but have also become the vehicle for redistributive social justice (Rankin 2004), neoliberal justice initiatives require close attention. Citizen consumers in the west not only buy products that distinguish them as a class (Roseberry 1996), but also their desire to see social justice is communicated to struggling producer groups under specific circumstances. Lyon (2008: 259) writes that the “fair trade market translates consumer action and shopping habits into the promotion of human rights in distant locales.” Therefore, scholars have increasingly become interested in the efficacy of transnational efforts to promote social justice through new networks of solidarity. Within these concerns, this dissertation raises the importance of making gender central to assessing the outcome of these emerging networks. It explores the layers of mediation between Fair Trade’s declared goals and women’s lived struggles. By situating the Fair Trade movement within these concrete struggles in a specific “locality,” the dissertation underscores the divergent effects of global justice within a single district in India.

The dissertation brings together the existing debates on communities with that of Fair Trade organic production. Community dynamics and embedded structures of resource sharing determine the outcomes of transnational

initiatives. Collins (2002) identifies deterritorialization – the erosion of moral economic ties/traditional community ties among owners and women workers – as a major reason for the declining possibilities of women’s agency and activism in work and community settings. However, Li (2002) shows how new processes of territorialization have emerged within communities due to the dialectic between new external influences and embedded structures (such as gender, caste, class). This study is the first to ethnographically explore the new processes of territorialization as they emerge (or not) in the tea producing communities due to Fair Trade organic stipulations. The dissertation explores how subaltern women farmers embrace the Fair Trade discourse and associated organic commodity production as a tactic to negotiate existing structures of domination in households and communities.

By focusing on the struggles of Nepali women plantation workers and farmers, the dissertation fills a major gap in the existing literature on the struggles of the Nepali community in India. The dissertation brings much needed attention to the struggles of Nepali women whose voices and stories are far removed academic engagements with adversities facing the Indian Nepali community today. While there has been rich documentation of the Gorkhaland Agitation¹⁰ and continuing ethnic politics, there has been no effort to understand how Nepali women interpret the dominant preoccupations in Nepali politics and history. Also understudied is the effect of the Gorkhaland Agitation on the

¹⁰ I detail the history and effects of the Gorkhaland Agitation in the next chapter.

region's labor politics. The creative struggles of Nepali women and their efforts are absent from standard narratives of the plight of tea plantation laborers and marginality of Nepali men. This dissertation draws attention to contemporary politics within the Nepali community and its gendered effects.

In recent years, feminist scholars in India (Subramaniam 2006, Sharma 2008) and elsewhere (Subramaniam and Purakayastha 2004) have become increasingly interested in women's collective organizing efforts. Both Subramaniam and Sharma focus on state led development programs for women, like Mahila Samakhya (see also Klenk 2004). I contribute to this growing literature by exploring the circumstances under which women's collectives can be most effective. I also underscore where and how these collective efforts benefit most from Fair Trade initiatives. I also explore how the differing nature of women's collectives both impact and are shaped by women's subjectivities.

Finally, within the existing academic engagements with Fair Trade, there is no existing study of the effects of Fair Trade and the Organic movement in South Asia. By focusing on women tea producers in Darjeeling, India, this dissertation is the first ethnographic engagement with Fair Trade in south Asia.

Research Methodology

The findings which inform this dissertation are based on eighteen months of intense fieldwork in Darjeeling district, West Bengal India between 2004 and 2008. The longest uninterrupted stay was between August 2006 and August 2007.

My primary research methods were intense participant observation, a basic survey, semi-structured interviews, and collection of life histories. I observed the daily activities of the small tea farmers' cooperative and the plantation and household dynamics and accompanied my research subjects to social gatherings (social gatherings, meetings, and marketplaces). I complemented these observations with a survey of 40 women plantation workers and 40 women tea farmers in the cooperative. In addition to asking questions on basic demographic and economic background of the families, my survey questionnaire was open-ended and designed to elicit views on Fair Trade ideas, organic farming practices, and how relationships within and outside the family have changed due to Fair Trade. Open-ended questions in the questionnaire often led to long semi-structured interviews. Interviews with older respondents gave me the historical backdrop of the present-day women's activism. I also interviewed the Fair Trade and the tea bureaucracy, Fair Trade inspectors, Tea Board officials, and NGOs promoting Fair Trade. Newspaper articles (local and transnational), website material, documentary films, and the collection of "United Voice" (the cooperative news letter) comprise my archival data.

I have used pseudonyms for both the plantation and the cooperative, which were the focus during this study. I also used pseudonyms for all my informants to avoid any damage to them.

Nepali Language Training

I spent the first three months of my research in Darjeeling learning Nepali with the help of a private tutor in Darjeeling. I not only practiced my Nepali conversation with my tutor, but also regular visits to plantations and the cooperative area resulted in regular practice and increased my vocabulary strength. My knowledge of the Devanagari script was of immense help as I could read Nepali newspapers on my own once I improved my vocabulary. By the time I returned to Darjeeling in 2006 I spoke Nepali very well.

My previous knowledge of Nepali and enthusiasm for speaking in Nepali at every possible instance was instrumental in gaining valuable research access among plantation workers and tea farmers. Rural Nepali people are exposed to Hindi, Bengali and English through radio and TV programs. They use a lot of English and Hindi words in their everyday conversation, but their primary language was Nepali. I was seen as a Bengali from outside Darjeeling, but my excitement about learning and speaking Nepali always put me at an advantage. Often village and plantation folks would start a conversation in broken Hindi, thinking that I would not be able to follow the question in Nepali. I always replied in Nepali which pleasantly surprised many people. Good knowledge of spoken Nepali was vital for the life history interviews. Older people in the plantation and the cooperative area had no knowledge of Hindi. My fluency in Nepali also became a cause of concern for the plantation authorities. The plantation managers always made fun of me by saying “you are becoming like

them.” Plantation workers always called me “Madam,” which I resisted, but since I always addressed them as big sister, younger sister, aunt, or sister-in-law they started calling me by my name.

This research would have been impossible if I had not had knowledge of two other important languages spoken in Darjeeling, Bengali (my mother tongue) and Hindi. Most Darjeeling Planters’ Association bureaucrats and Fair Trade Labeling Organization International (FLO) officials I met and interviewed spoke Hindi and English. They were pleasantly surprised to know that I was eager to have a conversation in Hindi and lived in Delhi for four years. They often opened up more while speaking in Hindi. Most FLO trainings and interactions with the local community were in Hindi, as none of these officers had knowledge of Nepali.

Beginnings: Open-Ended Interviews

My entry point into the public life of the tea plantation and cooperative was through informal discussions with workers and farmers after their work-day, after meetings, and during social gatherings. I used various kinds of probing techniques (see Bernard 2002: 211-212) to explore people’s ideas about organic agriculture, Fair Trade policies, plantation life, and more. Such probing helped me keep up with the current gossip, complaints, confusions, and general concerns with work in the plantation/cooperative and the feelings regarding organic production and its effects. In this way, I accessed “networks of talk” (Das and Addlakha 2001: 514) in the plantation and the cooperative.

Apart from following these networks of talk, I conducted open ended interviews to see whether people invoked Fair Trade or organic agriculture in their daily conversations. I also noticed in what contexts they invoked Fair Trade and organic farming to understand the depth of how people related these ethical regimes with their daily struggles.

Participant Observation

This methodology was the centerpiece of my research design. It complemented my interview data and helped me establish patterns of talk and opinions. Participant observation of daily conversation in the households, at work, in social gatherings, and trips to the market was important to understand how women were relating Fair Trade and organic production to their everyday lives. It gave me access to prevailing discourse among people about progress, development, and political action in light of economic and political developments in Darjeeling. To enable the process of participant observation to be effective, I had to make strategic decisions about where to live. I had the option of living in the plantation guest houses where most visitors lived. From the very beginning, I made a decision to live in plantation workers' homes. This was enabled through the home stay program that the plantation ran as part of its eco-tourism ventures. I adopted a similar approach in the cooperative area. I made it a point to live in households belonging to different socio-economic strata. This enabled me to compare how wealth differences affected the monthly

meetings of the Women's Wing cooperative and *Ghumāuri* (informal women's group in the plantation). I began my participant observations in the first few months, during and after meetings, to assess what women and men discussed and possible issues of conflict. As my presence in these communities was further established, I attended some of these meetings to analyze the form and content of women's participation: What roles did they play? What issues did they raise? Where did they sit? How often did they speak? How did they interact with men?

I also accompanied the women from my sample when they went to town or the market to assess how they describe their work and community participation to friends and acquaintances. In my interactions, women tea farmers have told me that they feel much better about their land since the formation of the cooperative (because they occupy state land illegally). I also noticed that some women take great pride in telling outsiders that they interact with NGOs and tea buyers. Noticing these comments forms an important part in assessing whether women feel different about their independence and the respectability of their lives after adopting organic tea production and related developments. Throughout my field research, I have tried to notice women's subjective reactions to processes of agricultural change to understand their subjectivities.

I also participated in their daily lives to understand how women carried out negotiations with plantation and cooperative authorities in formal meetings. Apart from formal negotiations, I also examined informal negotiations. While

women in the plantation strategically negotiated with male supervisors and union leaders, such struggles were carried out according to local gender ideologies of honor and respect for men. In the cooperative, however, women took leading roles because they ran their parallel organization, the Women's Wing. Women tea farmers also had the right to control the time and place of the Women's Wing meetings. I carefully observed the women tea farmers during their meetings with the plantation management, with the Fair Trade promoting NGOs, and also when they met on their own to devise the strategies to negotiate with the cooperative. I observed Fair Trade training events and Fair Trade certification events at both sites. I also observed the meetings that Fair Trade officers had with plantation management, which were rare and mostly secret. I compared the negotiations I observed in the cooperative and plantation, to see where women have better mastered negotiation strategies.

I also had detailed discussions with male plantation workers and cooperative members on whether and how they understood Fair Trade and organic production. I spoke to the male co-workers and family members of the women in my sample to comprehend how they interpret these changes. These processes of observation were critical to arrive at my research conclusion that women tea farmers engage more with Fair Trade and used Fair Trade to gain economic and political visibility in their community.

Discourse Analysis

From the beginning of this project, I have collected representations of the two communities in local, national and international newspapers, Fair Trade related websites, and plantation and NGO publicity brochures. For instance, short documentaries on You-Tube or retail websites about these communities where I did my fieldwork helped me track how Fair Trade rhetoric was used to represent production sites as fair and sustainable. Some of my key informants were also filmed in these documentaries. I compared their narratives in these films and publicity material with my notes during participant observation to see patterns of convergence and divergence between what they said in front of the documentary film makers and what they discussed in their absence. Survey of posters, billboards, and website content also revealed how organizations promoting Fair Trade understand Fair Trade or empowerment. As I will show later in chapter two and three, these discourses of Fair Trade which I collected were different from how Fair Trade officers on the ground saw Fair Trade. These discourses, so readily available, are vital to understand the discursive scope of global ethical regimes.

Life History Interviews

I conducted fourteen life history interviews, six in the plantation and eight in the cooperative area. These interviews were very important to understand the lived history of the two communities and their people. For instance, the plantation life history interviews with older men and women helped me piece together how average plantation workers understood political developments,

which I write about in the next chapter. In the cooperative, life history interviews revealed that the British planters did not use chemicals, an aspect of the continuity of the tea farmers' agricultural practices between the colonial period and the present. Life history interviews with older women at both sites were important to understand generational perceptions of women's progress and daily lives. These interviews were also important for me to understand how women in Darjeeling view society and their roles in it.

Socio-Economic Survey

I used a basic socio-economic survey in the first few months of my research to find out basic information such as age, education level, migration histories, wage, number of children, what kinds of crops farmers produced, and general strategies for income generation. These surveys helped me get acquainted with more people in the plantation and the cooperative. It helped me select more people for life history and semi-structured interviews. I used snowball sampling to select my sample.

Semi Structured Interviews

I used semi-structured interviews with individual women to see how they understood the benefits of Fair Trade, community relations, and household issues. I also asked women about their future hopes and aspirations and the problems they faced at work and home. I asked them why they became Women's Wing or *Ghumāuri* members, and what they had gained from membership. I enquired about their knowledge of Fair Trade and organic agriculture, union and

cooperative dynamics. I also requested them to compare their past and present community activities.

Pressures to be a “Conventional Anthropologist”

Very early on in my fieldwork, I felt the pressure of being a conventional anthropologist. Even before I had landed in the plantation, the owner told me that he had a plan for me. I had already sent him a letter from Rutgers explaining my research, which clearly stated my research goals so that my intentions would be clear. But he insisted that I study the “cultures and customs among the Gurkhas.”¹¹ He further placed a challenge, “I am not going to give any of this information to you up front. You anthropologists are trained to investigate these cultural things, so please come back after you are done and tell me what I have not found out in my years here.” He soon realized that my objectives were very different. He was not the only one. Other bureaucrats or officials whom I met had similar responses. At social gatherings, they would introduce me as someone who would write a “book on Darjeeling,” which was partially true. At other times the introductory sentence would be “Ms. Sen is here to study the culture of the Gurkhas.” I did not object to any of this for tactical reasons. I got access to people’s opinions about plantation workers, tea production, regional politics and Darjeeling’s future. Many of these interactions confirmed the existence of popular stereotypes about Nepali/Gurkha people.

¹¹ Another term for Nepalis popularized by the British Colonizers. Also spelt as Gorkha.

There was another reason why I went along with their depictions of my research objectives. If I had told bureaucrats or plantation owners in detail about my comparative work on Fair Trade, they would quiz me on why I was interested in small tea farmers. Most plantation authorities and tea bureaucrats were in denial about the presence of small farmer-grown tea. Some old officers of the Darjeeling Planters' Association worked with local NGOs that had become liaisons for transnational Fair Trade bodies. I soon realized that they had very little idea of Fair Trade's history and association with small farmers. Usually, I handed these people my card followed by my much practiced research sound-bite. Immediately there would be comments on how local tea farmers were numerically insignificant and yet foreigners were really interested in them. They would ask me the reasons behind this spurt of interest, which has really blossomed since 2004. I would have a tough time convincing them that I was on to something, and the small farmers were not only significant for western buyers but also for plantations in Darjeeling.

Once the plantation owner realized that I was not studying "Gurkha customs," he made an effort to monitor my interactions within the plantation. Mapping "Fairness" through plantation ethnography was a real test of patience. People had very little spare time and the workers who were articulate and informative were hesitant to share their views in spite of knowing that I did not intend to put them at risk. Every conversation started with informants requesting that I not repeat any of this information to the management or co-workers. The

strict discipline of field and factory life was made unbearable by the presence of “*chamchās*” (henchmen of the planter) who literally reported on every aspect of workers’ and “visitors’” work and leisure routines. I would be surprised when the planter would meet me at some corner of his 400 or so acre estate and know the details of my previous day’s movements, although we had not met in weeks. He teased me about becoming too close to certain people. In an indirect way a compliment about how well I spoke the local language, it was always a reminder about his suspicion.

Whenever I asked the planter about collective bargaining, I was directed to closely observe the activities of the Joint Body and was rarely encouraged to talk to key union members. The union was not a taboo topic between me and the planter, but he made a tremendous effort to convince me that the plantation had no “union problems.” He even told me, “Please let me know what you learnt from members of the Joint Body about their feelings about Fair Trade.” His standard statement was, “The sustainable revolution has already been unleashed in Sonakheta¹² through organic farming and Fair Trade. It was supposed to produce new energy, prosperity and improve plantation life, but we do not know what good things are in store, and I rely on you for all this emerging information.” Apart from politeness, this statement was a reminder that nothing unethical could happen in a Fair Trade certified sustainable plantation. He still wanted me to follow closely the “tribal culture” of various Nepali groups present

¹² This is the pseudonym for the plantation where I did my fieldwork.

in his estate. He considered it natural that as an anthropologist, I would be interested in tribal customs, as we study culture.

Plantation workers in the beginning were extremely hesitant to talk to me, even when I had started living in their homes. They saw me as an acquaintance of the planter. Some saw me as his guest, but they soon realized that I was far more interested in them than him. Compared to how quickly I established rapport with the members of the cooperative tea farmers, it took longer to break ice in the plantation. I soon realized that many of the plantation workers assumed that I would be a natural ally of the owner and manager since we were all Bengali. I was an “other” in a community where Bengalis are seen as outsiders. (I detail the history of these fraught ethnic relations in the next chapter.) Bengalis and Nepalis have deep animosities because the latter feel exploited by Bengalis or plains people. The Nepalis in Darjeeling consider themselves to be *pāhāDi* or hill people. For both Bengalis and Nepalis, the perceived differences result in thinking about each community through stereotypes. It should be noted that such hostility also exists between Nepalis, Marwaris, Biharis (other non-Nepali groups in Darjeeling), and other dominant regional groups that exist in Darjeeling. The Bengali hatred of course is special, since Darjeeling is a district in the state of West Bengal, and the Gorkhaland movement was aimed at separation from Bengal to form a separate Nepali state within the Indian nation. Bengalis were thus envisioned as immediate oppressors. While the Bengalis tend to see Nepalis in stereotypical ways, such as

they are simple people, they drink a lot, Nepali women are outgoing, and they are fickle, Nepalis tend to see all Bengalis as supporting communism, as sharp, privileged, and not as well dressed as themselves. These are the dominant tropes. Being a Bengali and discussing politics with Nepalis was going to be difficult. However, my eagerness to learn and quick grasp of Nepali made people around me think that I was someone they could trust with their ideas. Once I had stayed in the two sites long enough, the elderly women would refer to me as “*Darjeeling ko Chori*” (“Girl from Darjeeling”) when they introduced me to strangers. In the beginning most people used to think that I was just going to be around for a couple of weeks, as in my preliminary visits. Soon they realized that I was there for the long haul. They were slowly “getting” my research objectives.

I shared some other social differences with the people in the plantation and the cooperative. Caste was less a concern, compared to class. Although I was upper-caste, I shared a common religion with most informants, Hinduism. I also got along very well with people of Buddhist leanings because I did not practice the strict dietary restrictions like a quintessential Hindu—I was not averse to eating beef or pork. Sometimes my open dietary practices were a cause of concern for very orthodox Hindu families. But soon they realized that I was not exactly invested in being a devout Hindu, and of course, I ate whatever they cooked at home. I was, however, forbidden from touching the kitchen *chulā* (cooking fire) in Hindu homes even though I was upper caste. The fact that I was married to a Hindu man went in my favor, but not without complications. The

mark of a married Hindu woman was wearing vermillion, which I did not use. Initially this resulted in some serious doubt about whether I was actually married. I had some wedding pictures in my laptop which came in handy. But being thirty years old without children was another serious issue. My respondents advised me to have children before I returned to Darjeeling again. But being a married woman made it easy for me to discuss delicate household matters, and women assumed that I would understand their personal problems. There were many things I learnt about these women that they asked me not to write about. I will honor these requests.

There were times during fieldwork when I found myself to be like an informant. Many tea bureaucrats would try to understand many things about the Fair Trade movement through me. The most difficult questions were from tea farmers and some plantation workers who wanted to know why all of a sudden white people were interested in helping them. Many tea farmers initially saw Fair Trade as NGO aid or government aid. Some joked, saying that there was an overflow of money they got from selling their tea. They would use the English word “flow” to interpret FLO (the certifier with which they had become familiar). This was a very useful way for me to engage people on how they viewed Fair Trade and if at all they thought they benefited from it.

Chapter Précis:

In addition to the introduction, the dissertation consists of five chapters. In chapter one, I detail the social and economic features of tea production in Darjeeling. I begin with the history of Nepali tea workers in India, focusing on the political developments within the Nepali community in India. I trace the consequences of minority politics on the region's labor movement. In this chapter, I also detail the history of plantation and non-plantation tea production in Darjeeling, detailing the structure of the plantation and the tea cooperative where I conducted my fieldwork. The chapter also includes a discussion of Fair Trade operations in Darjeeling.

Chapter two takes a closer look at the gendered labor struggles within plantations. In this chapter I demonstrate how ethnic citizenship politics has replaced labor politics in Darjeeling's plantation unions and how women interpret these changes. Women's participation and evaluation of Fair Trade policies was influenced by their engagement with the changing landscape of labor politics in Darjeeling. In such a scenario, women felt that Fair Trade had little effectiveness because it bypassed structural issues within systems of collective bargaining. Few of the plantation workers knew about Fair Trade.

Chapter three analyzes women's tea farmers situated interpretation of Fair Trade regulations. Here I underscore the tensions between an abstract global justice, as conceived by the alternative trade movements, and women tea farmers' concrete and local aspirations for justice. I show how the empowerment

directives of Fair-Trade are reinterpreted by women tea farmers, who use these global discourses of Fair Trade and re-articulate its spirit and ideas by coining local terminologies of *swaccha vyāpār* (transparent or fair business). This reframing, I argue, enables these women to negotiate with local and trans-local power structures to demand justice and equality in their family and community. Such re-articulation also simultaneously unsettles Fair Trade directives and existing gender ideologies in the community.

In chapter four, I analyze the communicative and symbolic dimensions of women's work in the plantation and the cooperative that had distinct effect on intra household relations at the two sites. Fair Trade related activities produced a "new social landscape" of community and household relations in the cooperative, which not only affected the "conjugal contract" but also social and economic relations with the extended household. Women's re-appropriation of Fair Trade and their economic ventures in the cooperative area escalated household conflicts over the material and symbolic implications of women's work. In the plantation household, conflicts were independent of Fair Trade activities, although they also centered on implications of women's gainful employment and its symbolic dimensions.

In chapter five, I compare the political subjectivities of women plantation workers and women tea farmers in light of the institutional structures in which they are embedded. Women's self-knowledge or subjectivity (Foucault 1994) is shaped by the institutional structures which govern their lives. Their specific self-

knowledge influences the nature and scale of engagement with Fair Trade organic issues. I have argued throughout this work that women plantation workers find a situation more averse to large scale collective organizing. Even individual actions challenging systemic nepotism or workplace hazards — everyday resistance — are rare. Women tea farmers on the other hand are engaged in activities which challenge both the hegemonic male domination of the cooperative and adversities at home. They are refashioning themselves as entrepreneurs, trying the undo the exploitation of middlemen. In this chapter I demonstrate how the difference in the political subjectivities of women at two sites impacts the scope of their collectives (*Ghumāuri* vs. Women's Wing) to impact social change and gain a public voice. Women tea farmers and women plantation workers see themselves as very different kinds of actors embedded in their respective institutions.

In the conclusion, I summarize my findings and discuss the theoretical implications of the ethnographic findings that I have presented in this dissertation.

Chapter 1: The Social and Economic Landscape of Darjeeling Tea

For us, what is conventional tea is organic. When organic and Fair Trade inspectors ask us about our production practices, at times they are confused because they think we have no idea about organic production and we have switched to organic production recently. They ask us what we used during conventional production; I tell them our convention is organic!

Secretary of the Tea Farmers Cooperative

I am confident Ms. Sen, Darjeeling's pride resides in its plantations. There is no tea grown outside it.

Head of the Darjeeling Tea Planter's Association

The history of Darjeeling tea is full of contradictions. Events in Darjeeling's tea industry are influenced by both local politics and transnational initiatives. These events, near and far, both influence tea production and social relations of tea production. What I present in this chapter, is a quick glance at the recent developments in Darjeeling's tea industry, concentrating mostly on events after 1947, the year of India's independence from being a British colony.¹³ I focus on the current picture of ethicized labor politics (till 2007 August), on changes within plantations, the growing importance of small tea farmers and a brief history of Fair Trade operations specific to Darjeeling. These historical and contemporary events are important to contextualize the arguments and findings presented in this dissertation.

¹³ For a very detailed description of the tea industry in North Bengal, please see Piya Chatterjee's work on tea production in North Bengal (2001).

Demographic Profile

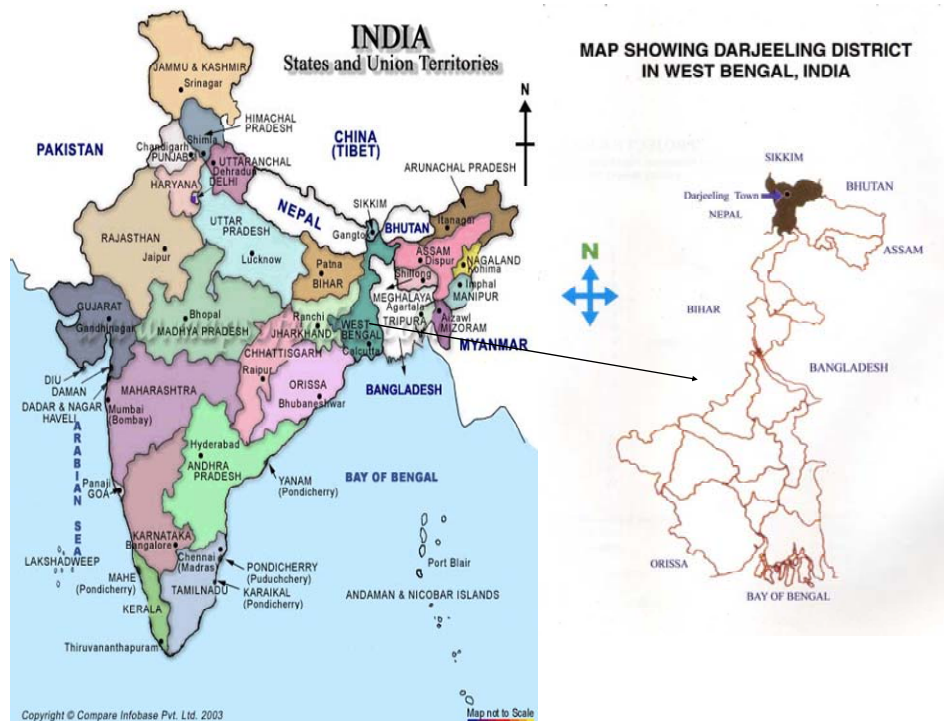


Photo 1. Map of India and West Bengal District showing Darjeeling.

Darjeeling is the northern most district of the state of West Bengal in India. Elevation in the district varies from 800-2000 meters above sea level. There are three sub-divisions in the district, Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong. The majority of the tea is grown in the two subdivisions of Darjeeling and Kurseong. The district of Darjeeling covers a total area of 238669 square kilometers with a total population of 1299919 (620596 female and 679323 male). Urban population is 396060 (184061 female and 211999 male) covering 69.28 sq. km area. Rural population is 9, 03, 859 (436535 female and 467324 male) covering 1967.80 sq. km area. The sex ratio is 914 females per 1000 males.

76.88% of the population is rural with 53.99% small and marginal farmers (1991 Census). Most have very small land holding and practice subsistence agriculture. The major food crops are maize, potato, radish, pulses, and vegetables. The major cash crops grown here are ginger, orange, cardamom, turmeric, broom sticks and tea. Floriculture is also an important industry, especially cultivation of orchids.

More than 40% of the area is under forest. 4.56% of the population lives in forest villages and forest fringe areas (per 1991 census). Darjeeling is rich in non-timber forest products. The area has a vast reserve of medicinal plants.

More than 20% of the districts area is under plantations. Roughly 40 percent of the population is involved in plantation work. Among plantation workers, 60% are women. There is great secrecy among plantations about the percentage of their permanent workers. A local NGO reports that only 20% of the workers are permanent and are covered by the provisions of the Plantation Labor Act of 1951, which guarantees workers a federally fixed minimum wage, ration, basic health care and housing.

Tourism is an important industry for Darjeeling. Both domestic and international tourists frequent the district year round. In recent years there has been a spurt in eco-tourism and tea-tourism ventures.

The Social and Political Landscape of Darjeeling

Knowledge of the social landscape of Darjeeling is important in order to understand local concerns about economic and political justice. The majority of

Darjeeling's population is Nepali, and Nepali people are a minority group in India. The Nepali community in Darjeeling has been engaged in gaining more resources and recognition within the Indian nation-state. After India's independence from British rule in 1947, India maintained an open boundary with Nepal. Citizens of each country could move freely across borders, work and live in India and Nepal, but they did not have voting rights.¹⁴ Since colonial times, people from Nepal migrated to work in Darjeeling's tea plantations. Nepali men were recruited to fight in the British Army, and to work as guards and cooks in colonial households. Women were employed in tea plantations. Migration from Nepal continues today, but because of this open border policy, Nepali migrants, even if they have legal citizenship rights in India, are frequently called outsiders. They experience cultural marginality. During my fieldwork, the main accusations that Nepali youth had towards rest of India was that Indian citizens of non-Nepali descent treat them as foreigners even though most Nepali families have been in Darjeeling for generations.

While Nepali migrants have settled in other parts of India, such as Delhi or Dehra Dun (in North Western India), or Assam, in Darjeeling district, they are the majority. Because of their different language, culture, customs, and their movement back and forth between Nepal and India, there developed a feeling among non-Nepali Indian citizens that Nepalis belong to Nepal. Because of

¹⁴ Nepali migrants came to Darjeeling almost 180 years ago, and through their stay have acquired citizenship rights. Barring new migrants, most Nepalis in Darjeeling have voting rights and ration cards. Ration cards entitle them to subsidized purchase of food items from government run grocery stores. In India, ration cards are used as proof of Indian citizenship.

cultural discrimination, Nepali people also felt like outsiders in spite of their legal entitlements.

Contrary to mainstream notions, that Nepalis are possibly more loyal to their “homeland” – Nepal – than to India, my ethnographic experiences reveal that the relationship between Nepali people in Darjeeling with their original homeland was contested. Many of my informants, even now, have a picture of the Royal Family of Nepal in their homes, but through my interviews I learnt that they consider themselves part of India because this is where they work and have settled, in spite of visits to Nepal. Visits to Nepal were also influenced by economic well-being. None of my informants, whether from the plantation or from the cooperative, reported visits to Nepal.

Women tea farmers and plantation workers also perceived Nepal to be an underdeveloped country that has lesser prospects than India. Some of my informants would have male family members or neighbors get brides from Nepal. Women tea farmers explained to me that many agricultural households preferred women from Nepal as brides because they were supposedly more simple (*sidhā*), and they were also good at agricultural work. My informants also mentioned that cross-border marriages were now few. Narratives of Nepali men revealed that they wanted to migrate to Mumbai, Goa, Delhi, and Bangalore for work. Nepal was not a viable option for them. In recent years, migration from Nepal has increased to other parts of India, especially Delhi, since the state of West Bengal (where Darjeeling is located) and Eastern India in general are seen

as lacking in employment prospects. The complexity of the ties between Nepalis in India to their original country is lost in popular representations of Nepali people.

In post independence in India, a Nepali watchman in a middleclass Indian home was a quintessential representation of the community and its place in the nation. Soon after my return from Darjeeling in September 2007, there was widespread violence in Darjeeling because a radio jockey in Delhi had made sarcastic remarks about a Nepali boy becoming the “Indian Idol.”¹⁵ The radio jockey continued his sarcastic remarks saying that everyone in Delhi would have to guard their own homes and businesses now that there would be no Nepali people to guard homes and communities as Nepali boys were entering talent contests. There would be no roadside *momo*¹⁶ shops in Delhi.

Young Nepali men in Darjeeling reacted violently to these insults to their community and Nepali men. Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF)¹⁷ members called for a strike, and the radio station had to go off air for a while. Knowing how much my informants wanted Prashant (the Nepali contestant in

¹⁵ This talent contest is very similar to American Idol.

¹⁶ *Momo* is a Nepali style dumpling very popular in India, and primarily considered as a Nepali delicacy. *Momo* is originally a Tibetan delicacy.

¹⁷ GNLF stands for Gorkha National Liberation Front the dominant political party based in Darjeeling. The reason why the word “Gorkha” is used to designate Nepali people in India has a very complicated history. For this chapter, I use Gorkha and Nepali as synonymous. When I was doing my dissertation fieldwork this was the dominant political party in the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) and also in the plantation labor unions. Before GNLF was formed, in the pre Gorkhaland agitation days, CPIM (Communist Part of India, Marxist) was the dominant political party influencing the labor unions. After the agitation, this party lost all its political teeth in Darjeeling. The Communists in India are parliamentary communists, more like social democrats.

Indian Idol) to win in “Indian Idol,” I was not surprised by the violence that followed these remarks.

Common literacy around the Nepali community in India is formed through the image of “*bāhādur*” “*kānchā*” or “*kānchi*” (stereotypical names of Nepali people) that appear in numerous Hindi films. Nepalis were accepted as trusted servants, and through their occupation provided security to Indian homes and the nation. In many ways, Nepali people still are taken for granted in these occupations. It is common in India to hear derogatory stereotypes about Nepali men, especially about the work they can perform, their stupidity and their faithfulness. The owner of Sonakheta frequently used these stereotypes with me in our conversations. Nepali women are seen as hard working, but whimsical and sexually promiscuous.

Nepali people share their marginality with other people from India’s north-east.¹⁸ Nepali people believe that they are oppressed by the Bengalis or Marwaris (other regional groups originating outside Darjeeling) who occupy important offices and dominate business ventures. They were also of the view that Nepali people suffer disadvantage in social and occupational settings because of these enduring stereotypes about their capabilities. In the places

¹⁸ The majority of the population of India’s North Eastern States, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh and Parts of Assam have different physical features. In common parlance they are said to have “mongoloid” features. They have much lighter skin, straight hair, and smaller eyes. Dietary practices also differ. These differences are used as markers of racial difference, which then are used to culturally marginalize people from India’s North East. In my own experience of having many close friends from Nagaland and Manipur, they would jokingly call me Indian. They would complain to me that other girls from “India” think that women from India’s North East were sexually promiscuous. States in India’s North East are also under-developed, perpetuating existing feelings of marginality among people from the North East, including Darjeeling.

where I did my fieldwork, the standard advice given to a migrating man was, “Please do not end up becoming *bāhādur* or *kānchā*(servant), try to do something better.” Such feelings of inferiority have deep historical roots in colonial labor recruitment and at present are amplified by the poor economic condition of Darjeeling. Nepali women were very anxious about the future of their sons and even if they were in jobs outside Darjeeling women feared the kinds of jobs their male family members were doing.

In Darjeeling there were very few employment opportunities for men besides being drivers and some opportunities in the plantation. The latter was dominated by women. When men found jobs, they were menial. Nepali people have always had to work under a Bihari, Marwai, Kashmiri or Bengali business owner in Darjeeling. Even today in the remotest villages, the main grocery/supply store is owned by a Bihari/Marwari.

Most of my informants expressed their marginality by referring to themselves as *pāhāDi*, which in Nepali means belonging to the hills. In India, hill people see themselves as different from people in the plains. It is not a class, race or caste based difference, but implies personality type, like “simple,” “hard-working,” “loyal,” “honest.” It implies a particular kind of personhood. Among Nepali’s in India, the invocation of *pāhāDi*-ness is pronounced because Nepalis find in this usage an effective way of maintaining their distinctiveness from plains people, whom they perceive as oppressors, as cunning, smart and privileged. *pāhāDi* -ness simultaneously expresses marginality and

pride/difference. Nepali plantation workers and tea farmers took pride in their *pāhāDi* identity. Many Nepali people would say, “*hami pāhāDi majale kām garchu*” / “we *pāhāDis* work with great zest” or “*India lai bachaunu ko lagi pāhāDi lai चाहिन्छा*” / “to save India you need a *pāhāDi*” (alluding to the presence of Nepalis in the Indian army). Political parties in the hills also used *pāhāDi* -ness strategically to build local party loyalties.

Leaders of the Gorkhaland movement in the 1980s sought to change this situation of marginality and underdevelopment among Nepali people through the formation of a separate Nepali state. This Nepali state was supposed to represent the interests of the Nepali people. This particular form of recognition politics shaped the regions political developments. The movement for a separate state was violent; 1200 people were killed, mostly men. In 1988, the dream of a Nepali/Gorkha State was temporarily compromised when the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) was formed to oversee the development of Darjeeling, and provide respectable work for more Nepalis in DGHC offices. This was GNLF’s promise and a way for them to gain legitimacy in the eyes of Nepali people. Unemployed male Nepali youth were particularly attracted to this new party and the movement because they faced chronic unemployment in Darjeeling. Nepali women were also supportive of the new party because it promised a possible brighter future for their sons, brothers, and husbands.

The negative images of Nepali people were also gendered representations of a minority community. Women were seen as hard working (bolstered by their

predominance in the plantations and markets), and men were seen as belligerent, lazy and prone to alcoholism. The images, along with growing discrimination in the rest of India and the lack of opportunities for Nepali youth (except for the army and police services), have led to a crisis in Nepali masculinity. The demoralization among young Nepali men and the problem of substance abuse was a cause for much alarm in Darjeeling. The culmination of pent up anxiety was seen during the Gorkhaland agitation of 1986, when Nepali GNLF members killed other Nepalis suspected of having other party loyalties.

The mid-1980s were important times in Darjeeling and had significance for the future of the region's labor unions. Events during this time changed the course of plantation labor union and party politics. The district prepared for a sub-national uprising for separate statehood, which culminated in the late 1980s. Many of my informants reported unrests in the plantation, and even inter-union fighting. From written records and interviews, I have found that till the mid 1980s, most labor unions were dominated by various communist parties, most notably the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPIM). Nepalis, who wanted a separate state from just being a district in the state of West Bengal in eastern India, also wanted their "local" party and this gave birth to GNLF. Communist loyalists were forced to join the GNLF, at times forcibly, because being a Nepali meant supporting the "local" party, the Gorkha/Nepali party. Some people joined the GNLF and became natural loyalists and others recount stories of being violently forced into joining the GNLF. The thrust of the movement was to have

a separate state which would uphold the identity of Nepalis as citizens of India, contesting their popular representation in the mainstream as foreigners. Women also participated in the movement, but mostly as by-standers.¹⁹

The negative representations of Nepali males in Indian society have created a crisis in masculinity, exacerbated in household and community politics, because of the past and present prevalence of women's participation in the labor force (detailed in chapters two and four). While women have become important in the household economy, men have been faced with high unemployment in Darjeeling, resulting in massive migration of Nepali men to other places in India. Working for or networking with the local party (GNLF) thus became a way for Nepali male youth to spend their time. This was not just the case in Darjeeling, but in many other parts of India where unemployment is rampant and male youth end up working for local political parties. But it was not just about spending time in the party; the formation of the Hill council meant that party involvement would lead to a possible employment in the hill council (DGHC) or the party.

These major political developments shifted the tenor of union politics within plantations. GNLF supporters urged their party members to be good *pāhāDi*, work hard and not engage in unnecessary trouble, like the communist unions in the plains.

¹⁹ A recent newspaper article discusses the deliberate strategy of the 2nd Gorkhaland Movement and its solidarity with women from all walks of life, which was not the case in 1986. In fact, the first martyr of the new movement was a woman who died in a recent police firing. The 2nd Gorkhaland movement started in October 2007.

After the agitation, plantation unions focused on getting people into DGHC jobs since plantations had very few work opportunities for men and plantation employment was stagnating. Many small farmers (including members of the tea cooperative) in the post-Gorkhaland period got their land titles. They were ardent supporters of the GNLF. This ownership of land influenced their identity, and at present, they see themselves as “farmers” and not plantation workers. This ownership of land resulted in the formation of the cooperative and strengthened the small farmers’ movement to get government recognition for their tea. Plantation workers, also loyal to GNLF, could not show many tangible benefits of the agitation as the GNLF could not solve the unemployment problem by increasing plantation recruitment (detailed in chapter 2).

These historical developments shaped the contours of social justice as expressed in Darjeeling. In the early 1980s the GNLF was born out of the collective desire of Nepali people in India to have their own state within India, which would be called “Gorkhaland.” Whenever I refer to agitation, it means Gorkhaland Agitation of 1986-88. As I write this dissertation, Darjeeling is under the grips of a 2nd Gorkhaland Agitation because the first Gorkhaland agitation ended without the formation of the Nepali state. The leadership of DGHC between 1988 and 2007 had also become dictatorial. In 1988, the DGHC was formed, which just led to more decentralized administrative power for the local state in Darjeeling. Subhash Ghising was its chairman. Ghising was seen as a dictator by many locals, and 22 years after his rule his closest allies ousted him

from power by forming a new party Gorkha Jana Mukti Morcha (GJM). This new party had similar viewpoints as the GNLF led by Ghising, but the new movement promises to be less violent and more Gandhian (peaceful) in its approach and tactics, but still wants a separate Gorkha state. From my content analysis of newspaper articles and personal interviews with people, I gather that this new party GJM and its tactics are being questioned by minority political groups in Darjeeling as being non-democratic and coercive, just like the first Gorkhaland Agitation.

Gendered Distinctions within Darjeeling Nepalis

While Nepali minorities in India are victims of stereotyping and economic disparities, there are many significant differences among them. These differences are both socio-economic and cultural, and are deeply gendered.



Photo 2.1. By author, May 2007

The beautiful smiling faces of Nepali plantation workers greet people at every corner in Darjeeling. However, the glowing presence of women tea producers tells a partial truth about the gender ideologies associated with their work.

In one of my very first trips to Darjeeling I was traveling in a car full of people making the journey from Siliguri (in the foothills) to Darjeeling town. In the three-hour journey, it was common for strangers to talk amongst themselves about local politics, tourist destinations, tea, films, TV shows, religion, soccer, etc. There was also sharing of personal information on these trips. When I told one of my male co-passengers²⁰ that I was going to do research among plantation workers, he told me a joke about the 3 Ws of Darjeeling. Apparently one could not trust its weather, its women and the wine. He implied that women in the plantation were promiscuous, repeating the stereotype about plantation workers. There were other stereotypes about women plantation workers in Darjeeling that I encountered in non-plantation villages. Unlike women from the plains, Nepali women were seen as strong, hard working, but at the same time with loose morals and of unpredictable nature (see also Chatterjee 2001). Women plantation workers were accused of spending a long time outside their homes, being promiscuous, and prone to alcoholism. They were also positively represented as “deft tea workers” and “expert pluckers.” These stereotypes were not only used

²⁰ This male passenger was a Nepali NGO official. While Nepali men and women object to the use of stereotypes to describe their lives, they most often use these stereotypes themselves. Class also plays a big role. The passenger was of the same socio-economic background as mine. It is common for people outside plantations to think of plantation work and women in negative ways.

by outsiders. Upper-class men and women of Nepali origin also used these stereotypes.

Non-plantation tea producers like the women tea farmers in my study, engaged in household tea production, were seen as dutiful tradition-bound wives. Ironically, women tea farmers and plantation workers were at most times engaged in the same task of growing and harvesting tea, but the ideologies associated with their work varied significantly. The tea farming households also distinguished themselves from plantation households. Both women plantation workers and market women were seen as “*chuchchi*” (with sharp tongue) and “*bāthi*” (street smart). Tea farmers saw their female relatives as being “*sidhā*” (simple/straight). The ownership of land was a major factor in the tea farmers’ self perception. Male tea farmers took pride in the fact that their women did not have to go to work.

These gendered social distinctions shaped women’s practices and subjectivities, as I will describe in the rest of the chapters. Women plantation workers, in the absence of strong unions would be afraid to get into arguments with their male bosses; they would fear being called “*chuchchi*” tarnishing their already negative representations. Women tea farmers on the other hand engaged in defying their image as docile housewives, using Fair Trade and seeking recognition for their misrecognized labor. To understand the distinct gender ideologies about tea work in Darjeeling, it is important to understand the history and different systems of tea production, which I outline in the following sections.

Plantations and the Reincarnation of Tea

The history of Darjeeling is deeply intertwined with the production of tea. This green gold has given this dreamy Himalayan town its people, culture and history, and even today forms the backbone of Darjeeling's economy (formally and informally). Tea bushes were planted in Darjeeling about 150 years ago by a British planter who brought them from China in the days of the British Raj. Tea is cultivated at altitudes ranging from 600-2000 meters. The cool moist climate, sloping mountainous terrains, and sufficient rainfall gave Darjeeling tea its unique muscatel flavor. Today there are about 87 plantations out of which 30 are certified organic producers, and the number of organic plantations is growing.²¹ At present about 17500 hectares of land are invested in growing this tea, yielding about 10-11 million kilograms annually. Control of tea gardens take three distinct forms: (1) foreign control through transnational corporations, (2) Indian tea companies (public or private), and (3) joint ventures between foreign or national interests. Plantation owners, however, lease the land from the state and pay revenue from the profits earned.

According to the Indian Tea Board, 80% of the tea that is grown in this area is exported to Europe, North America and Japan. In my interviews with planters, the export figure varied between 90%-98%, depending on how much their plantation exported. Darjeeling tea can sell anywhere between Rs100 (\$2

²¹ From my interviews with Darjeeling Tea Association officers, I understand that there are no official statistics about the exact amount of organic gardens, but I was given a rough estimate that 30 plantations were certified organic and the number was growing.

approximately) a kilogram to Rs.18, 000 (\$400) a kilogram, depending upon its quality. Most ordinary people in India do not drink Darjeeling tea because it is unaffordable.

While the plantations and tea are a matter of pride, some see plantation tea mono-cropping as a reason for the district's economic impoverishment. They argue that the plantation lobby has prevented any other manufacturing industries to flourish here for the fear of losing their cheap labor (Bhowmik 1981).

All plantations growing Darjeeling tea have to be registered as a Darjeeling brand. This is actually a confounding issue since the Darjeeling tea growing area is not synonymous with the administrative district of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC). The latter includes eleven plantations in the plains (*terai*) area, but international buyers do not accept this as orthodox Darjeeling tea. In fact, the tea grown in the plains is of a different quality, considered inferior to Darjeeling tea. In the state of West Bengal, Darjeeling district produces most of its tea for export. The plains tea produced in the foothills of Darjeeling is mostly for domestic consumption and exported to the Middle East and Russia. The tea grown in Darjeeling is known as "orthodox black tea," and the variety grown in the foothills is called "CTC" (crush, tumble and curl). They are products of different tea plants. The prices of these two kinds of tea are very different.

These confusing distinctions have also created trade problems. About 40 million kilograms of tea sold in the world market were under the label of Darjeeling, but not produced in this certified Darjeeling area. In the wake of the World Trade Organization (WTO) regulations to protect intellectual property rights within sovereign domains, the government of India has defined a specific area in which Darjeeling tea can be grown. It has promulgated a Geographical Indications act that will enforce it. The Tea Board of India is also pushing for a registered trademark for Darjeeling tea, which will certify its origin in every transaction. The forging of labels in the international market also hints at the huge demand for Darjeeling tea, which amounts to just 1% of the total tea output in India but is remarkable in terms of the money that it can command in the world market.

Darjeeling tea is a niche variety in the tea market, protected by Geographical Indications as for champagne. Champagne is bound spatially, and so is Darjeeling tea. In the world of tea, “Darjeeling” is the most famous. Tea from India can be known as Assam, Nilgiri, and generic Indian tea, but it is Darjeeling which is the only “orthodox” variety. Darjeeling is a leafy variety compared to the round dry leaves found in most tea bags of lesser quality, which can come from India and any other part of the world depending on the blender’s taste and convenience. It has a distinct flavor that its connoisseurs recognize just by touching it to their palette. Darjeeling is a very common ingredient in “English Breakfast” blends. Blends called “Irish Breakfast” contain lower grade

stronger black teas from Assam (India) or elsewhere. It is the specialty of the Darjeeling brand which makes boundary disputes very strong. Many plantations want to be part of the chosen group that will enjoy a much higher price and prestige in the world of tea.

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 was a dark moment in the Indian tea industry. Plantations of North West Bengal including Darjeeling were no exception to this general downturn in the tea market. Because of political turmoil in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the assured market of the former Soviet Union was no longer available. Together with these political developments, other non-traditional tea producing countries also offered low prices for similar quality tea. Kenya and Sri Lanka gave stiff competition. According to some plantation owners, the flooding of Indian markets with cheap aerated drinks reduced domestic consumption of tea, adding to the tea crisis.

Darjeeling was just recovering from the scars of the Gorkhaland movement (discussed earlier), during which a large part of the industry had reduced production. At the end of the movement, the tea industry was faced with this turbulent tea market. Darjeeling tea producers started searching for new markets in the UK and the US.

Darjeeling tea was popular in the West, especially United Kingdom and Europe, and the market was also big in Japan. However, the adversities for plantation owners had not yet ended. The specialty market in tea was the domain of health conscious consumers who sought a wholesome cup devoid of

chemicals/pesticides. This was a time when food scares dominated Western countries, especially Europe (see Friedberg 2004). Consumers were also increasingly concerned about the socio-economic conditions of the people and communities where this special cup was produced. There was a growing interest in recognizing the rights of producers in third world nations who toiled in dreadful working conditions and were vulnerable in the turbulent world market.

On my very first trips to Darjeeling in 2004, the big bright red billboard on my way from the Airport had the following phrase “Tazo, the reincarnation of Tea.”



Photo 2.2. by Author, May 29th 2004

The phrase stuck to me, and I saw it being used by plantation managers and publicity personnel in the subsequent months. The reincarnation was essential

because of a changed market scenario. The recent shift to organic and biodynamic tea production was a response to this demand. In the mid 1990s, huge shipments of Darjeeling tea were sent back from Europe and Japan because of the high chemical residues found in them. Although the tea produced by chemical intensive methods was of superior quality, the returned shipments made some plantations switch to organic production methods. The decision to switch was not an easy one, as I will explain later.

Although plantations still provide the order of reason in Darjeeling, they felt the need to form new alliances with the region's "illegal tea producers." In Darjeeling, plantations were recognized as legal spaces for tea production. As indicated earlier, "Geographically Indicated," place-specific branding by the state and confirmed global laws stipulated that Darjeeling tea could only be produced within the 87 recognized tea plantations. Any tea produced outside these boundaries is labeled as illegal. Plantations were and still are forbidden from buying tea from outside Darjeeling, meaning outside these 87 plantations. The Darjeeling tea logo can only be used for tea produced within these plantations. In the tea world, Darjeeling tea means tea grown in plantations. This is the more publicized history of Darjeeling tea production. There is also an informal shadow economy of Darjeeling tea, which has been around for many years, but has not been brought into the folds of the tea industry. There are no official statistics on small tea farmers in Darjeeling.

The presence of legal rules of tea growing and processing do not forbid plantations from buying green leaf tea from “illegal” tea farmers present in Darjeeling. Every now and then there will be news in the papers, or at best planter’s gossip, that a particular plantation is buying tea from small growers in India or from Ilam (a district of Nepal that shares its boundaries with Darjeeling). The state-recognized boundaries of tea production, in a sense, have enabled this shadow economy of tea to thrive in Darjeeling for many years. This form of boundary maintenance and subsequent crossing, as I found out, is increasing in the present. Plantations seeking or labeled as certified Organic-Fair Trade are finding it hard to keep up with the declining tea production due to organic conversion. Production falls by 30% when plantations abandon chemical induced production to adopt organic methods. Pests are hard to control in the absence of chemical use.

Small tea farmers in Darjeeling’s informal economy, who have depended on these illegal circuits and have had no connections with the global market, are now finding new ways to challenge their disenfranchisement within this tea industry. They are thankful for local NGOs, who are the local face of a new organic movement in the west, bringing these farmers in touch with transnational agencies and certifiers of organic produce to increase their visibility in international tea trade. In this dissertation, I draw attention to some (positive) impacts of transnational alternative trade campaigns for the regions’ small

farmers, who are rarely talked about in the Tea Board or tea planter's community. It brings to light an alternative history of Darjeeling tea production.

The new aesthetics of tea consumption in the West, expressed through a movement for Organic-Fair-Trade certified tea has impacted the spatial politics of Darjeeling's tea industry. Marketing of the cultural difference of foods through these transnational alternative trade movements has engendered a new spatial politics of production in Darjeeling. The new "politics of recognition" (Fraser 1997), manifested through an obsession with "small farmers," their "traditional methods of growing tea," their sustainable lives, and concern about their vulnerability in the global tea market has intensified the struggle over boundaries of legality, territory, and resources in Darjeeling's organic tea producing communities. I will explain the history of Darjeeling's illegal farmers in the next section.

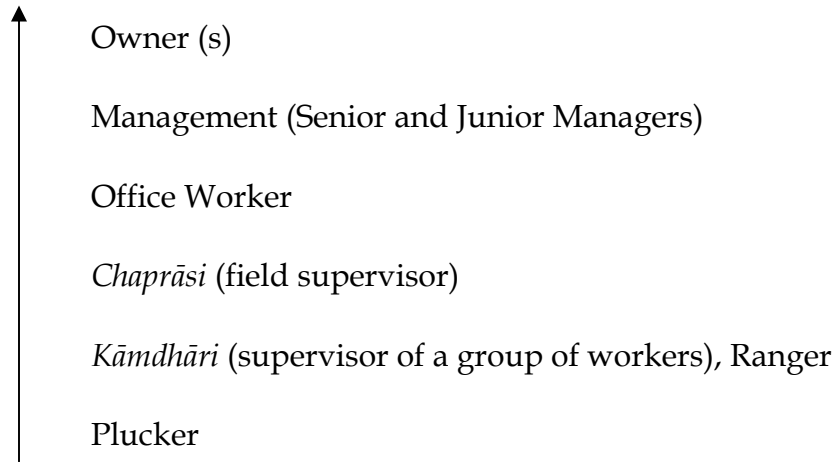
In Darjeeling, the switch from conventional to organic tea production due to alternative trade movements has led to the dependence of the "legal sector," or the plantations, on the "fragile-illegal" spaces and unrecognized producers, a majority of whom are women. While the Fair Trade-Organic movement gives prominence to the so-called "illegal farmers," efforts to secure access to land and market among the "illegal" women tea farmers have gained intensity in the political life of the villages, so long excluded from the global circuits of tea-trade. Women tea farmers, who claim to have kept alive the production of illegal – now

organic tea – feel disadvantaged as male members in their community try to dominate the tea business.

Plantation Structure

The plantation in which I did my fieldwork, which I call Sonakheti, has 625 workers of which 70% are women who do the bulk of plucking, pruning, sorting and are involved in every stage of the manufacturing process. Their work day begins at 7:30 am and continues till 4:30 pm with a hour's break for lunch. The plantation system is hierarchical, with the owner/planter in control of every aspect of production and marketing. While the field supervisors, group leaders and ordinary workers/pluckers are mostly Nepali, the management and ownership is dominated by other ethnic groups. The ownership is mostly Marwari, with a few owners being Bengali. The management is a mix of Bengali, Marwari and well-to-do Nepalis. Women mostly occupy the lowest strata of the hierarchy, with a few women group supervisors. Office workers consist of a few women who work as typists and accountants. These women are Nepalis belonging to comparatively wealthy families in the plantation, who could afford a college degree for their children. The daily wage of an ordinary plantation workers is \$1.28 per day (approximately; it varies with the rupee to dollar exchange rate).

Plantation Hierarchy



Plantation hierarchies were also spatially represented. Most plantation workers are provided with housing. The owner and management live in big bungalows with an entourage of maids, cooks, guards and drivers. Ordinary workers live in designated housing areas. Clerical staff (Office workers, *Chāprāsi*, and *Kāmdhāri*) have better housing provisions than ordinary pluckers. Most plantation workers complained that their housing condition was a serious issue. Most homes had water leakages and sanitation was also a major problem. There is a small dispensary in the plantation's main office premises for basic health check-ups. Most plantation homes now have electricity, but some homes which were located far off from the main office did not have electricity.

Plantation workers' families have lived and worked in the same plantation for generations. Upon retirement, each worker's job can be retained by a family member.

Unions, Joint Body and Fair Trade:

All plantation workers in Darjeeling are represented by a union; stipulated by the Plantation Labor Act of 1951. Most unions are affiliated with the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF). Like elsewhere in India, union activities in Darjeeling are closely tied to the aims and ideologies of the political party with which the union is affiliated (see also Fernandes 1997, Chatterjee 2001, Basu 1992). The union's leadership is loyal to the party. In Darjeeling pre-1984 most labor unions were of communist leanings. After the Gorkhaland agitation, majority of unions got affiliated to GNLF, the local ethnic party. Communist or Congress Party affiliated unions are few and weak. In Sonakheti, every worker is a union member, but there is no major union activity. My interviews with retired and active tea bureaucrats revealed that plantation unions are much less militant now than twenty years ago. A point of comparison was the plains tea garden unions which are non-GNLF unions and are affiliated with Center of Indian Trade Unions [CITU, Communist Party of India (Marxist)] or Congress, the major political parties in the rest of the state of West Bengal.

At present most plantations also have an organization called a Joint Body . The formation of this group was necessitated by Fair Trade certification. All Fair Trade certified plantations are required to have a Joint Body to make democratic

decisions about the disposal of Fair Trade premium money. According to the Fair Trade certification handbook, the Joint Body is supposed to be a democratic space consisting of a mix of workers, union members and management staff. My informants have repeatedly told me that the Joint Body has union members who are not greatly involved with the union. They do not include the leadership of the union or union representatives who are brave enough to challenge the owner or the management. Worker representatives were handpicked by the owner, and the presence of senior management staff made this space lack any form of democratic decision-making. Plantation Joint Body meetings were abrupt and irregular. A senior woman office worker in the plantation told me that Joint Body meetings were organized when inspectors, researchers or important tea buyers were visiting. When I first visited the plantation, I was invited to attend the meeting where a FLO official was also present. When I interviewed past and present union office holders, they had no idea about what Fair Trade was and said that they were never involved in disbursing Fair Trade funds.



Plantation Landscape

Photo 2.3. By Author (12th July 2004)

This photograph shows a typical plantation landscape. The cluster of homes is workers housing.



Women Plantation
Workers at Work

Photo 2.4. By Author (15th April 2007)

Plantation workers during the peak plucking season

The Shadow History of Tea in Darjeeling

When I began my preliminary research in Darjeeling, I was under the impression that I was going to study the effects of Fair Trade/organic policies on plantation workers. The aesthetics of plantations was so binding on my imagination of Darjeeling that I couldn't believe any tea was grown outside plantations. Tea production was synonymous with rolling hillsides dotted with bushes, spreading out uniformly for miles on an end, very much an effect of centuries of monoculture and large scale plantation production. I was a victim of this aesthetic trap.

As I was getting to know more people in Darjeeling's NGO circle, I heard rumors about "illegal farmers" and their tea cooperative. For me the Darjeeling Planter's Association (DPA)²² was a natural place to enquire about these new and exciting developments in the history of this region. When I asked the head of DPA he insisted that there were no tea farmers in Darjeeling. His self-conscious denial stoked my desire to know about the role of farmers in Darjeeling's economy, especially why no one in places of power wanted to talk about them.

My search soon brought me to the right NGO that was involved in development work among such "illegal" farmers and had organized them into a cooperative. I detail this NGO's history later in the chapter. It was the thick of the monsoon season when I had planned my trip to the illegal niches. The person who was going to guide me to these villages warned me that the road conditions

²² When I returned for fieldwork in 2006, the DPA was renamed as Darjeeling Tea Association (DTA).

were going to be terrible because of the recent landslides due to heavy monsoon rains. Through the heavy monsoon mist, we started the journey, which was approximately 20 kilometers from the center of Darjeeling town. On my journey, the plantation aesthetics dominated my imagination, I asked Pravin (an NGO worker), "How far are we from the tea farmer's lands?" he replied "We are there. Soon I will show you the tea cooperative office and you will meet some people." According to Pravin, my reaction to the strikingly unconventional tea landscape was identical to the tea buyers who come here. An American buyer apparently asked him, "Are you sure this is not some wild variety of tea? How can this even be organic tea, this does not look like an average tea plant." Pravin had the IMO (Institute of Marketology) certificates ready. He said that he loved this moment when people challenged him, and he would show them the paperwork of organic certification. The contradiction of visual aesthetics and taste is an interesting one and outsiders like me let the visual quickly overtake our minds.



Photo 2.5.

Both photographs by author 19th July 2004

In this photograph, an NGO worker who first took me to the “illegal” tea producing areas points to the villages which are concealed by the heavy forestry.



Photo 2.6.

Illegal tea farmers at work. Tea bushes cannot be distinguished from other crops like corn.

The visual aesthetics not only conceal secret tea histories, but gendered stories of survival, trade and activism. Soon I tasted *hathe chia*²³ with a very distinct smoky taste while chatting in the kitchen of a small farmer. I asked Pravin why the tea tasted different. Pravin told me, “When they pluck the leaves and dry it beside the clay ovens, some of the smoke from the oven gets into the tea, which is very sensitive, and the leaves easily take on the flavor of their surroundings. Most people are not used to this smoky taste which happens because of the lack of proper processing units.” It was because of these limitations that members of the cooperative have had to depend on a plantation to make their tea market worthy. The situation might appear grim for the farmers are at the mercy of plantations, but plantations also have to depend on these farmers for economic and strategic marketing purposes. Their desperation has linked them to these illegal communities in ways which affected the latter’s community dynamics.

For plantations the process of conversion to organic is extremely difficult. Soon after India’s independence, chemical-intensive green revolution technologies were adopted by plantations to boost production; tea was one of India’s major exports. Pesticides were used to reduce the effects of pests, which are a perpetual problem in the tea industry even today. When plantations converted to organic pesticides they became less effective in dealing with the pest problem.

²³ Hand rolled tea made by the farmers and their families

During conversion yields declined because of the non-use of chemical fertilizers. This is where the small-scale tea farmers grabbed the plantations' attention. Plantations had to wait for 3 or 4 years for complete organic certification, but they could expedite the process by buying organic tea from illegal farmers. As I understand from my interviews with plantation owners, organic cultivation methods can never match the volume of productivity achieved through chemical intensive techniques. Thus, the informal sector tea farmers producing illegal tea suddenly became part of Darjeeling's new economic transformations. They were cultivating illegal tea so far in the margins of plantations in the shadow of national development. There are various reasons for their tea being illegal, as I will explain shortly.

Farmers by Default:²⁴

Darjeeling's tea farmers own their lands; it is the tea they produce on it which the state, even today, considers illegal. These are 'farmers by default' because they were actually plantation workers during the colonial period and became unemployed when the British owners of the plantations left in 1950 after independence. There are many such cases of abandoned plantations in Darjeeling. Very few scholars and policy makers have documented the history of these communities, except for the local NGO which worked with these communities.

²⁴ The phrase "farmers by default" was used by the NGO workers and they also use the same description in their publications.

After the plantation closed, the people in these plantations then arbitrarily divided the land among themselves and continued growing tea. From interviews with community members, it became clear that they uprooted many tea bushes to make space for other agricultural products in the face of unemployment and immense hardships. Because the plantation closed down, workers destroyed the factory in frustration. At that time, because there were no roads in the community, these forced farmers made dangerous journeys to Darjeeling town to sell whatever they grew.

Due to mono-cropping of tea, these plantation workers did not know how to produce anything else, and almost 100 years of tea mono-cropping had made the land unsuitable for any other forms of agriculture (Tamang 2003). These “farmers” therefore found their way out completely on their own, selling illegal tea. But these farmers due to their marginality had one advantage. The abandoned plantation was away from the state’s attention; there was no use of chemical fertilizers because the farmers simply could not afford it. The people produced superior quality Darjeeling tea through the use of cow dung and compost homemade manure as opposed to the chemical-intensive green revolution technologies. They rolled dried tea leaves beside their *chulās* (clay ovens) in the absence of processing units. They sold this tea in the local market at dirt-cheap prices because they were not legally cultivated, and did not have processing plants to meet government requirements to be exported or sold outside Darjeeling.

The farmers who accidentally practiced “organic” agriculture are now coming to reap some benefits. They have gained international attention from tea buyers in search of an “authentic” cup of Darjeeling tea – just as it was grown during the Raj.²⁵ The latter has raised hopes among these small farmers who had been selling their organic illegal teas in the local market at give-away prices. They had almost given up tea production to grow subsistence crops, which had more value in the local market.

The Cooperative of “Illegal” Tea Farmers²⁶

With the commencement of World War II, the British Empire ran into rough weather and this was felt in the plantations. Finding it difficult to run the tea plantations, British owners frequently sold them to Indian businessmen. The plantation in which the current coop members worked closed in 1956 after many turbulent years. This closure was not abrupt but a slow process lasting a decade. The process made the plantation workers jobless, and a period of turmoil ensued. When the tea estate closed down, the people distributed the land among themselves, which gave birth to new “agricultural” settlements. The distribution of the land was done arbitrarily. The people, for the next decade, survived by selling tea leaves illegally in Darjeeling town or to neighboring plantations. At other times, they felled trees in the tea garden reserve forest and sold firewood

²⁵ I have found out from my life history interviews with older plantation workers that the British planters did not use any pesticides. They used cow-dung. Chemical-intensive methods of tea cultivation were introduced in the 1960s when India adopted the green revolution.

²⁶ Like the plantation, I have not used the name of the cooperative; I just refer to it as a tea cooperative. I deliberately abstain from using the name of the closed plantation, as people will be able to identify the communities.

and charcoal. In 1962 the reserve forest had exhausted and the hope of the tea garden re-opening had receded further, the people, then, began to uproot the tea bushes partially and started to cultivate other crops. They began to grow maize and millet. The production was very low. The lack of knowledge of cultivation and the infertility of the soil were the causes of such low production.

The present cooperative members were mainly 4th and 5th generation daily wage laborers in the closed and abandoned British estate. They depended solely on the tea estate for their livelihood and were not engaged in any other productive economic activity. Agriculture was an alien lifestyle for them in which they failed miserably. The people used to supplement their income by selling milk. Most of the people had bought cows with the loans obtained from the village middlemen at very high interest. The interest rates ranged from 72% to 120% per annum. The milk was bought by the same middlemen, who then sold it in Darjeeling town.

Through the Kisan Sabha (a leftist farmers' union) in 1977, official measurement and distribution of land among the people were initiated, which as I understand from my interviews, was completed after the GNLF came to power in the late 1980s. Informants in the cooperative area attribute their getting land titles to the GNLF, their local party.

In 1973, the first NGO intervention was made in this area. This was a Jesuit NGO run by Catholic missionaries. This NGO helped establish a dairy union and sponsored medical outreach programs. The dairy union ceased to

function once this Jesuit NGO withdrew in the mid-1980s. In 1996, with the intervention of secular branch of the same NGO, the people were organized into a cooperative, with milk as its first product. The tea cooperative started functioning in 1997 and filed its official registration paperwork in early 2007. There were many hurdles to this registration, although plans had been in the pipeline since its inception in 1997. The main impediment was the legal battle to ensure that these lands fell within the geographically indicated Darjeeling tea growing. Although the area of this now-abandoned plantation was at the heart of the “Darjeeling Tea” growing area, the Darjeeling tea bureaucrats have still not responded favorably to registration efforts or to including these farmers within in the designated Darjeeling tea growing area.

In 1996 the NGO conducted a survey among the villagers to find out the development needs of this crisis-ridden community. At that time there were a total of 307 homes and the population was close to 1469 (male 663, female 806). The area also had high illiteracy, women had even lower literacy compared to men. Total land calculated in this survey was 401.92 acres. Animal husbandry and agriculture were the main occupations of the community. The people of this community are mostly *Rais*²⁷ and *Chettris* with a few *Mukhias*, *Biswakarmas*, *Gurungs* and *Tamangs* who are all members of the Nepali community with Nepali being the common and binding language.

²⁷ The italicized words indicate the various Nepali caste groups present in the coop area.

They practiced agriculture and most have small land holdings, the average of all the villages being a mere 1.48 acres, the average per family income (annual) being Rs.11822.76 (according to the 1996 Survey, \$237 at present exchange rates). Another baseline survey of the coop area was conducted by an NGO during the months of August and September 2004. Here are its results:

2004 NGO Survey

1. No. of Houses	:	455
2. Population	:	2457
(a) Female	:	1033
(b) Male	:	1424
3. Total Land		775.91 acres

Table 2.1. 2004 Demography of the Cooperative

The formation of the informal cooperative was seen as beneficial and more people from the abandoned plantation joined in. This is why we see an increase in the coop's total area and number of households between 1996 and 2004. At present, the cooperative is apprehensive about including new members because they suspect that new members might not have organic soil in their lands.

The people grow a variety of crops apart from tea, the most common being corn, vegetables and millet in the lower elevations of the cooperative area. When possible, vegetables were taken to the market (ethnographic details provided in later chapters). The most important cash crops apart from tea were ginger, cardamom, turmeric and in lower elevations, oranges. Before the cooperative was formed in 1997, tea farmers harvested tea leaves, hand-rolled

and dried them, and sold the dried tea leaves in Darjeeling town. After the cooperative was formed, tea farmers sold their green leaf tea to the plantation through the cooperative and did not have to dry the tea leaves. A very small amount is dried today and kept for home consumption.

The inaccessibility to the Darjeeling markets due to lack of communication facilities severely limited the earning capacity of the people. In 1996 the first road was built, but even now, certain neighbourhoods within the cooperative area have no roads. For all marketing and selling needs the villagers relied on middlemen, either from the village or outside. Most of these middlemen were also shop owners. The people took loans from these middlemen and paid them off by giving them their agricultural produce at the middlemen's rate. Thus, the people were completely at the mercy of these middlemen who dictated rates of interest and prices of agricultural produce. Middlemen sold dry illegal tea leaf for Rs.130-150 per kg to tea shops in Darjeeling town. They paid Rupees. 65 per kilogram in the village. This disparity was true for every commodity. Therefore, a major part of the profit was maximized by the middlemen, leaving the people with meagre income.

In 1998 the cooperative sold tea to the plantation at Rs. 16 per 1 kilo of green leaf tea which increased to Rs. 30 per kg of green leaf tea in 2006-7. The Institute of Market Ecology (IMO), Switzerland, has given a Producer Organic Certificate to coop members maintaining organic farm standards under ECC 2092/91, Naturland, Bio-Swiss(EU Standards), National Organic Program (USA

Standards), and National Program for Organic Production (Indian Standards).

This is a unique programme in the Darjeeling Hills with implications for tea internationally. It is the only small farmers' project where the community owns the land, have developed a system of organic farming and share of profits with a corporate/plantation tie up.

In 2004-2005, Fair Trade Labelling Organization International included this cooperative as a partner member. FLO labelling ensured that the products sold under the label were ethically produced and marketed. A percentage of the profit was provided to the primary producers, which was invested by the cooperative to buy an office space, build small bridges, tea weighing sheds, and repair the water tanks, which were built through the NGO help earlier. The cooperative and its recent achievements and publicity as the first small farmer organic Fair Trade certified multicrop cooperative has raised a great deal of hope among members and their families. During the tea season, there is a great deal of activity in the households for harvesting tea and making sure that they are selling more tea to the cooperative. People are really excited about producing tea. The FLO premium was just Rupees 75,000 in 2004-5 financial year, and in 2008 it had increased to Rs. 4,40,000 (I explain the concept of FLO premium in the next section). FLO regulates the contract between the cooperative and the plantation to which they sell their tea leaves.²⁸

²⁸ The plantation where I did my fieldwork was not buying tea from this cooperative.

The cooperative has an elected governing body whose members were mostly male. Each household within the designated cooperative area is a member. Male household heads have the membership. In a rare case, when there is no male household member present, women are made members. Every two years the households vote to change the governing board. Within the cooperative area there are eleven clusters of households, which coop members call *gāon* (village) These cluster settlements vary in size. Some have just seventeen households, whereas others have close to seventy households. These clusters were numbered by the NGO when they began work in this area for administrative efficiency. The cooperative has a Women's Wing consisting of female relatives of the male cooperative members. I detail their activities below.

The Women's Wing within the Cooperative:

My interviews and participant observations among women have been instructive in understanding that women have fulfilled the major subsistence needs of this community through farming at home and engaging in all kinds of trade in agricultural and other commodities through informal networks. In subsequent chapters I detail their gendered history of struggle within the community, and their present economic and political activities in the community contrasting them with the activities of the women plantation workers. This section is an overview of what the women's groups have done so far, to provide

a historical backdrop of their present pursuits as they unfold in subsequent chapters.

While the NGO provides logistical support for all activities in the community, their effort to foster gender equity is not the centerpiece of their development and capacity building initiatives. Some efforts have been made, and plans are in the pipeline for helping the Women's Wing start an organic fresh vegetable business under a local label, but sharing the same principles of FLO (as per an interview with the NGO's director). The Women's Wing started their Credit Union in February 1999 with over 100 members from cooperative members' families, and it continues today. The credit is made available through the Indian Bank, Darjeeling Branch under the Self Help Group Scheme. The chart below shows the extent of money borrowed by Women's Wing members over the years and the amount of money they have saved in the last five years. The get loans from the bank based on the amount they save in the bank. The NGO handles the distribution of the loans since many women are illiterate. It also provides help with accounting to make sure that the Women's Wing members are returning the money to the Bank and their accounts are updated.

Year wise total credit disbursed to Women's Wing from 1999-2004:

Year	Credit/Loan (in Rupees)	Savings (in Rupees)
1999 – 2000	60,000.00	17,270.00
2000 – 2001	1,75,000.00	26,670.00
2001 – 2002	2,14,620.00	71,090.00
2002 – 2003	2,72,400.00	92,250.00
2003 – 2004	5,73,000.00	1,43,050.00

Table 2.2. Total Amount of Loans and Savings of Women's Wing Members

More than the cooperative's male members, the NGO members are more sympathetic to women's needs and desires. Women also consult the NGO members for ideas and logistical support.

While the men outnumber women in the governing body of the cooperative, members of the Women's Wing are frequently present in important meetings. The Women's Wing has a separate meeting on the 8th day of every month where the president and secretary of the Women's Wing discuss the activities of the cooperative and how women can benefit from them. Women cooperative members feel that the women's group should receive a separate share of the Fair Trade premium money. Women tea farmers have devised a plan to start their own business to sell other organic commodities they produce apart from tea. They want to do it as a group, so that they can reduce their dependence on middlemen for selling such products. Women tea farmers feel that their business ventures are in tune with the larger concern over equity within the Fair Trade movement.

Fair Trade in Darjeeling

Now that I have laid out the history and structure of the plantation and the cooperative, I turn to the specificity of Fair Trade's operation in Darjeeling. Before that, let me give a very brief sketch of the goals of the Fair Trade movement.²⁹

Fair Trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect that seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers –especially in the South. Fair Trade organizations (backed by consumers) are engaged actively in supporting producers, awareness raising and in campaigning for changes in the rules and practice of conventional international trade. (European Fair Trade Association)

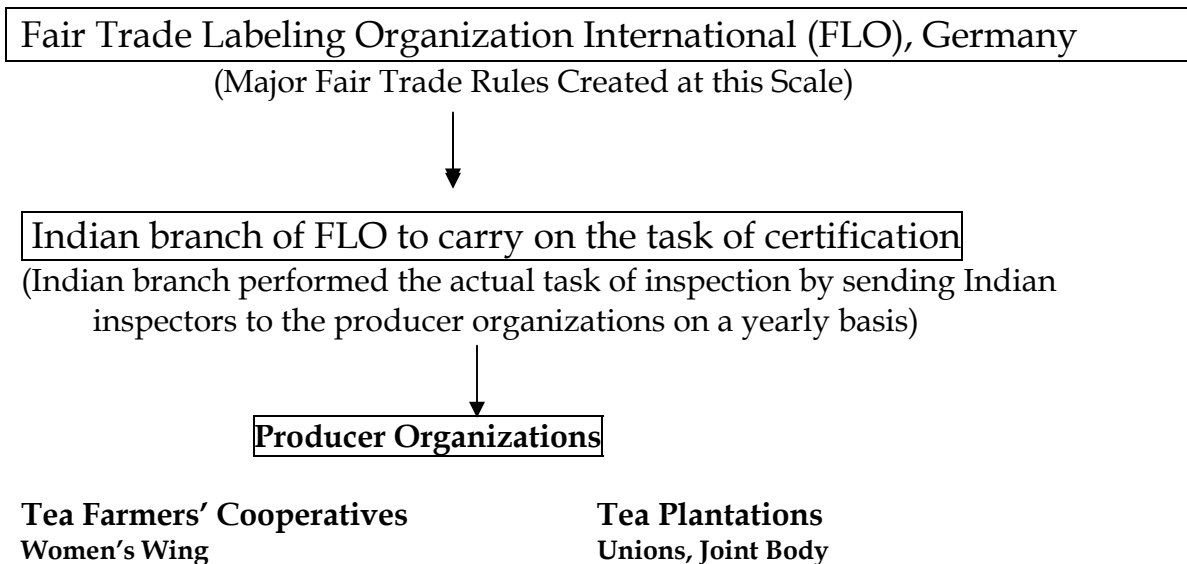
Within the Fair Trade movement, there is a great concern over what kinds of producer organizations FLO should certify. Recently, Fair Trade affiliated marketers have become conscious about whether plantations should at all be certified Fair Trade. They found inconsistencies in plantation reality and certification. On January 6th 2009, Phyllis Robinson wrote on the Equal Exchange website:

Equal Exchange and others believe that no matter how “benevolent” a plantation owner is, a joint labor-management council and social premiums cannot in and of themselves correct the huge imbalance of power that exists on a plantation. We just don't believe that deep, structural goals oriented to change the playing field for small farmers can be achieved in a plantation setting. For these reasons, we are committed to building market access for small farmer tea organizations...

(<http://smallfarmersbigchange.coop/> accessed 12th January 2009)

²⁹ It is not my purpose in this dissertation to write the history of Fair Trade. There have been numerous interventions by scholars to chart its history (see Reynolds et al 2007 for a very detailed history, also Jaffee 2006)

Ms. Robinson, who authored the above article, further wrote that Fair Trade should go back to its roots and attempt to form empowering partnerships with small farmers, recognizing their rights and struggles. The Fair Trade movement has engendered a diversity of opinions and expectations in its short history. The diversity of institutions is a result of the varied ethics and conceptualizations of fairness. Starbucks very recently, at least as evident from field operations in Darjeeling, maintained its own rules and used its own labels. There have been concerted efforts by activists and the Fair Trade bureaucracy to standardize rules and certification requirements. I would like to share the basic certification standards that I saw being used in participant observation and interviews by FLO certifiers:



Three Standards of Fair Trade Certification

- Ecological Sustainability-Organic Production
- Representation of Women in the Working of the Producer Organization
- Transparency in the use of FLO funds for Development

In my participant observation of certification dynamics and interviews with Fair Trade certifiers, I have seen them check for the above certification criteria. To implement these rules, FLO has two specific operations. Within FLO, there are two departments: FLO-EV, responsible for providing Fair Trade training to member producer communities, and FLO-CERT which finds out whether producer organizations are indeed carrying out their operations according to Fair Trade standards. To get the Fair Trade label, producer organizations have to undergo yearly inspections by a representative of FLO-CERT.

Labeled Fair Trade Tea Products



Photo 2.7.

Source:

http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.equalexchange.co.uk/products/images/Darjeeling_Leaf_125g_1.gif&imgrefurl=http://www.equalexchange.co.uk/products/product.asp%3Fid%3D70%26pn%3DDarjeeling%2520Leaf%2520Tea&usg=__ztxgp_IYdp7TiXzWe2NaCwPD_U=&h=620&w=355&sz=55&hl=en&start=8&um=1&tbnid=iu4foeQvY0kTKM:&tbnh=136&tbnw=78&prev=/images%3Fq%3DFair%2BTrade%2B%2BDarjeeling%2BTea%26hl%3Den%26rlz%3D1T4DGUS_enUS307%26um%3D1 (accessed on 3.15.09)



Photo 2.8

Fair Trade Label



Photo 2.9

Source: www.zhitea.com/FAQs/OrganicFairTrade.aspx (accessed on 19th March 2009)

When producer organizations decide to sell their tea in the Fair Trade market, they send their produce to the retailers in the West. For every kilogram of Darjeeling tea sold in the Fair Trade market, producer organizations get a premium over and above the regular market price of that kilogram of dry tea. For instance, if the tea cooperative sold 5000 kilograms of black tea in the Fair Trade market in one year, they would get one Euro for every kilogram of tea sold over and above the market price for cost of production. FLO would monitor that

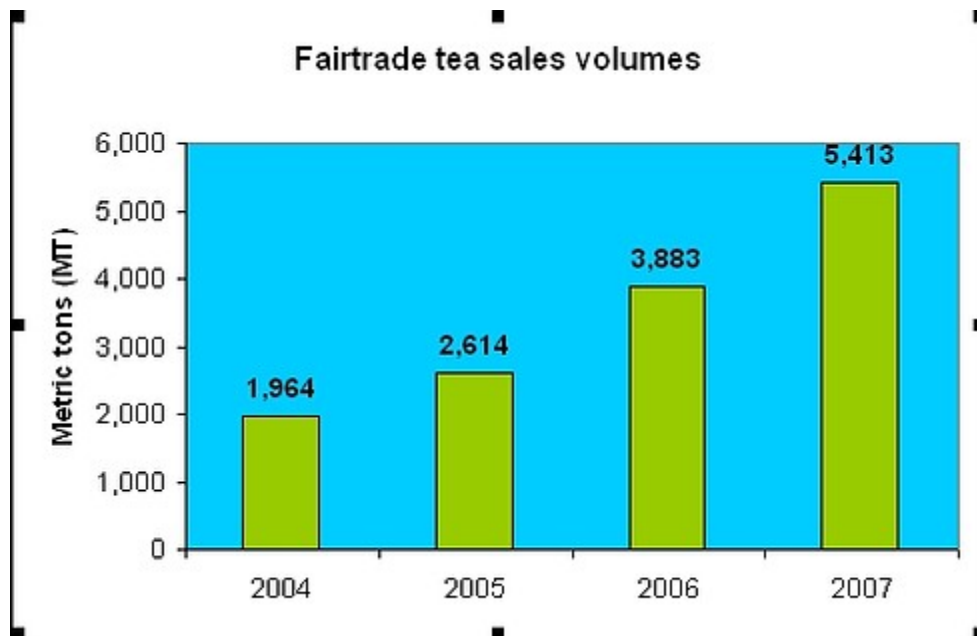
the cooperative is indeed getting back 5000 Euros as Fair Trade premium. My interviews with cooperative governing body members revealed that they were getting their premiums regularly. FLO tried to ensure that this money was being used for community development in producer organizations. FLO officials also ensured that plantations which processed and exported small farmer grown tea were being transparent in their operations with the coop.

It is really difficult to trace when exactly Fair Trade projects began in Darjeeling since no one has recorded its history. From my interviews with plantation authorities and local NGOs, I gather that plantations which had a good marketing team were ahead in the Fair Trade game. From their frequent visits to Europe and UK, particular plantation owners and their managers learnt that they could get their tea Fair Trade certification along with organic branding. The owner of the plantation where I did my fieldwork claimed that he has been doing Fair Trade since 1994. Other plantation authorities mentioned that they started their Fair Trade affiliations in the new millennium. Small tea farmers' affiliation with Fair Trade is much more recent, since 2004.

It is also important to understand how Fair Trade works in Darjeeling. I noticed some patterns. Plantations who are members of FLO carry out their own Fair Trade related awareness or development work. The management oversees how Fair Trade funds are disbursed. Small farmers' organizations usually work with NGOs to carry out Fair Trade awareness campaigns and plan development.

The reason why local NGOs get involved is because these small farmers' communities have depended on NGOs for previous development work. The NGOs now act as consultants and explain Fair Trade rules and regulations to small farmer communities in the local language (Nepali) and assists the cooperative governing board in making best use of Fair Trade premium money. One NGO member told me, "We are so happy that Fair Trade money has begun flowing into these development deprived communities. Our resources as an NGO are limited for perennial supply of development money to these communities." NGOs also monitor the relationship between the small farmer coop and the plantation which processes their tea and sends it to western retailers. Not all Fair Trade work in Darjeeling happens according to FLO rules. Large beverage giants run their own Fair Trade related NGOs. Plantations which sold their tea to these large beverage giants involved their own NGOs to carry out welfare work in the plantations. In such instances, these NGOs also provided funds and logistics for welfare work in the plantations.

The graph below shows the rise in Fair Trade tea sales. In the coop the Fair Trade premium increased six times between the years 2004 and 2008.



Graph Source: <http://www.fairtrade.net/tea.html> (accessed 10th January 2009)

Table 2.3. Rising Sales of Fair Trade Tea

Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined the key attributes of Darjeeling's economy, politics relevant to the tea industry. The information presented here provides important background information for understanding the context of the coming chapters.

Chapter 2: Illusive Justice: Women Plantation Workers, Ethnic Politics and Struggle for Voice within a Fair Trade Certified Plantation

For Fair Trade certifiers and providers, unions are a major preoccupation. For most consumers in the west, unionized workplaces denote a democratic workspace, and Fair Trade extends its membership to such producer organizations. The emphasis is on supporting good workplaces, not building good workplaces. In a recent New York Times article in 2008,³⁰ the international campaign coordinator of the United Students Against Sweatshops objected to a company – Counter Sourcing – extending Fair Trade benefits to a non-unionized garment manufacturing unit in Bangladesh. Activists stated that non-unionized workspaces could not be labeled “Fair” since they lacked collective bargaining facilities. Non-unionized work-places were not seen worthy of Fair Trade benefits.

These kinds of responses are typical of a bounded vision of justice occluding social movement organizations and the gatekeepers of Fair Trade. The pressure for being compliant with Fair Trade standards, blinds them to the reality of what unions are (or are not) actually doing for workers in certified workplaces. Fair Trade product buyers just need to know that unions are present, but little information exists about what unions are actually doing for workers. As I was told by one Darjeeling Tea Association bureaucrat in November 2006, “If

³⁰ <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/13/nyregion/13education.html> (accessed on 13th February 2009)

the Plantation Labor Act was followed and properly updated there would be no need of Fair Trade.”

Another buyer from England wrote on her company’s website about the plantation union where I did my fieldwork. She proudly proclaimed that “_____ plantation workers never go on strike, while strikes by the local militant Ghurkha population are rife at other plantations.” Her comments were similar to the head of the anti-sweat shop campaign that supported unions, but she seemed unaware that all plantations in Darjeeling have unions. All plantation workers received similar benefits through a uniform wage structure stipulated by the federal government. Also missing in this tea buyer’s analysis was the fact that union activity for workers’ rights has been weak in Darjeeling over the last two decades because of situated historical and political developments. I interviewed the same plantation owner as she did, but her conclusions were very different from mine. What was more alarming was the subtle celebration of the plantation owner’s ability to quell agitating Gurkhas – repeating the age old colonial trope of seeing Nepalis as a martial race with a streak of useless rebelliousness. The Gurkha workers in Sonakehti tell a very different story of union politics and workers’ rights, as I am about to outline in this chapter. The material presented here raises questions about Fair Trade certified unionized plantations and about the limits of Fair Trade to deliver justice within unionized workspaces.

This chapter ethnographically explores why situated struggles for justice cannot be reflected in the directives of a global justice regime, such as Fair Trade. It specifically looks at how recognition politics, based on a desire for cultural citizenship, overshadows the effects of global ethical or justice movements aimed at ensuring economic rights for marginal producers.

In Darjeeling's plantation communities, there has been a shift in trade union politics from Marxist ideas of workplace justice to a union politics intended for building consensus on the desirability of a separate Nepali state within India. This shift radically changed the justice-seeking practices and desires of women tea workers in the plantations, which is overlooked by global ethical regimes, such as Fair Trade. Fair Trade, which aims to empower women workers within Darjeeling's plantations, fetishizes local institutions, such as the labor unions, as vehicles for women's empowerment. Fair Trade directives, however, turn a blind eye to the fact that male ethnic subnational politics silences the voices of female workers in male-dominated labor union politics. The chapter argues that understanding the gendered shifts within local labor unions is important in order to locate women's complex desires and political agency in Darjeeling. The chapter shows that the latter is manifested through the formation of informal savings groups (*Ghumāuri*) run by women plantation workers. It provides a space for women to discuss their daily economic and social problems away from the attention of plantation owners and Fair Trade certifiers.

Scholars studying transnational protest movements have often pointed out the limited scope of these movements; the ambivalence within these movements about “local struggles” for justice (Brooks 2006). Such instances of boundedness are more pronounced in plantations that retain old colonial structures of labor domination. This chapter analyses why such ambivalence can persist (Collins 2002) and its effects on particular sites within a Fair Trade production chain.

Feminists and labor historians of South Asia have tried to theorize and understand the marginalization of women workers within formal labor union politics. Feminist scholars have documented the myriad ways in which women’s voices are silenced in union protests (Fernandes 1997) due to “multiple patriarchies” (Chatterjee 2001:275). Kabeer argues that liberalization has further undermined the possibility of women’s mobilization in the post-colonial era, which remains “sporadic, limited and uneven” (Kabeer 2004:186), and concluded that the process of commodity production is debilitating for women’s political futures (Collins 2002, Sen 2002 but see Mills 2002, Ramamurthy 2003 as exceptions). Chatterjee writes that investigations of women’s public political participation within plantation production systems have to explore the “informal” i.e. “small protests, usually excised from discussions of what are deemed ‘political’ activities” (1995:265). In this chapter, I ask why such small protests become necessary. Such marginalization of women’s voices when occurring within the space of a Fair Trade certified plantation should become an

object of greater scrutiny, especially since Fair Trade aims to strengthen women's power within unions.

As the focus of oppositional politics within plantation communities in Darjeeling shifted over time, so did the scope and nature of women's organizing and activism within the plantation community. Within the plantation community, the shift in trade union politics based on communist notions of workplace justice to a union politics based on giving shape to a more concrete Nepali identity³¹ in India, through the creation of a Nepali homeland, has affected women's perception about the effectiveness of unions in their lives. The plantation wages are insufficient (approximately \$1.23 a day), and there is a crisis in drinking water and health care measures (Area and Issue Profile of Darjeeling 2003). Yet the focus of the union priorities was invested elsewhere. Women had turned their attention away from unions to *Ghumāuri* groups, which they found more meaningful in the backdrop of a more male-dominated union. *Ghumāuri* was an informal savings group run by women plantation workers. It provided a space for women to discuss their daily economic and social problems. In this chapter I establish why such activities were necessary in spite of a Joint Body and FLO funds.

Women's participation and evaluation of Fair Trade policies was influenced by their engagement with the changing landscape of labor politics in Darjeeling. In such a scenario women felt that Fair Trade had little effectiveness

³¹ The majority of workers in Darjeeling's plantations migrated 180 years ago from Nepal to work in the Indian tea plantations. Now Darjeeling is their home and Nepali people are a minority in India.

because it bypassed structural issues within systems of collective bargaining. Few of the plantation workers knew about Fair Trade. For them the Joint Body meetings were like any other work-related affair where they had to be present. As I mentioned in chapter one, the Joint Body was not a democratic space; the management controlled every conversation. While much has been written about reasons for the rise of ethnic politics in Darjeeling (Samanta 1996, Lama 1996), little research has been conducted on the gendered community dynamics of the politics. Foregrounding women plantation workers' narratives, I try to underscore the gendered effects of this ethnic movement on plantation workplace politics and the limits it places on Fair Trade's scope within a plantation at present. Justice within plantations has been illusive. I begin this chapter describing the effects of ethnic sub-nationalism on plantation labor politics. This is followed by an analysis of the importance of competing communities within Sonakheti for plantation workers. The chapter also presents worker vignettes to show the effects of these political shifts on workers' identities.

Ethnicized Sub-nationalism and Plantation Labor Politics

It is important to understand the specific effects of subnational politics on gendered labor politics. Whenever I asked my informants about their involvement with unions, I was often told, "you will not find the union now, but they will not let you sleep during election time." This statement was a way of

expressing frustrations with the union and its inability to address issues related to plantation work.

The dissociation of workers' rights and union politics has a long history in Darjeeling's "Nepali Community." In the mid 1980s when the GNLF was slowly gaining importance, plantation unions were still dominated by the communist party.³² However, from 1986 onward Subhash Ghising (the leader of GNLF and the Chairman of the hill council) had already started his campaign for Gorkhaland. He took full advantage of the existing insecurity of Nepali youth (which I have detailed in chapter one) in the region, which finally made the movement extremely violent. Male youth were used as foot soldiers in the Gorkhaland movement. Ghising re-interpreted the clauses of the Indo Nepal Friendship Treaty³³ (see Samanta 1996) to emphasize that Nepali migrants were unable to vote in India, and therefore, the treaty should be scrapped, and Nepali people should have their separate state within India. His comments found great support among people, especially since a huge number of Nepali people were ousted from the state of Assam and Meghalaya at that time. In reality, a majority of the Nepali people in India was voting, since their children and grandchildren were India citizens having been born in India. However, Ghising made judicious use of these insecurities to convince average people to join the GNLF, leaving the communist party.

³² Leela Fernandes (1997) and Amrita Basu (1992) also write in detail about the union and political party nexus in India. In Darjeeling the alliance has a specific history with consequences for labor politics.

³³ This treaty allowed Nepalis and Indians to settle, work and trade in each country without the right to vote, as I have described in chapter one.

At this time there was also a massive stagnation in Darjeeling's tea industry. Exports suffered as other countries were gaining a foothold in the international tea market. Plantations delayed worker payment and bonus. GNLF used this opportunity to show that the communist unions were ineffective in fighting the battles for common people in Darjeeling, especially because they were an outside political party. Culturally, the GNLF argued, they were not like the Gurkhas, so they could not understand the real problems of the region and were not well versed in local problems. Other scholars, like Amiya K. Samanta, write that Ghising distributed anti-communist speeches in cassettes saying that communists were atheists and they did not want Nepali people to have their own state because their loyalty was towards West Bengal. In reality, most leaders of the CPIM in Darjeeling were Nepali.

In the post-Gorkhaland period, the local state and labor unions in Darjeeling were dominated by the GNLF. During 2005-7 (before the 2nd movement),³⁴ the focus of the GNLF was to get the Nepali people in Darjeeling recognized as "tribal" so that they could get special benefits from the federal government. This involved the "reinvention" of Nepali "tribal" tradition, although the majority of the Nepali people adhered to the Hindu caste system, and had various religious and cultural practices depending on caste affiliations. However, preoccupation with this new cultural turn defined the focus of the party (GNLF) and the local state in the in the late 1990s and early 2000.

³⁴ From October 2007, Darjeeling is under the sway of the second Gorkhaland Agitation, this time lead by Gorkha Janamukti Morcha (GJM), a break-away party from the GNLF.

Since its inception, the GNLF positioned itself as different from the plains people's parties, especially the red parties (like CPIM). CPIM was seen as serving the interest of the state of West Bengal (in which Darjeeling is a district) and the people of the plains. The non-orthodox tea producing districts bordering Darjeeling still have CPIM-dominated unions. Making people conscious about the stigma of the red party and its principles was a deliberate move to engender a new politics of difference. Adherence to any of the principles of the "red" party was considered incongruous with the political demands of the emerging Nepali state within India. Therefore, the worker-centric policy of the communist unions did not receive priority in the GNLF agenda.

One of the offshoots of this differentiation was that the GNLF encouraged plantation workers to work hard and not engage in militant trade unionism, which was a marked feature of unions in the plains. In my interviews workers expressed this pride. Expressing pride was a positive motivation for average Nepalis who had to suffer the consequences of negative stereotypes about them, as outlined in chapter one. Many workers told me that they understood the value of work because this was the only way they could survive. Workers in Darjeeling distinguished themselves from non-Nepali workers in the plains, who, according to my informants, were communists and did not want factories to survive. As proof of this claim they cited the numerous plantation closures in the plains. It seemed from their narratives as though the unions in the plains tea plantations

were uselessly conducting a movement to stop work, just because of their party affiliation.

In regular conversation workers always related their hard work with the quality of the tea produced, as if their labor was of a different kind, like their ethnicity, climate and environment. Workers knew about the high price of Darjeeling tea since they were almost forbidden to consume this green gold. Factory supervisors checked on whether women from the sorting department were stealing tea. One of the male workers once told me, “You know, sister, the British were very clever, and they taught us Nepalis everything about tea except for its taste. We learnt how to produce tea, but we never learnt to appreciate the goodness of Darjeeling tea. This was probably good, otherwise our plantation would have stopped by now.” He made this last statement with great sarcasm. Other workers in the sorting department complained about the long hours and the low pay. This pride in work was always laced with complaints about the lack of water, the undemocratic plantation practices, and union busting. However the hegemonic ideology of GNLF’s current vision became meaningful for average workers in these self-proclamations about being hard working *pāhāDi* workers. These contradictions and ambiguities expressed by workers became beneficial for the GNLF in putting labor issues on the backburner.

Male GNLF members were constantly engaged in making the “Nepali Community” more conscious about their ethnicity. Being equal citizens of India and gaining respect became the priority, not improving the existing conditions of

laborers within Darjeeling. A survey of documents at the time of the formation of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council reveals that the demand for Gorkhaland was accompanied by a request to increase the quota for Nepali men in the army, the dismissal of the Indo Nepal Friendship Treaty, and more direct funds from the central government in Delhi for general development of Darjeeling. The central government, which also regulates the wages of plantation workers through the Tea Board of India, was never requested to increase the wages for plantation workers. Gorkhaland became a panacea for all the evils that existed within Darjeeling. The consequences of hegemonic sub-national politics are evident in the following interviews and vignettes:

Chhaya:

Chhaya and I were neighbors in one of the plantation villages. She was illiterate and could barely sign her name. She was among the most talked about women in the plantation because of her past labor activism work in the Women's Wing of the communist dominated unions in the 1980s. She was the leader of the communist party's Women's Wing, *Mahilā Samity* (Women's Organization). She kept insisting from the beginning that she did not know much about Fair Trade, but she knew about organic agriculture because she supervised in the field. Chhaya was also a *kāmdhāri* (group leader). But I had other intentions for meeting her. I wanted to know about women's past activism in plantations in order to understand why active women like Chhaya had such little interest/knowledge about Fair Trade and current labor union politics.

Chhaya, now 48, started as a child laborer in Sonakheti when she was 10 years old. She was an active union member, and she changed parties (from the CPIM to GNLF) in 1984 when GNLF started dominating the labor unions. Though she shared the sub-nationalistic urge of Gorkhaland with other members of her plantation community and was a proud *pāhāDi*, she somehow found the preoccupation with Gorkhaland in Darjeeling's "Nepali Community" stifling.³⁵ Chhaya told me that she used to hide and go to the CPIM meetings in Siliguri and Darjeeling when the 1986 agitation was brewing. Once the GNLF had started the movement, no other party or political opinion was tolerated.³⁶ In fact the situation in Darjeeling continues to be that way, where many of my informants feel pressured to join the 2nd Gorkhaland movement because of the fear of violence and of becoming unpopular in their communities.³⁷

Chhaya was one of the six female "field supervisors" known locally as *kāmdhāri*. Chhaya was a member of the Fair Trade funded Joint Body,³⁸ but I rarely saw her at Joint Body meetings. When I asked her the reason for her

³⁵ Chhaya's views about the coercive politics of GNLF are shared by many informants (both male and female), some of whom are not as articulate as Chhaya and do not share her leadership qualities. Women who were not explicitly critical of GNLF also complained about nepotism, the uselessness of unions in raising wages and upholding their concerns.

³⁶ Criticizing the leaders of the 2nd Gorkhaland Movement, an opposition party leader in Darjeeling expressed concern over the an-democratic means of this movement for social justice in an English newspaper. The GJM (Gorkha Janamukti Morcha) is being accused of diverting attention away from many other problems in Darjeeling by promoting this single issue movement.

³⁷ Phone interview with Chintamani Rai December, 2007.

³⁸ The Joint Body is a recent phenomenon in many Fair Trade certified plantations in Darjeeling. It is supposed to be a group of workers representative of different interests within the plantation community. The group was supposed to be drawing up plans on how to spend money coming from Fair Trade product sales in the West.

absence, she told me she was not aware that the Joint Body had any real benefit for the workers. I then urged her to talk more about why she thought that the Joint Body was not as effective as the union. Chhaya told me that there were problems in the present GNLF-dominated union. Chhaya liked unions because she expected them to provide a sense of community, a fellowship of concerned people who shared their ideas and understood each other's problems. But she did not get that from the present GNLF union. She told me that from the beginning she was committed to the CPIM's ideology. She liked the way CPIM trained them to understand workplace politics. I urged Chhaya to talk more about her activism. From the interview I found out about her version of the "union problem." Here are excerpts from Chhaya's interview:

Chhaya: In the beginning there was no politics. But slowly problems began with our bonus and other benefits and a union was formed. Every plantation should have a union; it is an absolute necessity for our daily problems. Earlier we consulted the union in the smallest of disputes. This is why the union was important. But now there are no regular union meetings to discuss our issues. Now you see no one; they are all busy in Kurseong or Darjeeling town. Come election time, they will not let you rest in peace because they want our votes. I feel like our small *Ghumāuri*³⁹ group is like a union. We have unity and we care about each other. We try to solve our daily problems. We give each other hope and older sisters guide the younger ones. We teach them how to take care of themselves. We discuss how to save money and not waste it on alcohol. Even some men have started these groups, learning from us. They also have small kids and they know that mutual support is required at difficult times because our wage is not enough.

DS: What did you learn from your experiences in the union when you were active?

³⁹ *Ghumāuri* is the informal money saving group popular among women plantation workers. I detail it later.

Chhaya: I used to meet women who were elder than me in Kurseong. Women in important positions in the Women's Wing of the Communist party urged me to head the *Mahila Samity* (Women's Organization) in the plantation. I listened to them and learnt a lot. I used to travel to all the units in Sonakheti with some other women; we listened to each other's experiences and problems; tried to find solutions to each other's problems. I even went to Calcutta to consult senior members of the party. There was a lot of sharing and planning and a great sense of camaraderie. The party and the union worked out a system for dealing with the management.

DS: You say that the union is a necessity. So what is the state of the present union at Sonakheti?

Chhaya: I was in CPIM. During the agitation time, the older men in our locality came and explained to me that I should join the GNLFF. As a Nepali, it was my duty to join our local party, so I joined. But I used to hide and go to all the CPIM meetings in Siliguri, Kalimpong, Kurseong and Darjeeling town. I almost did not survive once as our vehicle was pelted on our way to Darjeeling to attend the CPIM meetings. Those were troubled times, but in my heart I always liked what CPIM taught us.

The GNLFF always talked about "Gorkhaland." CPIM on the other hand emphasized rights and entitlements of the average poor workers who are not looked after well in the plantation system. GNLFF is not interested in the issues of workers; they are only interested in making us understand the significance of our land and making us conscious of our identity as Nepali. Yes I understand the significance of the land we live in; we have lived here for so long, and our forefathers toiled here. There was no doubt that "Gorkhaland" was important for us because we needed a place in India which we could call our land. Technically, it was my duty to support the party of the hills which championed this cause. But that is not enough. There are other very important issues besides land. When I look deep into my heart I do not like the principles on which GNLFF operates. I think the issue of workers' rights has taken a backseat in the plantation. Before, we used to think how to take these issues up with the management; we used to strategize. Our party (CPIM) used to teach us how to negotiate and talk to big people in difficult situations. As small people, illiterate people, it was important for us to learn these strategies. We had friends in different plantations, we used to have important meetings and share information about how we small people could fight and negotiate with the management. Our leaders in the CPM used to ask us to think about the most important things for our life as workers and

then teach us how to place it before the management. If the management did not agree then we would have to let the leaders know and they would have a meeting with the planter sâhib. We had to choose our issues well. Our “company,” our “sâhib” is like a parent; you cannot fight with them on any old issue, and you have to be judicious to further our cause. One has to learn to strategize.

Within GNLFF the preoccupation with Gorkhaland stood in the way of placing workers’ concerns before the management. This preoccupation with the issue of Gorkhaland is the source of all problems in Darjeeling. It has been 20 years since GNLFF gained power. There are no jobs, and the youth do not know what to hope for. But I don’t feel motivated to attend the present union meetings because they are not concerned about workers’ rights. That is why I feel that the *Ghumâuri* groups are important.

More than twenty years after development of the first Gorkhaland movement in 1986, lives of women in Sonakheti – like Chhaya’s – help us contextualize what the search for a local identity and state within the larger “Nepali community” has meant for labor rights for women workers within the plantation community.

The frustration with unions was not just limited to women; male union members also shared these complaints. Knowing that Devilal was an active union person, I asked him how effective the union was in Sonakheti. As usual, he told me that it was not very active. Devilal was very forthcoming about helping me learn the names of other union members. I asked him why there was no union agitation here in Darjeeling, in spite of all the problems. He told me that whatever problems the union was having were on minor issues, nothing major. Usually, when a worker got warnings from the management about wrongdoings, he went with his people to negotiate with the management. If there were

payment delays, then too, there was trouble, but the union did not push for any major changes.

The most interesting thing that Devilal told me was that union members were apparently not aware of the true terms of the Plantation Labor Act of 1951. Describing the union further he said, “They make demands just like that and they really have no teeth.” Moving on to the question of union issues in Darjeeling, Devilal mentioned that after the agitation people ceased to be that active in politics. In his words, “People have lost interest in politics.” On a philosophical note, Devilal mentioned that people look for direction in their lives. Either it was politics, religion or something else, and people in Darjeeling were now more into religion. People really “slacked” (he actually used the English word slack) after the agitation, and of course this was used to describe the political inactivity of the people.⁴⁰ It almost seemed that Devilal was referring to some kind of loss of interest and disillusionment with the current political situation, which impacted union politics in a negative way. He mentioned further that the unions were now more concerned with matters outside the

⁴⁰ When I was in Darjeeling in 2005, and then again for a year in 2006-7, the second Gorkhaland Agitation had not started. The members of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill council were preoccupied with their efforts to get the 6th schedule for Darjeeling district. The latter was thought to be a panacea for the under-development of the region. It would prevent people outside Darjeeling from buying land and also have special job reservations for “backward” people in Darjeeling in government jobs all over India. Ghising spearheaded this drive of the hill council. Ghising invented new tribal traditions and people objected to them. He banned the worship of certain Hindu gods, which upset a large section of the “Nepali Community” who were staunch Hindus and did not identify as tribals. Local youth were used as vigilantes to ensure that no Nepali person observed their favorite Hindu festivals, so that the community could prove that it was tribal and should have their own land. While this was just a proxy for an actual state, it gave GNLf party workers a new pre-occupation. Like many people, Devilal was frustrated with their efforts to “tribalize” Nepalis and invention of new religious traditions. Hence he said that people were more into religion.

plantation, not inside it. The unemployed male youth from the plantations were recruited to the party by union leaders to work for the GNLF. They were promised jobs in the local state and party offices around Darjeeling.

Competing Communities, Interstitial Spaces

The ineffectiveness of unions had compelled women to make alternative spaces for trying to meet some of their daily needs, and is evident from this comment by Chhaya:

Our union leaders tell us that for the Nepali community “Gorkhaland” is the biggest issue. Yes, we have learnt the significance of demanding our land, but the miseries of the poor people have not reduced. Our *Ghumāuri* group is like a small union where we women can openly discuss issues about our livelihood and work. We can give each other confidence.

In Chhaya’s comments we can locate the different communities that exist within a Fair Trade certified plantation. It brings to light the complex social matrix which an average plantation worker has to negotiate in his/her daily life – the Nepali Community, the Union, the *Ghumāuri* Group. These communities are in friction, and the dialectics among them are influenced by the changing politics of the region. These comments made by Chhaya get us to the heart of community and labor politics in Sonahketi, where GNLF-led labor unions in the post-agitation⁴¹ period have gradually devoted more time and energy to further the

⁴¹ In the early 1980s the GNLF was born out of the collective desire of Nepali people in India to have their own state within India, which would be called “Gorkhaland.” Whenever I refer to agitation, it means Gorkhaland Agitation of 1986-88. As I write this paper, Darjeeling is under the grips of a 2nd Gorkhaland Agitation because the first Gorkhaland agitation ended without a separate state being formed. In 1988 the DGHC or Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council was formed, which just led to more decentralized administrative power for the DGHC whose chairman was Subhash Ghising. Ghising was seen as a dictator by many locals,

demand for a separate Gorkha state or “Gorkhaland.” Chhaya’s comments are deeply relevant to contextualize the interstitial politics (Springer 2006) within a Fair Trade certified community of workers. It brings to attention larger structural issues that always remain outside the purview of Fair Trade. Academic criticism of these campaigns advances the idea that these ethical transnational initiatives after all, “advance a project of neoliberalism” (Blowfield and Dolan 2008:1); that they are bounded in a way that gives more agency to consumers-citizens in the first world rather than producers in the third world (Brooks 2006: xxi).

Chhaya’s comments also uphold a peculiar scenario for feminist scholars studying the effects of globalization on women’s workplace politics. For feminist scholars, the idea of community remains central to understanding the limits and possibilities of women’s consciousness and agency in the context of globalization (Collins 2002). Feminist scholars identify community as both a medium through which factory disciplining is enabled; it also provides women workers with an opportunity to navigate the strictures of factory or household disciplining (Ong 1987). However, when community dynamics become enabling for women to voice their grievances against perceived oppositional/inimical forces, and when they act as a barrier requires closer attention. One has to explore the constant becoming of the community in question (Li 2001).

and 22 years after his rule his closest allies ousted him from power by forming a new party Gorkha Janamukti Morcha (GJM). The new party, GJM, has similar viewpoints as the GNLF lead by Ghising, but the new movement promises to be less violent, more Gandhian in its approach and tactics. It still wants a separate Gorkha state. From my content analysis of newspaper articles and personal interviews with people I gather that this new party GJM and its tactics were being questioned by minority political groups in Darjeeling as being non-democratic and coercive, just like the first Gorkhaland Agitation.

The multiple tendencies within a single community⁴² need to be acknowledged to understand the gendered consequences of articulation between these tendencies and political forces in the wider environment in which the community is enmeshed. In Darjeeling one has to look at how the change in local politics, from trade union based to ethnicity based, creates community dynamics with gendered effects. Below, I outline the effects of the constant friction between the “plantation community” and the larger “Nepali/Gorkha Community.” The latter is the imagined community (Anderson 1991) that Nepali politicians want to convert to a separate state. The former or “plantation community” is the community in which my informants live and work; they have kith and kin ties here for generations. A less talked about feature of plantation life is the *Ghumāuri*⁴³ group, which I discovered after much difficulty during my long term fieldwork. *Ghumāuri*, as a community of women plantation workers, is not visible in the plantation public space.

I found out about *Ghumāuri* through careful participant observation. Asha and I met at a designated spot on January 12th 2007 to join her tea plucking

⁴² The question of community is not only significant for anthropologists but has been important for scholars of South Asia to understand the consciousness and practices of people in this region. Scholars studying the region have debated the significance of community in explaining dominance, hegemony and cross-cutting loyalties of subjects. The question of community gained significance in studies of working class consciousness. Particularly notable is Dipesh Chakrabarty's (1989) discussion of the importance of community in determining how the working class experience domination and resist powerful forces. More recent work has focused on the production of class and community (Fernandes 1997) with special emphasis on gendered exclusions. Scholars studying environmental conservation have also focused on the contested nature of communities in South Asia and its significance for resource managements (Agrawal 1999, Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan 2000, Baviskar 1995).

⁴³ *Ghumāuri* come from the nepali verb *Ghumāono* (to move something in circles). Workers explained that they move money in a circle “like a ring.” It is named so because money, food, stories, emotions are circulated between groups of workers by their own volition.

group. As we walked down the narrow pony road she met Sunita, another plantation worker. Asha quickly went over to her, leaving me alone in the company of some local youth. From the corner of my eye I could see that she gave Sunita some money and whispered something to her. I could only grasp the last line of the conversation, "let's talk about it some other time; how about tomorrow evening when we return."

As soon as Asha came to me, I asked her who Sunita was and why she gave her money. She said that she owed Sunita some money. I probed her asking why she did not return it to her in front of me. Asha did not answer in the beginning and avoided eye contact with me. She desperately tried to avoid the conversation, as if her whole communication with Sunita was insignificant. I tried to push further. Sensing my persistence Asha told me that she cannot talk about it on the road where there were so many people. When we reached the designated spot in the plantation where Asha was going to pluck tea leaves with her other group members, she told me about *Ghumāuri*.

Women saved money through *Ghumāuri*. In my sample of 40 women plantation workers, 37 were members of different *Ghumāuri* groups. The meetings took place every two to three months. Women workers had these meetings during their lunch break or after work. They held these meetings during work break because at that time no field supervisors or managers would be doing rounds. Each woman saved between Rs.50 and Rs.100 per month. Each group had between 8-15 members.

A few weeks later, after the incident with Asha, I attended their *Ghumāuri* meeting. In this meeting, a woman plantation worker spoke at length about the financial problems she was having because her husband had to have a surgery, and there was no money in the house. Women in this *Ghumāuri* group then started discussing from where they would collect money for her because the savings in their group was not enough. This woman also said that she was scared of the manager because she was not sure whether he liked her. Conversations continued about different possibilities for helping her. I had never witnessed this kind of a close interaction in the plantation before.

The next day, when I met Asha, she told me how much she trusts me; that I was like her sister; therefore, that I was not allowed to tell anyone connected to the plantation details about this group practice of *Ghumāuri*, especially the plantation owner, his managers, and other workers.⁴⁴ She feared that specific knowledge about women's secret activities would raise the curiosity of managers and might result in a delay in her bonus payment.⁴⁵ She said she was concerned about my knowledge about the women's lives in the plantation. She said this because I knew that women wore gloves when picking tea leaves which was an absolute violation of the right way of plucking taught to women when they first

⁴⁴ Although I was asked by some women to not reveal the existence of *Ghumāuri* groups on the plantation, I have since conferred with some members, and they qualified their request. They agreed that it was alright for me to talk about the groups, since the plantation management did indeed know about their existence. But they asked me to try to protect their identities, since the management does not know which individuals were involved. I have therefore done everything I can to protect their identities, including the use of pseudonyms, masking/changing of details, and delinking critical quotations from individuals.

⁴⁵ "Bonus" is a payment made to workers during the Nepali Hindu festival of "Dashāi". The money for the bonus comes from a section of a worker's salary and the management also puts in a proportion depending on the harvest year.

start plucking. Women did this to protect their hand from abrasion and staining. She also made fun of me because I was so curious; told me that she had never met any other visitor who was so interested in the activities of pluckers, so much so that she had decided to stay away from her husband for a year to spend time with “coolies.”⁴⁶ But this incident proved to me how much women cherished these alternate spaces. In later interactions I understood that *Ghumāuri* was a secret, a perceived therapy for many of their daily problems. It reminded me of Scott’s famous essay on “hidden transcripts” (1977). But *Ghumāuri* groups were more than hidden transcripts because they were not clandestine ways of resistance but a source of sustenance for women in their plantation community. Asha, Chhaya and Lachmi *didī* (who I talk about later) were part of women’s union politics before, as I detail later in the chapter. When the CPIM was present, they were all members of the women’s wing of the CPIM. But why did women need these groups for sustenance in a Fair Trade certified plantation?

In Darjeeling, women could not rely on the plantation community ties to take care of their workplace needs because of certain shifting party politics within the plantation community. The average daily pay was about \$1.28 for a tea plucker in Darjeeling, one of the lowest wage rates in the formal economy, according to the Indian Labor Bureau.⁴⁷ Instead, women entered *Ghumāuri*

⁴⁶ Plantation workers, both men and women sometimes refer to themselves sarcastically as *coolies*, a Hindi word for day laborers who made their living by carrying heavy loads. It is a derogatory term for unskilled laborers.

⁴⁷ Information used from <http://www.mercycorps.org/countries/india/2108>, accessed on 12th December 2008.

groups in large numbers. Women did not just identify male domination as the cause of their disillusionment (see also Dutta 2008: 220) with union politics. They pointed to something more complex in the politics of the region which had affected their communities and debilitated the power of collective bargaining institutions, leading to increased masculinization of union concerns. As I mentioned before, the union leaders were more interested in recruiting Nepali youth to work for the GNLF.

The *Ghumāuri* groups have been around in plantations for many years. My informants could not trace their exact history, nor could other scholars in the region. But it was a regular feature in most plantations and was dominated by women. It was significant that women in Sonakheti constantly upheld this group as an alternate space for them to mentor each other. But at one point in history there was a possibility of articulation between women's issues in their small groups and the broader trade union movement that dominated the plantation community. As Chhaya told me, now that the Mahila Samity (the women's wing of the communist party) was not there, the *Ghumāuri* group became the only place where work-place politics and family issues could be discussed together without fear. Monmaya told me that before they used to play *Ghumāuri* just for learning how to save money, but they gradually realized that the group had other benefits for women. Communist-dominated trade unions in Darjeeling (pre-1984) were largely dependent on the support of women because they formed the majority of Darjeeling's workforce. The plantations were also the

toughest places for the GNLF to influence until the Gorkhaland movement had turned violent (Samanta 1996, Madan Tamang quote from Telegraph July 28th 2008). The Mahila Samity networks had close ties with these localized women's groups. But when the GNLF leaders started mobilizing the community to rally around the issue of Gorkhaland, they did not just have to depend on women. There were plenty of un-employed local male youth to lend themselves to a cause, to please the local party bosses. When Gorkhaland become the priority within local parties and labor unions, neglect of localized women's efforts to organize became routine.⁴⁸ Since every household had its sons or brothers in the GNLF women felt that their needs were not considered a priority, although they backed the efforts of the GNLF by keeping their silence on labor issues. Women still hope that the young men in the plantation might eventually get some employment. Women's issues gradually receded from the public realm, but came to occupy center stage in *Ghumāuri*.

Feminist scholars who study the politics of women's activism rightly propose that there is no straight-forward explanation of why women actively participate in labor politics and why not (Fernandes 1997, Mills 2005). Feminists have also cautioned against hasty conclusions about the meanings of women's absence or presence in so-called public domain (Mahmood 2001). What becomes a political realm (Berger 2004) and where women's activism and mobilization can manifest itself is an emerging question. There cannot be any a priori assumption

⁴⁸ For further evidence of the influence of party politics on national and local level labor organizing see Leela Fernandes (1997) and Piya Chatterjee (2001).

about women's power. Producing situated place-based knowledge about why women protest (Baldez 2002), and the conditions that make putatively docile, "nimble-fingered" women belie their powerless images marks the cutting edge of research on women's political activities (See Mills 2005: 119). Building on these arguments, I propose that a closer look at the changing nature of labor union politics within plantation communities where women live and work.

Many scholars see community as a hegemonic space (Ong 1987, Collins 2002). However, it is important to note the nature of women's activism and its imbrication with the political becoming of its own community. Analysis of women's participation in labor struggles presents two scenarios. In one scenario off-shoring of manufacturing jobs and global patterns of production erode the possibility for women to use the "moral" face-to-face ties through which they had earlier voiced their workplace grievances. Collins (2002) calls this loss of community, "deterritorialization." The other scenario is a little bit different where nimble fingered third world docile workers are able to voice their concerns in unions through "cultural struggle" within patriarchal societies (Ong 1987, Mills 1999). Here, patriarchy presents women with a different situation where women articulate their anxieties and displeasures by invoking community relations of paternalism, religious or kinship ties, using discursive strategies so that they are not accused of violating cultural norms (see also Mills 2005, Lynch 2007, Jamal 2005). The general conclusion is that women in the global workplace face adversities at various levels that make it difficult for them to join formal

labor organizing in spite of many oppressive labor management practices that otherwise plague them as workers and as women. Community dynamics become pivotal for women's inactivity/activity in political battles.

Plantation workers in Darjeeling do not have to fear deterritorialization, or loss of community, in the same way as the women workers of the maquiladoras. Darjeeling tea can only be grown in Darjeeling enjoying, the benefits of a "spatial fix" (place-specific geographical branding). Maquiladoras can move across borders, because garments can be manufactured anywhere in the world as long as the raw materials can be supplied "just in time." Any threats from workers about unionizing or unions raising questions about worker abuse or pay propel companies to move to a new location that can offer "safer" production zones. In Darjeeling, capital becomes spatially fixed, so why does that not enable workers who produce "Fair trade" to raise their voices for a wage increase or better work conditions?

Women plantation workers in Darjeeling had lived and worked in the same communities that their ancestors grew up and worked in. Male supervisors, union leaders, factory clerks and average plantation workers shared kinship ties or at least were neighbors for a long time. Like the women workers in Malaysia (Ong 1987), women plantation workers could have used extended family ties (especially with men who are used by the management to discipline workers) to voice some of their grievances about poor salary or nepotism. But my interviews reveal that kin-community ties were not mobilized because women

did not want to become unpopular in their communities and households by asking men to change the priority within the current unions. Women workers in the plantation found that participation in the unions was useless. However, they silently hoped that the union would do something for their sons, brothers or husbands.

It was interesting to note that in the mid 1980s, some of the same women were active in the labor union politics. Even now women plantation workers joined their male counterparts at important political party events and public demonstrations as a show of solidarity. If women plantation workers in Darjeeling did not have to bear the brunt of “deterritorialization” like their counterparts in Bangladesh or Mexico, they had other reasons for being sidelined in the union. Women’s current frustrations with unions were even more striking as their plantations were Fair Trade certified. Instead of unions, women found solace in *Ghumāuri* groups to take care of some of their economic and workplace needs.

Beyond Empowerment Propaganda

One crisp winter morning Lachmi and I set out to meet the other women in her tea plucking group. Lachmi *didi*, as I called her, was a *Kāmdhāri*.⁴⁹ She was in charge of a group of 12 women tea pluckers in Sonakheti. She supervised tea plucking and pruning work. Over the months Lachmi *didi* and I had become

⁴⁹ In the labor hierarchy of the plantation, *chaprāsi*(overseer) is just above *kamdhari*(field supervisor). Women can become *kamdhari* but not a *chaprāsi*. Men can be both. The job of a *kamdhari* is to supervise their small group of male or female workers to complete their daily work.

close and she started sharing many of her work-related and personal problems with me. Normally a very positive person, that day she was in a particularly bad mood. As we walked away from her home into the plantation she pointed me to a *chaprāsi* (field supervisor) and told me “do you see him *bahini* (sister); they are the bane of our existence, those *chamchās*.⁵⁰ Here I am, always encouraging the girls in my group to work hard so that our company makes more money and here they are roaming around whole day and misreporting to the manager and owner to prove their efficiency.” Upon this comment, I asked Lachmi *didi* why there were no women *chaprāsis*. She replied:

There is no reason why we women cannot become *chaprāsis*, but who will fight that battle? Are the unions of any use? Our *sāhib*⁵¹ always listens to the wrong kind of people, the insincere ones, who tell him that women are no good. We might not know how to run the country like Indira Gandhi,⁵² but we know how this plantation works. We know that if we stop work, it will only lead to our wage loss. We have to look after our families. We don't want our plantation to suffer like the ones in the plains. We *pāhāDis*⁵³ work hard; we respect work. I always tell my girls that if you are sincere then no one can insult you. But there is no place for sincere people in this plantation. *chamchāgiri*⁵⁴ dominates everything.

These comments uphold a picture of plantation community life that belies the illusion about Fair Trade certified plantations in the publicity brochures of FLO

⁵⁰ Henchmen of the plantation owner, supposedly his favorite workers.

⁵¹ It is another name for the plantation owner. It is also spelt as *Sāhib*, but in Darjeeling it is pronounced differently and hence I use “*sāhib*”

⁵² Indira Gandhi was the first and only woman prime minister of India. Her regime turned dictatorial but she enjoyed popular support because of being the first lady prime minister and the daughter of independent India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.

⁵³ It means people of the hills. People in Darjeeling tend to think that they are not as cunning and opportunistic as plains people.

⁵⁴ *Chamchagiri* is the quality that a *chamcha* possesses. A person practicing *chamchagiri* is someone who is sly and always on the lookout to score points over his co-workers or people who work under him, by misreporting about work etc.

and the website of Sonakheti. One could see the pride of a *pāhāDi*⁵⁵ plantation worker laced with narratives of inadequacy in their lives. I came back that evening and looked at the notes from my first meeting with *sāhib*.⁵⁶ He had given me a lecture about the “strong women of Sonakheti.” He went to the extent of saying that Nepali men could not be trusted with anything because they were childlike, immature, and emotional; it is the women who were sincere and hardworking. The planter repeated the dominant stereotype, which formed the basis of recruiting a feminized labor force in the tea industry and the reason for men’s insecurity in Darjeeling. His comments on Nepali men were typical which made Nepali men very insecure over time. The owner was apparently training women to take on the management of the plantation after he died and told me that women were the future of Sonakheti. The owner somehow seemed to want to portray himself as a pioneer of women’s development in Darjeeling. In a recent book by him, he portrays himself as a social activist championing the cause of wage laborers to create a sustainable environment. He had also told me not to use the word plantation to describe Sonakheti as it smacked of colonial patterns of labor control. He identified himself as a sustainable farmer. But there was a sharp divide between what existed on Sonakheti’s publicity material as indications of women’s empowerment and what women thought about the

⁵⁵ *PāhāDi* in Nepali means belonging to the hills. In India hill people are seen and they see themselves as different from people in the plains, it is not a class, race, caste based difference, but implies personality type, like “simple,” “hard-working,” “loyal,” “honest”—it implies a particular personhood and among Nepalese in India the invocation of *pāhāDi*-ness is pronounced because they find this an effective way of maintaining their distinctiveness from plains people- who they see as oppressors, cunning, smart and privileged.

⁵⁶ This is a Nepali word meaning Boss/Big Person—in this case the planter or plantation owner

condition of their lives in the plantation. One publicity brochure read that the plantation “champions progressive social policies. It provides free childcare⁵⁷ and promotes women to supervisory positions (unheard of in traditional culture).”

Women plantation workers did not seem to think that they had broken away from the traditional culture of their communities and the plantation, which routinely committed injustices towards them. It was because of some “traditional” ways of thinking that women could not move up the ladder of plantation bureaucracy, just because they were women. As Lachmi *didi* pointed out, there is no one to fight their battles, i.e. male members of the community and management were not interested in promoting women to positions higher than a *kāmdhāri*. This tradition was co-produced by planters and men in their community at various turns in history. Women lived their lives amidst so-called traditional culture at the same time as their workplace concerns and frustrations could not be voiced in unions. The space of the “subaltern counter public” (Fraser 1997) was circumscribed by these patriarchal rules, yet the publicity brochures celebrated women’s leadership and empowerment.

Many women complained that sincere workers were never adequately rewarded because of the lack of a “system,” implying the rampant nepotism in the plantation and the lack of a systematized collective bargaining institution to voice these demands. My informants made a distinction between the patterns of

⁵⁷ Every plantation in Darjeeling provides free childcare for its women workers, complying with the Plantation Labor Act of 1951.

union activities. When the unions were dominated by communists, the union leaders were looking for reasons to embarrass and challenge the management, they said. The primary focus was to improve the quality of workers' lives within the plantation. So leaders took notice of women workers' issues. Even if leaders did not tell the management about the need to make women *chaprāsis*, they would push for raising the rate for tea leaves plucked, and since women plucked more, they made more money.⁵⁸ Nowadays, these were not the concerns of union leaders. For a long time there have been no specific demands for wage increase. As I understand from women in Sonakheta, the union's energy was devoted elsewhere, to motivate the youth to work for their party and fight the battle for a Nepali homeland. Men joined in because of the rapid unemployment and the hope that party work will eventually secure employment in the hill council (local government).

Production and reproduction of minority identity, whether ethnicized or sub-nationalist in response to larger political economic forces, is a gendered process (See Hodgson 2001, Alexander-Floyd 2006). The search for ethnic identity among Nepali minorities in India is also marked by a further increase of male domination in unions. In the plantation community, this is marked by the dominance of union politics by male youth and their concerns.

⁵⁸ Apart from a daily wage of Rupees 53 (\$1.28) in the peak seasons of tea production, women received a bonus payment if they plucked more tea leaf beyond the daily requirement of plucking 8 kilograms of tea per day. This was Rupees 3/kilo of plucked tea leaves when I was doing my fieldwork.

Apart from the problems men faced, some educated women had problems securing within the plantation work that matched their qualifications.

Kamala

Kamala had completed a Bachelor of Commerce degree⁵⁹ and was one of the better educated women in the plantation office. She was computer literate. Her maternal grandmother worked in Sonakheti, and from a very young age she visited her grandmother in the plantation on school holidays and during important religious occasions. In one of her many visits, she fell in love with a boy in the plantation. She married him and started living in the plantation with her husband's family. During my fieldwork, Kamala worked as a clerk in the plantation office. She was in charge paying workers their bi-weekly wage. She was also put in charge of coordinating the activities of the Joint Body. Kamala's photographs were everywhere and she was the face of "women's empowerment" in all of Sonakheti's publicity material. She was also not liked by many of her colleagues because of this publicity.

Like most of the other women and men in the plantation office, Kamala used to be very formal with me in the beginning as I was seen as the planter's guest. Later we developed a friendship, and she used to call me by my first name, as we were of the same age. As I started spending more time with her, I learnt more about how active women perceive Fair Trade, unions, and the Joint Body and the general attitude women had towards voicing their everyday

⁵⁹ B-Commerce is equivalent to a US bachelors degree in commerce, which includes basic accounting.

concerns. Although Kamala was earning more than the average plucker because of her education, she shared apprehension about the future of unions. She shared some of the same complaints of nepotism that illiterate women of the plantation expressed towards the management and the union.

According to Kamala, the union was strong in the 1980s, but post-agitation, the strongest communist leader was bribed by plantation authorities. Thereafter, people lost faith in communist union leaders and labor politics in general. During the 1980s, there were great leaders whom the management would revere. If the union leader gave an order to stop work or to conduct a house arrest, the workers (both men and women) from the farthest neighborhoods within Sonakheta would march up to the factory. According to Kamala, the bribing was very strategic for breaking up union solidarity, destroying people's trust in collective action and the communist party. From my interviews, I knew the party attachments of my informants and the people that Kamala did not like were ex-communists; she was a whole-hearted GNLF supporter. I was surprised that she somewhat regretted the breakdown of the communist party.

It is important to note that breaking the trust of the communist party during the time of the agitation was strategic on the part of the planter. Through this act he indirectly gestured his support for the GNLF and in turn the movement of the Gorkhas, which post-agitation, helped him form profitable relations with union leaders. Even now, the planter was quick to make

contributions for making temples and to promote the cultural projects of Nepali workers. He is very conscious of his support for the “ethnic” needs of his workers, though he frequently used ethnic stereotypes of “childishness” and “immaturity” of the Nepali men. Kamala told me that the owner had recently given a huge sum of money for making a Buddhist temple near the factory. One has to remember that all these events were happening at a time when GNLF was trying to “tribalize” Nepali culture and prove that Nepalis were different from Hindus, although most Nepali people were not religious minorities. She told me that this was very strategic because the owner had to find a way to show solidarity with union leaders.

Conclusion:

Union-busting was a common feature in India, and prominent South Asian scholars have tried to theorize why the trade unions have become ineffective in a climate where neoliberal economic policies have gained ground (Bannerjee 1991), but the lack of effective collective bargaining had deeper roots. What was remarkable in the case of Darjeeling was that a shift in union politics from a “politics of redistribution” (workers’ equality) to a “politics of recognition” (ethnicized minority politics) intensified the neglect of workers’ needs and rights, especially women workers’ rights. Men envied their wives salaries and regular employment (as I will show in chapter 4), and male youth were seen as more vulnerable. The Fair Trade efforts were seen as a sham since

plantations had not raised the minimum wage for a long time. In short, my ethnographic findings reveal that the peculiar tactic of the dominant political party in its drive to raise ethnic consciousness among Nepali people had weakened the movement for workers rights within the workplace. Workers interviews and their reflections on life are a testimony to this reality.

Kamala, Lachmi *didi*, Chhaya and Asha's subjectivities and comments were important reflections on how everyday women plantation workers understood their place in unions and workplaces. Workplace frustrations have not subsided with the change in union politics, but were expressed in *Ghumāuri* groups. Workers wanted more people to know about these inadequacies, especially Fair Trade certifying institutions, but they feared retribution from employers and male relatives. Kamala once asked me whether union members could directly complain to Fair Trade Labeling Organization International (FLO) about these misdeeds. She continued, "Sometimes when Fair Trade inspectors are around I feel like pulling them aside and telling them the real situation. How can they understand the problems here if they do not speak to common people and do not understand Nepali?" Kamala regretted that that I would not be using the real name of the plantation in my dissertation, because she badly wanted to expose the planter, but was afraid of doing it herself, because she had small kids and needed her job.

Kamala was not the only one who questioned the politics of knowledge production about Sonakheti. Illiterate women like Lachmi *didi* and Chhaya

frequently criticized the strategic use of their images and their talents at the present moment. Lachmi *didi* told me that whenever the “*kuires*” (whites) come to the plantation she takes them around. She further added,

We do not know each other’s language. We are called to the meeting of the Joint Body where nothing substantial is discussed. We are shown in a way which says nothing about our lives and frustrations. I know the real story; I know what our lives are like. The tourists and other whites take photographs, and I hate it because we are all supposed to smile and they never send them back.

Lachmi *didi* continued that there were people who made films on them. She never understood why foreigners had so much interest in showing a “coolie” in a “picture” (film).

My interactions revealed to me women’s very subjective interpretations of political ideology, work and hegemony. Sherry Ortner urges anthropologists to explore “how the condition of subjection is subjectively constructed and experienced, as well as the creative ways in which it is – if only episodically overcome” (2005:34). For Ortner, subjects are not just culturally or religiously produced and not simply defined by a particular position in a social economic matrix. They are not just an effect of power but are subjects defined by a complex set of feelings, anxieties and hope in a given historical moment. Women plantation workers like Chhaya and Lachmi’s stories, and their involvement in alternate spaces like *Ghumāuri* groups demonstrates women’s efforts to navigate multiple structures of domination that coalesce together to make their voices fade to the background.

Chapter 3: “We are the Police of Our Fields:” Women Tea Farmers’ Creative Interpretation of Fair Trade in Darjeeling, India

In the previous chapter, I discussed why women plantation workers could not bring their work-related concerns to speak to the goals of the Fair Trade movement. In this chapter, I analyze women tea farmer’s situated interpretation of Fair Trade stipulations for empowerment. Small tea farmers and their families are celebrated as real beneficiaries of the Fair Trade movement. As I mentioned in chapter one, many ardent supporters of Fair Trade strongly feel that the movement should support small farmers. This chapter highlights some of the ways in which small farmers, especially women tea farmers, rearticulate Fair Trade directives according to their own struggles to make Fair Trade more useful for them. The chapter ethnographically situates how Fair Trade actually becomes beneficial for small farmers. I analyze how women tea farmers creatively question the empowerment guidelines laid out by Fair Trade to protect their own collective desires and spaces of activism. They use Fair Trade to make visible the misrecognition of their labor in producing tea and building the cooperative community.

Denying Fair Trade, Denying Empowerment?

As I mentioned in chapter one, cooperatives and plantations who are members of FLO have to undergo Fair Trade inspections every year. Inspections were a time of apprehension among cooperative members. Depending on how cooperative members fared in the inspection interviews, FLO decided whether a

producer organization (like this cooperative) could continue to receive a Fair Trade premium (discussed in chapter one). In 2006 December, I had the opportunity to witness one such inspection. I was not allowed to witness the actual interviews with the cooperative governing body members but had a chance to interview the inspector soon after the inspection was over and witness his interactions with male and female cooperative members. Here is a notable excerpt from my interview with him,

Fair Trade Inspector: Women in Darjeeling are much more “forward” than women in other parts of India, where society is more patriarchal.

DS: Why do you think women are more forward here?

Fair Trade Inspector: At least you see them sit in the meeting when you come for inspection and they even answer my questions correctly. They are “more free.”⁶⁰

I was struck by the inspector’s comments about women tea farmers’ freedom considering that he spent a total of two days in Darjeeling and six hours in the cooperative. The inspector was a man from Delhi who did not speak Nepali; most of his conversations with cooperative members were in Hindi. During his routine inspection, the Fair Trade inspector was visibly impressed by the awareness and enthusiasm of women tea farmers within this male-dominated tea cooperative in Darjeeling. As I mentioned before, the tea cooperative was formed 1997 and represented 450 households scattered across a slope of the Darjeeling hills producing illegal tea. The cooperative also had a Women’s Wing consisting

⁶⁰ This entire interview was conducted in English.

of female relatives of the male cooperative members. The scale at which the Women's Wing operated was below the cooperative. Governing body members of the cooperative took major decisions about its operation and the management of tea within the cooperative community. The inspector sensed this hierarchy. He wanted the women tea farmers to dissolve the Women's Wing and join the governing body of the cooperative in larger numbers. After interviewing the male and female members of the cooperative, the inspector felt that women were ready for "more empowerment" and needed to be members of the main cooperative.

During our conversation the inspector remarked that Darjeeling was not as patriarchal as the rest of India, which was proven by the demographic fact – the sex ratio in Darjeeling was higher than other places in India – that there were more women in the population. He had observed that there were numerous women owned businesses in the market. Women in the villages did not observe strict norms of *purdha* (veiling) like other places in north India.

He assumed that women would welcome his "Fair Trade" directives, as it would guarantee women more political presence in their community and ensure a more equitable distribution of Fair Trade resources. Meanwhile, members of the Women's Wing did not approve of these Fair Trade directives. During my participant observation in the cooperative, I picked up common terms women associated with empowerment, such as, *aggi barhnu* (to move forward/progress), *bato dikhaunu* (showing the way), *swaccha vyāpār garnu* (doing clear/

transparent/fair business), *THulo yojanā*⁶¹ *banaunu* (making big business/big plan), and *balio hunu* (becoming strong). All these words, when translated from Nepali, invoke notions of empowerment based on equality and imply particular kinds of operation. Joining the governing body of the cooperative, as an act of empowerment, was never associated with these empowerment terminologies. I wanted to know why this was the case? Why did the suggestion of joining the governing body not sit well with the women's group? Why did women not want to make this potentially empowering move and give up their women's group? What were women trying to achieve by defying the inspector's suggestion when they knew that such defiance could lead to the loss of certification and subsequent Fair Trade funds.

Women defied the inspector to publicly demonstrate their disagreements with the cooperative governing board. In the end, the cooperative's Fair Trade certification and funds were not revoked because of this defiance by the Women's Wing, but they were put on probationary action (a warning to straighten out matters within the cooperative). The cooperative was advised by FLO to sort out its differences with the Women's Wing members. In the end the Women's Wing remained. It was decided that two Women's Wing members would be voting ex-officio members of the cooperative board.

Women's formal and informal self-help groups were a common feature in Darjeeling during this study. Women tea farmers felt very strongly about the

⁶¹ In Nepali *yojana* means plan. However women deliberately substitute the word plan with the word business in an attempt to familiarize people in the cooperative area about the Women's Wing business.

significance of their saving groups for income generation in the face of extreme unemployment and growing economic hardships in Darjeeling. Having a successful women's group was the first step towards *swaccha vyāpār* (Fair/Clean trade) and *aggi barhnu* (to move forward). There was substantial difference in the way the Fair Trade Labeling Organization (FLO) conceived of women's empowerment and what women who were the actual targets of Fair Trade policies saw as empowering. As I will outline in this chapter, women's place-specific interpretations of Fair Trade directives were based upon how they experienced power and domination within their own communities. Women thought that the cooperative stood in the way of *swaccha vyāpār* (clean/fair trade) because it only dealt in tea. For selling other produce from the community, villagers had to depend on middlemen. Staying away from the cooperative was seen as beneficial by women tea farmers within the Fair Trade system in Darjeeling.

Analyses of women's narratives and participant observation reveal that the decision of Women's Wing members to go against the inspector's suggestion was a critique of the gendered spatial and ideological politics prevalent in their communities and reflected in the cooperative structure. These practices restricted the scope of women's economic activities within the village, which made it difficult for women to succeed in their business ventures. It also included ideological challenges that members of the Women's Wing faced because of their actions. In this chapter, I show how Fair Trade directives provide an

opportunity for women to publicly vent their anxieties about the challenges they face in improving the economic situation of their families. Creative unsettling of Fair Trade directives by refusing to step up to the inspector's suggestion was a way to question the appropriation of women's labor through gendered scalar politics and denying them resources of Fair Trade.

I do not propose that FLO's vision of empowerment is inherently depoliticizing because the inspector realized the hierarchies within the community. However, his directive was based on the liberal idea of equal gender representation in numbers. Hence the inspector suggested that "more" women should be present in the governing body of the cooperative. While the physical presence of more women in the cooperative governing body was important, the effectiveness of their presence was questionable. Examining how these depoliticizing tendencies of Fair Trade are questioned by women as they chart their own plan of empowerment and community participation by critiquing Fair Trade directives is important to understand the grounded effects of Fair Trade.

Middlemen, Gendered Spatial Politics and the Government of Women's Work

Before I analyze women's narratives about their experience in the cooperative, it is important to understand the hierarchies and gendered work ideologies, which restricted the mobility of women tea farmers. Before the cooperative was formed in 1997, the people in the area depended on middlemen for credit and for selling their produce and dry tea leaves to the market. When I

asked women tea farmers to describe their life before the cooperative was formed, they mostly mentioned selling their produce to the middlemen. Women identified three important reasons why this was happening. Firstly, middlemen had good contacts in town to sell products from the village, secondly, they had money to hire people to transport material from the villages to town, and thirdly, women had to depend on them because women's frequent travel to the town was not appreciated by their family members. Women tea farmers were often obligated to sell their produce to the middlemen as a way to pay back loans they had taken from the middlemen.

Interviews with the NGO that worked with the cooperative also corroborated this dependence on middlemen. The NGO workers frequently used the phrase "middlemen mentality" to describe the adversities they faced in helping the tea farmers. One of them mentioned, "given a chance, everyone would behave like a middleman; that is what they have been used to. Every successful man wants to become a middleman because they know this is the easiest way to become successful and make money."

The middlemen were part of the cooperative members' communities. I used to meet them in the cars on my way to the cooperative. I picked up on the conversations that these middlemen had with the drivers of the village vehicles. Sometimes the middlemen were wealthy enough to buy their own vehicles and used them to transport produce and other commodities from the cooperative area to Darjeeling town.

The middlemen were usually better off than their counterparts in the villages. They usually had more land, political contacts with the local party, held lower level government jobs in town, and possessed good contacts with the shopkeepers and businessmen in Darjeeling town, where they could sell the produce they collected from the villages. Some of them had become wealthy over time and usually had more education than rest of the people in their community. Some of them also held important positions in the cooperative after it was formed.

After the cooperative was formed, the middlemen suffered setbacks on two fronts. The dry hand processed “illegal” tea that they had a monopoly over, was no longer there. The formation of the Women’s Wing and its subsequent involvement with micro-credit loans meant that the income middlemen earned from interest declined. As I mentioned in chapter one, the Women’s Wing members started taking out loans from a government bank through the micro-credit scheme. These developments formed the backdrop of the hostility between Women’s Wing members and middlemen’s efforts to harm their respectability, as will become evident in the rest of the chapter. Women tea farmers welcomed these comparatively low interest loans from NGO-run government schemes. Women also mentioned that that their family members welcomed these loans since they came at lower interest rates.⁶² Many women tea farmers mentioned

⁶² Most micro-credit loans are available for women. See Lahiri-Dutta and Samanta 2006 for relevant statistics on West Bengal.

that they were very scared to take loans from outsiders, but soon they realized that it was not a bad proposition since bank interest rates were fixed.

The middlemen were not pleased with the NGO involvement and the micro-credit schemes. In the beginning of my research, some of these middlemen thought that I was working for the NGO. When I met them in town, or when I visited their homes, they frequently quizzed me on how much money the NGO had and who funded them. They also assumed that the NGO was taking a share from the loans that women returned to the banks, which I knew was not the case. In the beginning, I could not understand the basis of these enquiries, but gradually I realized that the middlemen were very suspicious of NGO involvement. In spite of these feelings of suspicion, middlemen welcomed the NGO interventions because it ultimately resulted in development money from Fair Trade and a greater price for un-processed tea from the coop area. The middlemen, who served on the cooperative board, now tried to monopolize the sale of other produce from the area like turmeric, ginger, cardamom, milk, and vegetables. Most tea farmers complained that the prices middlemen offered to the villagers were very low, but because of the lack of adequate transportation and contacts, the middlemen still held their sway. In response to my survey question about future expectations from the cooperative, most respondents said that they expected that in the future the cooperative would sell more things apart from tea.

Women's Wing members had devised their plan of *THulo yojanā* (big plan, big business), so that cooperative households would also get a fair price for their other produce. While the middlemen were already a little upset with the NGO interventions, which dealt a blow to their assured sources of income, they still benefited from their dealings in selling other produce from the village. When the Women's Wing floated their business plan, open animosity began between the middlemen and Women's Wing members. The middlemen defamed Women's Wing members, making use of the existing gender ideologies. They took advantage of the existing cultural resources available to harm the Women's Wing members' respectability. They did so by spreading rumors about the women tea farmers, emphasizing that they were becoming like market women or women plantation workers who were considered *bāthi* (street smart).⁶³ In the cooperative area, women were seen as housewives, who worked in their family farms. Cooperative members took pride in their ownership of land and identified as farmers. They maintained cultural distinction from plantation people, "who sent their daughters and wives to work outside the home for the entire day." Women themselves lived their lives as housewives or good sisters who always asked for permission when they went to town. Too many visits to the town were not appreciated by elder men and women in the women tea farmers' households. While the women tea farmers tried to live up to these ideologies, they also found these ideologies constricting because they made these farmers dependent on

⁶³ I have myself witnessed men using these derogatory terms to describe key Women's Wing members in the village vehicles and even in community meetings where Women's Wing members were not present.

middlemen who exploited them. As I will describe later, many women made secret journeys in the night to sell tea and produce to town. Women despised these restrictions since it limited their scope of making more money for their households.

Controlling women's non-farm/non-household activities was a way of maintaining social distinction and upward mobility in the villages simultaneously, as women's non-farm activities were important for increasing household income. Gidwani (2008: 181) calls this the "government of work." In such a situation, absolute confinement to home-based work was not feasible. Instead women's non-farm activities were confined to the space of the village, preventing them from forming sustainable links with the market.

The persistence of gender ideologies not only confined women's economic activities to certain spaces; it gave some middlemen the moral resources to strategically question the actions of women who had the potential to challenge the monopoly of middlemen in the villages by going to the market directly. Practices of defaming were used to negatively affect the "respectability" of women who defied the dominance of middlemen in local business (see also Hodgson and McCurdy 2001:6). Women thought that these shaming practices curtailed their earnings which complemented their family income. Members of the Women's Wing were convinced that joining the governing body of the cooperative was not going to end the existing double standards that existed in their community about the appropriateness of women's business ventures.

Women read the inspectors suggestion as collusion between male cooperative members and the inspector. Women interpreted joining the governing body of the cooperative as giving in to the tactics of the middlemen, some of whom were important members of the cooperative. The suggested empowerment move by the Fair Trade inspector was perceived as giving in to this existing spatial politics in the community, which limited women's mobility.

In the sections below, I present women's narratives around Fair Trade certification and cooperative politics. I ethnographically locate women's daily activities, and their past experiences with Fair Trade resources within the cooperative.

From Good Village Women to *Bāthi* Entrepreneurs

Why is it that we get these stares when we walk down the village road?
Are we different, now that we are trying to do big business?
----- Minu

While it is a common sight in Darjeeling town to see Nepali and Bhutia⁶⁴ women of different ages selling their produce, crafts, snacks, cheap imported clothing and electronic items from China, village women were rarely seen selling anything in public. Working-class poor women who engaged in small business were looked down upon by upper-class men and women in their villages and towns. Market women are seen as shrewd, as opposed to village women, who

⁶⁴ Most people in Darjeeling migrated from Nepal in the 1800s to work in the tea plantations of Darjeeling during the British Raj. Bhutia people are considered indigenous to Darjeeling, and the primary difference between Nepali and Bhutia people is religion. Nepali people are staunch Hindus and Bhutias are Buddhists. Nepalis are the dominant ethnic group and consider other ethnic groups as outsiders. A feeling of hostility exists between Nepali and other ethnic groups in Darjeeling.

are seen as simple, family oriented and hardworking. Gendered moral views about women tea farmers' participation in public and commercial life were influenced by these opinions (see also Seligman 2004, Lynch 2007). Women tea farmers in the villages were supposed to be soft-spoken and supportive of men's initiatives. Women tea farmers were expected to work within the farm and stay in the village. Such gendered evaluations spatially restricted the scope of women's business within the village. The latter were not profitable because there was greater demand in Darjeeling town for produce compared to their village. Moreover, middlemen in the village, who took these products from women to town, did not give producing families a fair price. Poor village women that I interviewed thought that market women in Darjeeling town were skilled, smart and economically better off because they did not have to rely on middlemen to reach the market. Village women desired to be as successful as their counterparts in the market, knowing that this would be difficult. Their ultimate goal was to have their own produce shop in the market – their vision of large scale business – *THulo yojanā*. Women tea farmers told me that they were tired of taking loans from micro-credit. When Fair Trade premium money started pouring into the cooperative women thought they could fulfill their desires by asking for a share of this money.

In the villages surrounding Darjeeling where I conducted my fieldwork, in addition to farming, women tea farmers were always selling objects of daily necessity such as alcohol, sweets, vegetables, tea, ramen noodles, *khaini* (chewing

tobacco), washing powder, and many other knick knacks that they acquired from town. These small shops were sometimes not shops at all. They ranged from a box full of stuff under a woman's bed, a temporary place under the tree at the village playground, to a small shack just outside the house or mobile shops. Women filled a large tote with vegetables, *raksi* (local rice wine),⁶⁵ some milk, kerosene, and left over dried tea leaves (hand rolled and dried in the home kitchen, "artisanal hand rolled tea," as the NGO members would describe them when foreign visitors were around). Women sold it to the market women who frequented these villages to collect goods from women tea farmers. None of the village women went to the market regularly or had permanent shops in town. They sold products clandestinely through their networks with market women or middlemen. These small ventures were considered routine since they were done by individual women within the village. Spatially, it was difficult to map these business ventures since they were impermanent and malleable. Women who went to the market frequently were ostracized and shamed by elder family members and middlemen.

These small ventures helped women to put food on the table, send their children to school and stretch the cash income of their family. Like the market women in town, women tea farmers in the village made important contributions

⁶⁵ Practices of selling local alcohol, cigarettes etc. were developed because prior to the formation of the cooperative and subsequent rise in tea sales, these villagers were known as "illegal farmers," and tea was not a profitable venture. While men migrated to other places in India, women tried their hand at creative ventures from within the village. After the formation of the cooperative, women accessed micro-credit loans through a local NGO.

to their household income through these small business ventures. It is ironic that these small-scale business ventures did not upset the gendered moral universe of the villages in which they lived. These silent and flexible entrepreneurial acts did not require big investment or NGO support. They occurred through networks that were personal yet very much part of the market. So far these activities were being done individually by women, but when these acts ceased to be small scale, they caused great furor in the community.

So far women in the tea cooperative engaged in small entrepreneurial acts. During my fieldwork I found out that women consider having their own shop in the market as the ultimate goal of becoming empowered, to move forward/*aggi barhnu*. Their experience from micro-credit and their pursuit of a larger business (*THulo yojanā*) venture shaped their expectations from Fair Trade. Women were tired of taking micro-credit loans and eventually they requested money from the tea cooperative to organize a group business. When the women's group asked the governing body of the cooperative for money for their dream venture – the *THulo yojanā* – the cooperative initially refused. Women took this refusal as betrayal; they understood the importance of their labor and small trading ventures for the well-being of the community. Women knew that they had taken great risk by engaging in making and selling illegal tea, which had helped organic tea to survive in their backyards.

Soon after the Fair Trade inspection in 2006, a rumor spread that the women's group within the tea cooperative would be dissolved. Some vocal

members of the women's group mobilized against the cooperative. While in theory the inspector's suggestion was well-intentioned, according to Fair Trade's policy to make cooperatives include more women as officers, it was not received well by the women's group. The catalyst to this rumor however was an incident that happened during the 2005-6 inspections. Binu, one of the active members of the Women's Wing, narrated the context to me. The cooperative received 222000 rupees (close to US\$6000) as Fair Trade premium money. Women were happy because the governing body members told the villagers that the money was going to be used for development. Leaders of the women's group requested for Rupees 10500 (less than 5% of the funds) to start their produce business. Women wanted to use this FLO money as startup capital for their shop venture, instead of approaching a bank and burdening themselves with a loan. The cooperative refused. Women were extremely frustrated and angry. As Binu explained to me:

You know it was all fine until we asked for our share of the FLO money; somehow we became everyone's enemy. We could not even imagine that the men would show their true colors, and there would be so much hostility. We have been taking individual loans from the bank for the last couple of years and always return the money. After all, we get periodic suggestions and encouragement from the NGO and government officers running the SHGs (Self Help Groups) on how we should stand on our own feet and learn new skills. When we are selling *raksi* (both of these are local alcohols) and *biri* (local cigarette) it is fine, but when we want to make a big business it is just not accepted. When we put pressure on the cooperative men to give us some money from FLO funds, they immediately asked us, "who are you, what is your identity, your group is nothing without the cooperative, why are you asking for a separate share of the money? If we invest the money into the community as a whole you all will benefit, what makes you all special? Women also benefit from our rising tea sales, don't they?" I replied saying that women are the ones who

provide the labor in the plucking season from which you get this money, and we are going to use this money to learn new skills. To tell you the truth, we absolutely have to make this business a success and show these men that we can do the things they can; otherwise they are going to make fun of us again.

Binu explained to me that if Women's Wing members dissolved their group and joined the main cooperative, then they would never get a share of money to do this separate business. The middlemen present in the cooperative would not let the women take a separate share of the money to start a business, citing the fact that the money spent on the entire community would benefit all. Women's wing members saw the real consequences of joining the cooperative.

Binu further described how the cooperative faced many problems in its formative years. Some people had given up growing tea because it was considered illegal to grow it outside plantations. But women continued to rear the tea bushes in their farm and sold dry tea through their networks. Men accepted these business ventures knowing non-plantation tea was then considered illegal. It was risky to get caught with illegal tea in Darjeeling town. Yet, there was immense hesitation when women wanted to run an organized produce business. According to Binu, this hesitation resulted not only from the lack of confidence about women in the community.⁶⁶ More importantly, the middlemen feared that the Women's Wing would harm their business prospects. Men spread the fear among the cooperative community that village women

⁶⁶ It is important to note that there is no local market for the cooperative community products apart from tea. Trade in other commodities like turmeric, milk, ginger, cardamom, oranges are controlled by middlemen in the villages..

would become “*bāthi*” if they engaged in serious business. Women were thus expected to stay at home and farm along side their husbands or family members.

Binu elaborated:

We go for all sorts of training so that we can move forward.⁶⁷ Then why not give us the money now, when we can gain some real training to better ourselves? It is okay if they want us to be in the cooperative governing board, but we really want to have our own organization. We women have *lāj* (modesty, shame) and we can support each other, even if it is just five of us. I know the men in the cooperative must have jumped at the inspector’s suggestions because this was a way for them to wipe out our existence so that the cooperative would not have to share money with us again. When the secretary finally gave us the money things had become bitter, but he told us then that this was the last time we were going to get our demands met.

Binu’s reading of the Fair Trade directive as collusion between male cooperative board members and the inspector was shared by other women. Because the cooperative had refused funds to the Women’s Wing the previous year, women interpreted the inspector’s suggestion as an effect of collusion between the male governing body members and the inspector. Women read the Fair Trade directive as the final step in wiping out their group’s existence because the Women’s Wing had asked for Fair Trade premium money. They saw this suggestion as a way for middlemen to retain their voice in the cooperative. Women in the cooperative community had a bigger battle in mind. They believed that dissolving their organization to become members of the

⁶⁷ Women tea farmers were selected to participate in training programs for income generation, healthcare by NGOs working in Darjeeling. Most of these training programs were local, but sometimes involved travel outside the Darjeeling district.

cooperative leadership might lead to a cooptation of their business plan by middlemen.

What seemed to be an overreaction (to NGO workers and initially also to me) and contrary to Fair Trade's goals of empowering women within the community in reality conflicted with women's own aspirations for gendered social change. Here women understood that the success of the cooperative was important for getting a good price for their tea and the general development of their community. But they also saw the cooperative standing in the way of their business ventures. They believed that the cooperative was a men's domain and unfair. The present frustration with the cooperative had deeper roots, as is evident from women's narratives about their economic roles in the community even before the cooperative started. In the next section, I present narratives from members of the women's group to show how women understand their place within the community and why they want to have a women's organization within the cooperative.

"We are the police of our own fields"--Gendered Boundaries within the Cooperative

While I interviewed Women's Wing members, I had to get used to the rituals of waiting for them to return from their fields. The mountainous terrain and density of vegetation did not allow me to look past the homes to figure out where the women were working or whether they were working alongside their

husband or family members. Sometimes I could not join them. But soon I realized the rhythm of seasonal farming. Most interviews would take place in the early afternoon. On one such day, I started my interview by asking a woman tea farmer, Sumita *didi* (*elder sister*), when her husband was going to return from the field⁶⁸ and what kind of farming duties he performed. This was a common question in my interviews. I asked men and women to describe whether and how they shared farming duty. When I asked Sumita *didi* the question, she replied that her husband was in the army. Apparently, her sons were also preparing to join the army. Then, with a sarcastic smile, she said “But sister...we are the police of our fields.”⁶⁹ The “we” in Sumita *didi*’s statement meant women.

The extreme poverty in this community soon after the plantation closed down had forced men to take up other occupations outside the village. More so because farming tea outside of the plantations was considered illegal by the state. Women at times were single-handedly responsible for the production and marketing of household agriculture. The sarcasm was directed at me, because I made the common mistake of assuming that men always shared household work or that men were the farmers and women helped out in other household chores. Both of us burst out laughing because the statement was made with dry humor and sarcasm. It implied the *de facto* rights women had on their lands⁷⁰ and also

⁶⁸ In the coop it is common for spouses to work together in the agricultural farms. At times women have to do agricultural work alone, because the husband works in town or is in the army. Because the tea cooperative farmers were in the informal tea sector men were often away from their homes, they had joined the army, or were at another town to find a job.

⁶⁹ I conducted this interview in the coop on January 14th 2007.

⁷⁰ A woman rarely owned land in this community unless she was the only child of her parents.

the importance of their labor and surveillance for producing other cash crops and tea. The statement was very powerful and in short described how women interpreted their place within the community.

Sumita *didi's* statement also had dual meaning. Women in the tea cooperative not only had de facto rights over their land and produce, but they also needed to police the boundaries of their operation. They needed to protect their dreams and desires of large scale business within the community, even from Fair Trade directives. Her comments were representative of what women saw as their contribution to their households and the present challenges they faced within the cooperative. Most visitors including plantation authorities and visitors assumed that men were the farmers because they dominated the affairs of the cooperative. These misconceptions frustrated women. Women in the cooperative-community felt that they had sustained the production of tea even when there was no organic boom, no cooperative, and no NGO involvement. They performed the tedious job of plucking, hand rolling and drying the leaves. The cooperative community did not have a proper road for cars until 1996. There were only small pony roads left over from the colonial plantation. Women used the "*chor bāto*" (hidden/thief's roads) to take the tea leaves to Darjeeling town. The distance from the coop to Darjeeling town was 20 kilometers. Before the road was built, people had to walk 6-7 hours to get to the town to sell their produce. They used to start at night with their products to get to town. This time

was convenient because it ensured that women reached the town early and people in the village would not see them going to town. As Gayatri told me:

We [women] would pack the dry tea leaves, vegetables and other products well and keep it all prepared in our *doko*.⁷¹ We would barely sleep and at around 2 am we would start the journey to the town through the *chor bato*. We were afraid that we could be bitten by snakes and so we had to carry *titepati* (medicinal plants).⁷² Sometimes family members would accompany us, but we made small groups among us and went to town to sell it to the market women and local shopkeepers. But the fear of snakes and dangerous slippery roads was not as intense as the threat of being shamed by the police because of trading in illegal tea. Being arrested was a common feature; we slowly learned to pay bribes at police check posts and learnt how to hide the tea under the vegetables. But these dangerous journeys were worth it, because it helped us put food on the table and send our children to school. Tea would still fetch us more cash than vegetables.

I heard similar narratives from both older and middle aged women. As

Premeshwari, an older woman in her 80s told me in Nov 2006,

I was 10 years old when I started working in the tea fields in my parent's house. It was a fun thing to do for young girls. Most of the time I would pick leaves with my sisters, not knowing that this was going to be a way to make a living in the years to come. As soon as I was married at age fourteen, I came to the plantation when it was still running. I continued plucking tea with other women in my extended family and my husband also found a job in the factory. But a couple of years later the white *sāhibs* were gone and new Indian owners came in and took charge. Later a fight broke out between the workers and the management, and the factory closed down. Ever since then we had a hard time making ends meet. We occupied plantation land and did not have *patta* (land title), the constant fear of getting ousted from the land was there. Like my husband, many men from the plantation villages then started looking for work in the town or outside Darjeeling: some went to Nepal but the women had no choice.

⁷¹ Bamboo baskets used commonly in Darjeeling. Women usually hang these from their foreheads with a rope.

⁷² A common medicinal plant thought to have the power to drive off spirits and bad omens.

We [women] lived on, tended the bushes which had grown wild and unruly because there was no one to maintain them. What you see now are the very remnants of those wild bushes. At times the bushes were as tall as me. But we kept plucking and making *hāthe chiā* (hand rolled tea) and made the long journeys to the town. Now that we have the cooperative, it is so much easier, but yet people fight. I just don't understand why.

Fights among men in the villages were common; especially between middlemen.

The NGO, which had worked in this community for the last 40 years, described these people as “refugees in their own lands who later became farmers by default” (NGO report 2005: 6). The people were wage laborers and they had no concept of agriculture, they only knew how to rear tea bushes. Before the formation of the cooperative in 1997, people fought over land boundary disputes. Phulkumari, now 70 years old, remembered such fights, which at times turned violent. She told me in January 2007, “When the fight got out of hand we (women) had to rush in to control people and bring in sanity. It is not that we women did not face competition or frustration but we could never fight like men: irresponsibly.” Phulkumari’s comments were also corroborated by a founding member of the NGO working in this area, an academic and activist who started visiting these areas in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This was when the NGO was responsible for distributing the PL 480⁷³ resources as part of the US food for work program. He also mentioned that the fights over resources were very

⁷³ Public Law 480 described in <http://www.usaid.gov/pubs/cp2000/pl480ffp.html>, “U.S. support for overseas food aid was formalized in the Agricultural Trade Development and assistance Act of 1954, also known as P.L. 480 Food for Peace. The basic legislation, which has been modified many times, establishes the U.S. policy of using the country's abundant agricultural resources and food processing capabilities to enhance food security in the developing world through the provision of culturally acceptable nutritious food commodities

common. He remembered Phulkumari's role in putting an end to such fight and stated,

Although we never tried to intervene in the internal matters of the village, I could not but notice the significant role women played in these communities; at times silently. While men always tried to show that they were better and stronger workers; it was not true. Women from the coop area used to carry their babies for miles to reach our office to get their medical check-up done. They also carried their heavy produce to sell in the town.

Phulkumari further mentioned that she along with some other women, who used to go to the town to sell tea, had once blockaded the local police office. She stated that women had to take some action and stop the police from regularly arresting them. She said: "women were good at this because if there were men protesting they would have to be put behind bars immediately."

The events around Fair Trade certification provided women with an opportunity to reflect about their indispensability in keeping alive the production of illegal (now organic) tea and their role in the economic wellbeing of their households. My interview transcripts revealed to me women's very subjective interpretations of the Fair Trade directives. Their goal of a *THulo yojanā* (big business) was an enactment of critical subjective desires of seeing *swaccha vyāpār* (clean/Fair Trade) in their communities. They did not necessarily see the Fair Trade discourse to enable a fair sharing of resources within the cooperative-community. These subjective reflections had raised deep doubts in their minds about organic agriculture and Fair Trade.

Women tea farmers time and again recounted their critical role in community building while keeping alive the production of a vital commodity-organic tea. Being sidelined in the cooperative, women often expressed deep doubts about the benefits of organic farming for women. As part of complying with Fair Trade stipulations, each and every farmers' land was tested and rechecked for organic status every year.⁷⁴ When the NGOs organized organic agriculture workshops and trainings, members of the women's group were required to participate. Since this tea cooperative was the only organic-Fair Trade certified small farmers' cooperative in Darjeeling, they received considerable local and international media attention. Officers and members the Women's Wing sometimes visited other communities and talked about how they benefited from organic farming and the Fair Trade money they received for development. Women emphasized in their speeches that they had always practiced organic agriculture. Despite such a level of engagement with organic agriculture, women tea farmers sometimes raised doubts about the real benefits of organic farming. Babita asked me once, "Are organic⁷⁵ commodities just for men? Do organic commodities benefit women?" I hesitated to answer as the question was so profound.

⁷⁴ While FLO sent its representative to check for Fair Trade and organic standards, the cooperative's farmers as a group were also certified organic by another international organization called IMO (Institute of Marketology)

⁷⁵ The Nepali word for organic is *jaivik*. Tea farmers and their families rarely used the Nepali word for organic. Instead they used the English organic since NGO workers and inspectors use the word organic in English.

It was common for women in this community to make fun of organic farming and organic commodities as a whole. It was a way to talk about the difficulties of selling other organic commodities, apart from tea. One day in November 2006, some women had met for tea at the local village tea shop. The shop owner brought out a pack of biscuits and soon realized that this was a “duplicate” (women know what this word means and use it in original English), hence lower grade, not made by an original company and not as tasty. She quickly joked and said, “How can we ever become fully organic, when we are brought up on duplicate. Will my daughter find an *organic* husband?”

Remarks like these alluded to the inequities that existed in the community. The joke about the gendered nature of organic commodities is rooted in women’s frustrations with selling organic products apart from tea.⁷⁶ While members of the tea cooperative sold their household tea to the plantation through the cooperative, other agricultural commodities were hard to sell in the local market. Asking for a premium price (higher than the local market price) for their organic products was simply unimaginable. Other scholars (Dolan 2001:59, Schroeder 1997) have also noted such latent and sometimes very explicit gendering of commodities and forms of agriculture in communities where there are gendered patterns of resource use. Dolan shows that in Kenya, subsistence crops for household consumption and local sale are seen as women’s

⁷⁶ As mentioned in earlier narratives, the cooperative is very involved with tea which is more lucrative because of the western niche market for Organic-Darjeeling tea. Such markets are not present for regular subsistence crops which are still grown and which women sell to supplement cash income.

commodities. However when such commodities gain exchange value and become more marketable (in response to huge EU demands for marketable crops) men tried to dominate the circulation of such crops even if they were not spending more labor in producing it. Commodities that are organic and get Fair Trade certification then necessitate a large-scale operation, which alienates the surplus they generate to become available for some of its producers, in this case women tea farmers. Women's own experiences in trading make them envious of male dominance in large business ventures.

Similarly in Darjeeling, women tea farmers claimed that whenever there was large-scale big business opportunity, men seized it because they had more experience. Men were successful because women had limited spatial mobility, could not go to town and had to sell their produce to middlemen. When the cooperative was not in place and the contract with the plantation was not secure mostly women in these communities were responsible for trading tea while men spent time selling milk, finding wage work in the town, or planting ginger or cardamom, which ensured good cash returns. Since the formation of the cooperative, tea became more lucrative, resulting in Fair Trade money. Men who were in the cooperative tried to dominate the dealings in tea. While women were glad that now they had a more secure market for selling tea leaves, they also felt a little disenfranchised because of intense male domination in the cooperative. At times, women reflected on the organic hype (which they co-produced for

strategic purposes) with pessimism. Sarju, another woman farmer, told me in November 2006:

When we tell the market women that our vegetables and cow's milk are organic and no chemicals were used and hence they look small, they laugh and tell us not to fool them. They tell us the vegetables look small and apparently we are not taking good care of them. Some people get hooked on to my vegetables, but others just do not care. Men and women who come from other areas to the market do not have to abide by the organic stipulations and their vegetables are big, and they get more out of their money. Sometimes we get no benefit from organic farming, but we cannot give it up because at least we can now sell the tea and FLO money comes to us. But nobody cares about how we women suffer at the hands of the men who now try to control the cooperative. Joining the governing body is not going to solve this problem; we have to have our separate group.

Women in the cooperative community were concerned about the sale of other subsistence produce from their villages since this was a major part of their household income. Since tea could only be harvested for eight months a year, villagers depended on produce and milk for the other months. Since women grew vegetables and some had cattle they wanted to make sure that they were getting a good price for these. To overcome their dependence on middlemen, women asked for FLO money to organize a business for selling other produce.

After the women's wing fought with the cooperative over the Fair Trade money for their business plan, powerful men in the village spread rumors that the Women's Wing business was bound to fail because women were inexperienced. These middlemen often called active Women's Wing members names like "*bāthi*" and "*chuchchi*", which were local terms to dishonor women.

Men used these terms specifically to communicate that “*bāthi*” and “*chuchchi*” women were not respectable; these women had transgressed social norms according to which women behaved in villages. Such women were not worthy of people’s support. These gender ideologies were mobilized to deter villagers from supplying milk and vegetables to the Women’s Wing business; to control the scope of women’s business. Some *goalas* (middlemen who specifically dealt in milk) even tried to increase the price of the milk for the producers to encourage villagers not to contribute to the Women’s Wing’s business initiative. Other *goalas* found out the milk depot in town to which Women’s Wing was selling their milk and told the depot owner that women were disorganized and were unethical. Women now constantly felt they were at risk because their reputation was at stake. However, if they succumbed to these rumors and stopped their business they would risk losing their chance to convince villagers that they could run their successful business. Their failure would ensure that cooperative would never give them FLO money for their projects. These circumstances propelled women to maintain the boundaries of their own group and not comply with the inspectors suggestions.

Conclusion:

The events surrounding Fair Trade inspection at the time of this study provided an opportunity for me to understand the place-based gendered interpretations of Fair Trade in producer communities. The conflicts around Fair

Trade directives opened up the space for women to enact their collective desires by refusing to give up their women's group. In the process, they also drew attention to the inadequacy of Fair Trade to address larger structural inequalities in their community due to which middlemen still had a hold on people's lives. While removing intermediaries is one of the central aims of Fair Trade (Reynolds et al 2007), in Darjeeling the inspector could not recognize their domination because he was approaching everything from a technical result-oriented perspective.

Women farmers' decision to conduct business and form their separate group also cannot be read only as complete rejection of neoliberal justice (expressed through Fair Trade), since women want to use the Fair Trade premium money to further their *THulo yojanā*. The decision of the women's group to defy the inspector and conduct their own business is informed by the gendered politics of resource use and sharing within the community. Men were considered to have an edge over women in earning money because of spatial and ideological barriers that women faced. In reality, both men and women contributed to household costs.

Women frequently use the word "risk" to describe the hardships of returning loans; they felt that they had taken more risks for the community, right from the time the plantation closed. Women saw that the economic hardships in their community always placed them in more vulnerable positions, even when the community was getting some benefits of Fair Trade. Women were

responsible for subsistence and trade but middlemen dominated business networks. This meant that women always had to operate at an unprofitable level within the village and had to work harder to earn money. In such a situation dissolving the women's group was seen as a risk; it would make it difficult for women to question male domination and demand Fair Trade premium in the future.

What is perhaps more critical is that women used their knowledge from previous engagements with neoliberalism, such as micro-credit to interpret the significance market-based justice movements, like Fair Trade. Through micro-credit, women learnt the hardships of returning loans. For them, Fair Trade became a way to avoid the burden of loans, while planning a more sustainable collective business. Creative engagement with Fair Trade directives was a way for them to control men's economic control of their lives and to reduce their dependence on micro-credit loans.

In conclusion, this chapter highlights women's efforts to negotiate the limiting tendencies of the transnational Fair Trade campaign. Women tea farmers in Darjeeling challenged the boundedness of the campaign and its policy implications for their own roles in the cooperative and their community. In analyzing the background and circumstances of this struggle and negotiations, the chapter illuminates the circumstances under which women's collective agency can emerge within market-based production systems (Naples and Desai 2002, Oberhauser and Pratt 2005). Women in the coop did not perceive trade and

market as a problem; it is the gendered barriers within their community that they regarded as a major impediment to their possibilities of earning cash and supplementing their family income. They complicated notions of empowerment emanating from the Fair Trade regime and challenged the double standards within their community about the appropriateness and scope of women's economic actions. Perhaps, certain forms of exclusion within the community were productive for women to enact their new subjectivities as entrepreneurs and keep alive their own dreams of empowerment. The latter is made possible by their creative unsettling of liberal empowerment frameworks, which tend to use them as instruments for global justice.

Chapter 4: Competing Visibilities of Work, Fair Trade and Household Relations in Darjeeling

The communicative and symbolic dimensions of women's work in the plantation and the cooperative had distinct effects on household relations at the two sites. Fair Trade related activities produced a "new social landscape" (Schroeder 1999: 60) of community and household relations in the cooperative, which not only affected the "conjugal contract" but also relations between siblings and other household members. Women's re-appropriation of Fair Trade ideas and their economic ventures in the cooperative area escalated household conflicts over the material and symbolic implications of women's work. In the plantation, household conflicts were independent of Fair Trade activities, although they also centered on implications of women's gainful employment and its symbolic dimensions.

The two most important distinctions between household relations in the plantation and the cooperative were the nature of intra-household conflicts and public exposure of household issues at the respective sites. The differences in household relations and community participation were influenced by the varying power structures that shaped everyday life in the plantation and the cooperative. Women's work in the plantation was surveilled and appropriated through restricted employment practices and male-dominated unions. In the cooperative women's work was appropriated by the cooperative through male policing of women's work within the village and through mobilization of gender

ideologies about village women. Women in the cooperative were more adept at negotiating surveillance by publicly challenging the pressures put on them through household relations. Women plantation workers kept their household issues to themselves since plantation women were seen as “*chuchchi*” (with sharp tongue) and less respectable (see also Chatterjee 2001). Women plantation workers were also envied by their male family members who faced a gloomy economic future. Contrary to their stereotypical image, women plantation workers rarely fought with managers as they feared being shamed; they rarely “talked back.”

The observation of household relations and close attention to the narratives of the women plantation workers and women tea farmers reveal that Fair Trade-related concerns had entered the micro-politics of household and community politics in the tea cooperative, unlike the plantation. Women tea farmers in the cooperative used Fair Trade trainings, certification processes and public events to draw attention to the structural inequalities in their communities which were sustained through household relations.

The home is a contested space. Chatterjee (1989) shows that nationalist discourses made the domestic space – the home – a repository of tradition, a force of inertia against the ebb of colonial intervention. For tea farmers living in the villages of Darjeeling, confining the work of their women to the home was a way of maintaining their social distinction with plantation workers. Governance of women’s work was used as a marker of difference and closely associated with

discourses of social mobility. While the tea farmers in Darjeeling were only the second generation farmers and descendants of tea plantation workers, they liked to see themselves as essentially different from plantation workers. In their view they were the “farmers” and their wives didn’t go to work, alluding to a different identity. Women plantation workers are accorded different class sexuality (Ong 1987) because of long hours spent outside their homes by plantation outsiders and insiders. Male envy of their occupation also compounded negative portrayals of women plantation workers.

While on the one hand this spatial ethic of doing “home work” was prevalent at the discursive level, women tea farmers, as I have discussed in chapter three, have creatively worked to transcend the space of the home by engaging in monetary transactions and entrepreneurship under the garb of being dutiful housewives. Chakravarti (1990) writes that Indian nationalists praised women for their support of anti-colonial nationalism activities of their men folk; at the same time deplored wage work. Ethnic Nepalis, while critical of mainstream Indian culture and nationalism (as demonstrated in chapter one and two), share some common Hindu gender ideologies. Such commonalities are more pronounced among tea farmers who own their land – especially well-to-do villagers – who see themselves as economically better off than their counterparts in the plantations. Tea farmers see their women as distinct from market women, or plantation workers.

A very different kind of visibility politics affected the household and social relations of women plantation workers. As I mentioned in chapter two, women plantation workers occupied the lower end jobs. However, because of the hyper-visibility of women plantation workers in gendered recruitment patterns, they were envied by their male colleagues and household members. The chronic unemployment of male youth escalated household tension. Women feared that if they took the issue of wages or new shoes for the monsoon to the unions, it will not be taken up by the union. Women were already seen to have a much more secure financial future in their families.

In the plantation, women's relationships were tense with their male relatives, mostly their brother's-in-law (husband's brothers) and sometimes even their husbands. Verbal abuse by male colleagues and harassment were never reported to the union, as male union members would rarely take up their case. Male plantation workers and male members of their family were disinterested in taking up these "women's issues."

In the rest of the chapter, I provide ethnographic details of household debates and dynamics in the plantation and the cooperative. By exploring women tea farmers' narratives around "risk," I show how women publicly discuss household politics. They implicate household members in their failure to reduce the dominance of middlemen in the economic lives of the villages. For women tea farmers, *swāchchā* vyāpar (clean or fair trade) could only happen when

household members demonstrated honesty in acknowledging women's entrepreneurial skills and ambitions.

"She ate my work" – Women's Work and Household Relations within the Plantation

As discussed earlier, women plantation workers enjoyed a particular form of visibility in the tea industry. Most billboards in Darjeeling had an image of a smiling woman plantation worker engaged in effortless tea plucking. No male figures were present in the publicity material of the tea plantations. Women plantation workers' visibility was not just representational. Such representations were also accompanied by stereotypes about women's work and their personalities. Plantation owners often fetishized women plantation workers as loyal and hardworking and men as idle and childish, denying the gendered labor recruitment pattern which resulted in making men unsuitable for plantation work. Such visibility was injurious; it complicated household relations when women workers' husbands or other male members of the family were unemployed.

Women plantation workers were seen as hardworking. However, they were also seen as women with loose moral values, since they worked outside their homes. They perceived financial freedom was envied by male members in their communities. Women plantation workers were also seen as street smart by plantation insiders and outsiders. These dominant portrayals affected their household relations.

Women plantation workers' social relations and their subjectivities were deeply impacted by both positive and negative connotations of the gendered meanings of their work. Many women commented that their work was both an advantage and disadvantage for them. The result of these gender ideologies and the effects of such subjective reflections were best revealed in household debates and interactions. It strained their conjugal relations and relationship with the extended family. The plantation pay was very little and women reared chickens, and pigs and played *Ghumāuri* to meet their household financial needs. *Ghumāuri* money was crucial for buying clothing, furniture, school supplies, and medicines in case of major illness of family, or during the festival season to buy gifts. Many women said that they saved money so that they could make everyone in their homes happy.

Women plantation workers were seen to have financial autonomy. However, my participant observations and collection of narratives reveal their frustrations about economic freedom, since in many cases women were the perennial providers. Out of the 40 women plantation workers I interviewed in the plantation, 29 women had husbands without regular work, 5 had husbands who had migrated to work elsewhere and sent remittances, and 6 women plantation workers' husbands had work in the plantation.

Regular employment put women at a disadvantage in household relations. I used to frequent Bimla's house often in the evenings when she would come back from work. She was in her early 40s and had started work in the

plantation fifteen years ago when she eloped from an adjoining village and married Khim Bahadur. Khim Bahadur's mother was a plantation employee and was retired; his father had already died. It was common practice in plantations to give employment to one member of a family in which there was a retired plantation worker. This was also a way for workers to retain the right of living in the plantation quarters. Khim Bahadur and Dal Bahadur were two brothers, and their sister was already married and lived in another plantation.

Everyone in the family was happy when Khim Bahadur married Bimla, a girl from a neighboring plantation. Bimla became instrumental for the family to retain a regular source of income. Khim Bahadur worked as a cook in Goa (Western India) for six months in a year and spent the rest of the months at home. The family had meager earnings and Khim Bahadur's mother took care of household work for her daughter-in-law, who worked outside the house in the plantation. Khim Bahadur and Dal Bahadur's relationship had declined tremendously after the former's marriage. Dal Bahadur was expecting to get a job in the plantation as his mother's replacement, but there was low demand for men's work. It was much easier for women to find work, even if it was of temporary nature, as an apprentice tea plucker.

Like most unemployed youth, Dal Bahadur was always playing carom with his friends, but we used to chat a lot. We discussed films, TV shows and life in the states. Dal Bahadur frequently asked me whether I knew about the

migration of Nepali drivers to the US. The local village men at times also shared their frustrations.

Dal Bahadur and I were stuck in Kurseong bus stop one monsoon day. He asked me whether I liked Bimla, then told me whether he could share a secret. I showed interest. He started talking about Khim Bahadur, portraying him as a simple man, who did not understand Bimla's tricks. "Bimla *Bhauju* (sister-in-law) thinks she is doing a lot for the family; she does not realize that she ate my work. *Ama* (mother) and Khim *Daju* (elder brother) are always engaged in making her happy; no one cares about me. I am sure if I marry I will be economically dependent on Daju and *Bhauju*; I cannot marry the girl I love. I am trying so hard to find work. Bimla *Bhauju* has no conscience. She should have tried to get me a job too, but she is very selfish."

Dal Bahadur was a very pleasant person, but fights in their household were common in the months when Khim Bahadur was back in Kurseong, having finished his six months in Goa. Fights took place during lunch time when Bimla was at work and Dal Bahadur returned home for a meal and shower. Their mother tried in vain to stop them. She told me once, "I am so glad that Khim Bahadur's dad was the only son, and all his sisters married outside this plantation, so there was no problem for me to work in the plantation." Gendered labor recruitment in the plantation created these tense situations in households. Women's work outside the home was not a problem per se; but it had these negative consequences. Dal Bahadur saw Bimla as opportunistic and street smart

since he did not get the replacement job, implied by his comment in Kurseong, “she ate my work.” Whenever Dal Bahadur was asked to feed the chickens or pigs he would not bother to do it; he would tell his mom that if Bimla gave all her money to the household he they would not longer need to raise chickens. Bimla wanted to alleviate this feeling of animosity; Bimla always gave Dal Bahadur clothes. She once told me, “I wish Dal Bahadur could understand why I was recruited.” Plantation workers’ reputations were thus spoiled by their own family members. Gendered labor recruitment in plantations on the one hand gave women economic security but at the same time created these household tensions.

The above example is not the only instance of where women faced adversities at home because of plantation recruitment patterns. In my time at the plantation, I spent a lot of time talking to male and female household members of the plantation workers. Pooja’s mother worked in the plantation tea packing department and her father had died. Like many of her friends, Pooja had studied till middle school. She quit school after she failed the board exam in class ten. This was a common feature in the plantation; many women studied till they got to the board exams. Pooja’s brothers also had the same educational level. Her elder brother had worked at a pharmacy in Kurseong town but had lost his job after the pharmacy started hiring more educated men. Pooja’s younger brother Rakesh was twenty, just a year younger than her. Rakesh was unemployed, and

was very uncertain about what he should do next. He had also recently failed the Indian army's recruitment test.

Pooja's daily routine was to cook, clean and run errands for their household. She used to knit well and did small knitting jobs for neighbors, making sweaters and socks. One afternoon she had made plans with her friends to go to the town and asked her younger brother Rakesh to cook the evening meal. Rakesh's routine in the afternoon was to play carom with Dal Bahadur and some other local boys. When we were eating lunch, Pooja made this request to Rakesh, at which he immediately replied, "I am not going to cook rice in this house till you are married or you get work in the plantation." Pooja replied, saying, "Maybe that day will never come and I will spend my life making rice for you and your wife." These sorts of exchanges were common in homes between siblings.

Many elderly plantation workers sometimes saved money to send to their son's who had migrated to Delhi or Mumbai to work in restaurants. Dayamani used her *Ghumāuri* savings to send money to her son. Her son complained that his salary from working as a cook in a private home did not leave enough money to buy him winter clothes. Dayamani's daughter on the other had wanted to take a beautician's course, for which her mother never gave her money. Dayamani told me that if her son left that job in Delhi and came back to the plantation her household worries were going to increase, or he would just waste time with his peers. It was best to keep him away. She hoped that her daughter

would find a good match or she would get the replacement work when she retired.

The stereotypes that were associated with women plantation workers affected the way they could/could not negotiate with their employers. Sita was a nurse at the hospital dispensary; her pay (Rs. 1800) was higher than an average worker (a plucker). Her mother-in-law and father-in-law were both ex-employees. Her husband worked for a government concern in Siliguri. She was the only one in her family who worked in the plantation. Sita was chosen to receive nurses' training because her father-in-law worked in an important position at the plantation office. Sita was envied by other plantation workers because she enjoyed the benefits of being the daughter-in-law of an influential man. Her father-in-law was close to the present plantation owner, and hence, she got the job. Sita was also in the Joint Body and she did many hours of work apart from her nurse duty. This family was better off than Dal Bahadur's, they had a bigger house and Sita's husband had no brothers. But Sita's son was a cause of great anxiety in the household. Unlike Sita's daughter, her son was not interested in studies. He watched television all day. There was a tendency among many families to be protective of their sons, as they were anxious.

Sita told me that she was scared; her son Kumud would not find employment, not in the plantation or outside. Her anxiety was more about the quality of job that her son would get, since her family was better off than the other plantation workers' families. She told me one day,

I worry that Kumud will stand nowhere when we are old. Lipika (the daughter) will be fine; she will get a job as a teacher or get married. If Kumud does not study he will be given a field job, which he will dislike. I cannot fight like other women; I cannot create a scene for Kumud. The owner likes me because I always respect him and because I am not *chuchchi*; it worries me so much.

Plantation work and recruitment patterns had created many complications for women plantation workers, whether they worked as low-paid pluckers or as nurses in the plantation health center. On the one hand, they enjoy the fruits of assured employment, but on the other, their actions were underwritten by the motive to defy common stereotypes about them. Sita had a comparatively better job, but one that put her at a disadvantage, especially because she was seen as docile by the plantation owner and she saw herself as not being *chuchchi*; different from an average plantation worker who are *chuchchi*. Gendered cultural stereotypes were often kept alive by women plantation workers themselves. If her son was good in studies he would have had a chance at gainful employment, but now he was dependent on Sita's bargaining power, which she was hesitant to exercise because of the unwritten terms of her own employment. The plantation owner had once told me that Sita was a very presentable woman, she had a pleasant personality, she was also very judicious, and was not a trouble maker. The way she gained visibility in front of the employer decreased her bargaining power and created tension within her household. Women plantation workers like Sita were always careful not to upset their young boys because as she told me, "If there is no peace in the home they will start using drugs."

Plantation surveillance and employment tactics put great pressure on women's household politics. Households, which had a women member already working in the plantation, had a difficult time finding work for other members. The pay, which was approximately a little more than a dollar a day, was highly insufficient for putting children through school. Most plantation workers' children had primary and middle school education. High school and college were expensive and were unaffordable for most families. For women, seasonal plucking work in a plantation was always available, but for male youth, the pressure to find work was immense. Male youth were extremely envious of management officials, who were mostly Bihari, Bengali or Punjabi⁷⁷ college graduates from elsewhere. During my stay, a group of male youth assaulted the senior manager. The manager suffered head injuries and was admitted to the hospital. These kinds of sporadic incidents of violence were common and mostly performed by young male youth belonging to the plantation. The father of one of the managers whom I interviewed was murdered by a plantation youth. The paucity of employment for men and lack of proper educational opportunities put great strain on plantation households and women plantation workers, which resulted in these occasional outbursts. In addition, during my stay, there was often gossip about violence between spouses and alcohol-related abuse.

There was also great tension around sharing of resources within the family. Women often reared chicken, made rice wine and knitted during the

⁷⁷ Bihari, Bengali and Punjabi are other regional groups within India.

weekends to make money. They usually sold these in the plantation villages. Lachmi *didi* usually woke up at 5 am and lit the oven in her kitchen to make the morning tea. She also boiled water to make rice for lunch, which she and her husband took with them. Her daughter Mala would leave for work (she worked as a cook in the assistant manager's house). The two sons would still be sleeping. The elder one had just returned from Delhi with his wife who was expecting. After washing, Lachmi entered the living room where the younger son was sleeping. She told him, "Ramesh wake up and at least do things around the house, feed the chickens and make sure they don't flee or the neighbors dogs will eat them." She then turned to me and told me,

At least the girls find work in the plantation, if not full time, part time work plucking tea in the neighboring plantations. But my sons worry me. My elder son went to Lucknow to work as a cook. There he discovered that other *madeshi*⁷⁸ cooks threatened them to leave so that their own people could join. Even if our sons travel outside, they cannot find safe employment. There are no opportunities for them, and if they sit idle for too long, they take to drugs. There are so many managers and office workers hired from outside the plantation; why can't our sons be trained to work in the plantation? This kind of system would at least motivate them to study. Our sons have no future.

Ramesh hung out with some union guys and Lachmi hoped that the party leaders in the union would help him find a job. Lachmi's feelings were representative of the anxiety within households in the plantation.

As mentioned in chapter two, anxiety around the future of male youth was rampant. Male youth that I had befriended in the plantation asked me this

⁷⁸ Madeshi is another Nepali term for designating people from the plains.

standard question, “*Didi, hāmi driver ko kām pāondina? America mā, teta to dherai car cha?*” (Elder sister, will we not get a driver’s job in America where there are so many cars?”). Widespread nepotism in the plantations, along with fewer opportunities for men’s work, resulted in mounting tensions within households about men’s economic future. Most household conflicts were centered upon the supplementing household income and securing the economic future of their families. In Sonakheti and other plantations the gendered labor recruitment resulted in disillusionment of male youth.

The plantation owner’s constant emphasis on the “strong women of Sonakheti,” and his public exposure of negative feelings about the capability of Nepali men only furthered plantation workers’ tension about the future of their children and complicated their household relations. The owner was very conscious of his support for the “ethnic” needs of his workers, though he frequently used ethnic stereotypes of “childishness” and “immaturity” to discriminate against Nepali men, when hiring male workers for office or supervisory positions. He built temples for workers but did not recruit local youth in the plantation, except to do weeding work.⁷⁹

Male family members of plantation workers tended to see their wives/daughters/sisters as more privileged. In many families women had regular income and men did occasional wage work in town or they would be unemployed. Jang Bahadur and Gita had frequent fights over their son’s future.

⁷⁹ This work involves cleaning the weeds between the tea bushes.

Jang Bahadur had no employment; he sometimes did part time work in the plantation. His wife Gita, although sympathetic towards his unemployed status, sometimes could not control her frustrations about her husband's status. One evening when I was staying with them, I returned from a day's work in the field. Jang Bahadur was drunk, and Gita was giving him a piece of her mind. I did not enter their home and stood outside to talk to their neighbor, Thule, who incidentally was also unemployed. Gita shouted to Jang Bahadur, " Why can't you sell some of the *raksi* (rice wine), why do you drink it all with your friends, do you know that my *thikā* (wage) is insufficient." Alcoholism among men and women were common. Yet making alcohol also was a way to stretch the family income, selling it to neighbors and friends.

In many households, men helped in making alcohol to be sold in the plantation. Bindu was an average plucker, but her family was better off because her husband was a retired army man. Her husband received a pension. Bindu's husband used his pension money to improve their home and married off her two daughters. In his spare time, he made *raksi* (local rice wine) and reared pigs. If husbands had regular jobs they were much more supportive of women and helped out at home. When I lived in their house, Bindu's husband would make meals.

Household Relations in the Cooperative

As evident from my ethnographic examination of household relations in the plantation, Fair Trade activities were far removed from worker's everyday

lives. Household conflicts centered on the dim employment prospects of male family members. In the cooperative, household relations were affected by the increased visibility of Women's Wing members and their business plan which went against their dominant image as housewives. Tension was particularly strong in the homes of women tea farmers who were active Women's Wing members and were going to town to sell produce for the Women's Wing's business.

In the cooperative, women's image as housewives had naturalized "home" as the sphere of work for women. Women tea farmers faced problems because of their active participation in the Fair Trade activities of the cooperative. While family members did not object to women taking out loans, they complained if women went for too many meetings. The differential politics of class related to women's visibility in the public sphere affected gendered work struggles within and outside the household.

Another notable difference in household relations in the cooperative was the effect of socio-economic inequality among cooperative members and the way it affected women's position within households. Gendered mobility politics worked through household politics. Women in the cooperative area had different backgrounds depending on their socio-economic position. While caste was an important marker of identity in Darjeeling, socio-economic inequality played an important factor in shaping people's identity. The cooperative neighborhoods had a more or less homogenous caste structure, consisting of a majority of Rai,

Tamang, Chettri (Nepali ethnic groups). Economic inequities were based on education, family wealth, access to political power, government employment (whether in the army or local government offices) and size of land.

Active Women's Wing members who regularly came to meetings, were less wealthy compared to women who were interested in loans but never came to the meetings. I also observed that husbands of women who were active in the Women's Wing mostly worked as wage laborers in town or farmed at home. Women whose husbands had gainful employment, large holdings of land, or successful business ventures apart from selling tea in the cooperative were more apprehensive of participating in the meetings. The latter were also not ashamed when they defaulted on micro-credit loan repayments.

For instance Ashika, the wife of a shopkeeper and middleman in the cooperative area, was no longer a Women's Wing member. I knew from my interactions with other senior Women's Wing members that she had been a very active member in the initial years and also took out loans. After a while her husband's shop started doing really well and she left Women's Wing. When I asked Ashika to describe her experience in the Women's Wing she made the following comments,

When the Women's Wing started out we were encouraged to do *social* [emphasis mine] things. We campaigned in the villages against alcoholism, encouraged pregnant women to go to the hospitals, campaigned for polio awareness among new mothers. We did a lot of good work. But today the Women's Wing is only interested in loans; women have become very money minded and that is why their household members object to their activities.

It was ironic that Ashika ran her husband's shop when he was not in the village. The shop was in their house. She would switch on her TV and sit in the shop the entire day. She nevertheless blamed Women's Wing members' household conflicts on their "money minded" attitude. She repeated what many older men and middlemen said when asked about their thoughts on the Women's Wing. One of the male cooperative members told me that business was not a woman's thing; that is why it is bound to fail.

The active members of the Women's Wing mostly came from households with smaller land-holdings, or households which did not have enough tea bushes and felt the need to generate income from other sources. These women were interested in taking loans and usually returned them to ensure that they could take more loans each year. Women from neighborhoods which were not near the pliable road that ran through the cooperative area became most active in the matters of the Women's Wing because they were more exploited by middlemen. At times there were exceptions – women from supportive wealthy homes who could spare some time from agricultural or other household chores were also active. As it occurs in any organization, some women were more articulate than others, and this was not necessarily tied to education or wealth.

When I asked members why they joined Women's Wing, most women frankly admitted that they wanted to access loans by joining the Women's Wing. When I asked why they stayed on in Women's Wing, women explained that they

now felt a sense of camaraderie, while also admitting the possibility of taking part in future income generation schemes of the Women's Wing. The most common response was, "We love the fact that at least once a month we can forget about our homes; now we know people on both sides of the hill. We learn so many new things, get training." During interviews, many women mentioned that they became members so that their daughters could learn new things and eventually business skills. One often repeated explanation was, "Times are changing, and women need to learn new skills to keep up. I hope my daughter will also join when she is older so that she can go for different training camps organized by the NGO." Non-members or ex-members usually said they liked the Women's Wing but did not have time, very similar to responses of women who had left Women's Wing. Another important observation was that single women who got married to better (well-to-do) homes left the Women's Wing, even if they were active before marriage. Age was important, but economic inequities outweighed age in determining spontaneity of women's involvement in the Women's Wing.

These differences between women also affected household relationships. During my fieldwork I stayed in a combination of households to see how socio-economic differences influenced household relations. Economic difference affected the way men and women were socially evaluated in their communities, which in turn affected their household relations. For instance in one wealthy household, the daughters-in-law Poonam and Rajni were never allowed by their

mother-in-law to become members of the Women's Wing. In my conversations with the mother-in-law, who was never a member of Women's Wing herself, she told me that her daughters-in-law did not require loans, and they would rather spend that time in household chores. "Our family's daughter-in-laws do not need loans. There is much to do at home."

After some time, the youngest daughter-in-law, Poonam, decided to become a member of the Women's Wing. She was the more outspoken of the two daughters-in-law. Her husband did not have regular employment, and she decided that she needed to make some savings for the future. Poonam's decision was not welcomed in the household; her husband was also indifferent. There were arguments over her impudence. Poonam's father-in-law frequently cracked jokes about the failure of the Women's Wing's milk business and ineffectiveness at dinner time to dissuade Poonam from joining the Women's Wing. Poonam's father-in-law had 5 acres of land, almost three times the average holding size in the area. He was also a loyal supplier of one of the middlemen from this region.

Poonam's father-in-law, like many other wealthy families, had a material interest in defaming the Women's Wing because he wanted his individual milk business to survive. Jokes about Women's Wing's business ventures were common in wealthy families. Sometimes, even women who had benefited from Women's Wing micro-credit schemes earlier and now had more stable income sources denigrated women Women's Wing members as "*bāthi*," implying that active Women's Wing members had transgressed the boundaries of existing

social norms in the *basti* (non-plantation village area). These rumors of failure were damaging for the confidence of Women's Wing members and their family members who were already doubtful about their daughters' or wives' new ventures.

Poonam's family was not the only one with this problem. Women from families with sufficient income were always reluctant to allow their women outside the homes. In contrast, women who felt the need to increase their income would be most active in the Women's Wing so that they could take more loans. They would be regular in meetings and would pay their dues regularly.

Household Conflicts in the Cooperative

I was awakened from my sleep on 12 January, 2006 by a loud altercation between Manju and her brothers. Manju was the most active Women's Wing member of her neighborhood. She was in charge of helping the milk business along with Dipika. The night before, she had come to know that Kabita, another Women's Wing member who took the milk collected in the village (by Manju and Dipika) to Darjeeling town, had threatened the Women's Wing to start her own business. Kabita was upset when she was requested by Women's Wing members to give another economically struggling woman a chance to go to town and learn the skills of selling milk and vegetables.

Manju was extremely upset because she thought Kabita was betraying the Women's Wing's objective of a rotating collective business. Kabita, it seemed,

was very upset that she would lose her turn to take the milk to town 8 months after she took charge of the Women's Wing's business.⁸⁰ Kabita believed that not everyone should get a turn since her economic condition was not good. The rotation system was institutionalized by the Women's Wing so that every economically struggling woman in Women's Wing would get a chance to learn business skills. So when Kabita was requested by other Women's Wing members to give up her position, she took it personally. Manju's anger at this incident was compounded by her brother's comments. When I lay awake in my bed, I heard her elder brother sarcastically saying:

Dipesh: You should not feel frustrated now; I had warned you before that Kabita will take advantage of you. It was the Women's Wing's aim to make sure that women stand on their own feet; well at least one of them has. You should be satisfied and Women's Wing should also stop this business since it is not working out. If you cannot digest this reality you all are not fit to do business. That is why the cooperative is not giving Women's Wing Fair Trade money this year.

Manju's brothers and their friends in the locality were otherwise very supportive of the Women's Wing's business and helped them with accounts. I had seen them defending their sisters when people made fun of their business plan. Manju's brother also used the money Manju borrowed from the micro-credit loans. They nevertheless made fun of Manju because she was spending a lot of time outside the house going to meetings, going to the town and visiting people's

⁸⁰ The Women's Wing had decided that the person who took the milk to town would get a share of the profits from the milk sales as her daily salary. The same person would not take the milk to town for more than three months in a row to ensure that everyone, depending on their need, would be able to earn from the Women's Wing's collective business.

homes campaigning to give their milk to the Women's Wing business. Manju and Dipika would hold meetings in the village to make sure that villagers gave their milk to Women's Wing and not the middlemen who mixed water after buying milk from villagers and sold it in town at double the price.

Manju (snapped back): Don't talk to me like that. The next time you are upset because the middleman cheated you with your goats, I will remind you about your failures. It is common for beginners to make mistakes in business, but we want to do *swaccha vyāpar* (clean/fair trade). You must understand that Women's Wing does not want to be like middlemen; we want profit but not by exploiting others. So try to understand what Women's Wing is trying to do. Do you stop taking your goats to town during *Dashāi* (annual festival) because you were cheated by one middleman last year? Why do you want us to stop? I think you are paying too much attention to village rumors. Try to apply your brain and see what the Women's Wing is trying to do. And where would you get money to buy the goats in I was not a Women's Wing member

The exchange between Manju and her brother typified interactions between active Women's Wing members and their families. Among my 40 key women informants in the cooperative community consisting of members of Women's Wing, most commented that they do not go to town regularly and face opposition in their homes if they spend a long time outside their homes. I asked in the survey whether they needed to get permission if they were going to go to meetings; 35 of them said yes. Women's work inside the home was considered materially and symbolically important to maintain inter-household distinctions within the village.

Manju's altercation with her brother was underlined by socio-economic issues. Manju's family was sufficiently well to do. She lived with her aged father

and two elder brothers. She had a sister who was married. They had a large land holding, but tea was not the main produce of the family. Manju took out loans and gave it to her brothers for buying young goats for their animal husbandry business. She also ran a small shop from her house selling cigarettes, soap, and biscuits. She told me that she paid back her loans from the earnings of this small shop but her brothers also gave back a large share from the sale of their goats and ginger during season. Because Manju's family was comparatively wealthy her brothers frequently asked her to give up her Women's Wing work. The standard discourse was, "You don't need to." Socioeconomic differences were manifest by restricting women's visibility to the household. Upwardly mobile families were especially conscious of the movement of their women outside the household.

Men were also very self-conscious if their wives or sisters were working outside the home. While I was staying at Kabita's house, her husband, Harka Bahadur often asked me, especially if he had had too much *raksi* (rice wine) to drink, what I thought about their household. In the beginning I did not understand what he meant by this question. Gradually, I mastered village gossip; I understood his self-consciousness and concern about the reputation of his household. I continued pretending not to understand, and finally he elaborated, "You know Kabita goes out in the morning to the market and I stay at home. Do you think that is okay? How do you feel about that?" I told him that to me that was normal. He should not feel bad about it because Kabita was earning for him

and their two sons. My participant observation in the *jungās* (village vehicles) while traveling back and forth from the town also helped me to triangulate these frustrations among men, whose wives were active Women's Wing members.

Kabita and Harka Bahadur were looked down upon because apparently they had violent fights. According to male cooperative members, Harka Bahadur apparently drank too much. Kabita was seen as cunning because she went to town often and was not afraid to argue with male members of the community. Even her closest neighbors looked down upon her. She also had a smaller agricultural plot and her household output of tea was little, so she had much less income compared to households with large holdings of tea.

Harka Bahadur knew that people talked badly about his wife. But there was nothing he could do. Kabita was smart, she could sell things in town, and the two did not have enough tea bushes to just rely on tea. Harka Bahadur also helped his wife, collecting vegetables from the village and packing them in a bag in the wee hours of the morning, cooking for her sons and taking care of their small plot of land. Harka Bahadur had failed to secure regular wage work in town. When I stayed with Harka Bahadur and Kabita, he used to call his female cousin to make lunch for me in Kabita's absence because women serving food to a guest was the norm. I always requested him to let me cook my own food, which he appreciated. This saved him from being ashamed about his wife not serving his guests.

Household conflicts could not be seen just as an interaction between spouses; conversations within the household were often influenced by rumors in the cooperative community and actions of the cooperative board. Harka Bahadur was sidelined in the cooperative because he drank too much, had little education, and also because his wife had a bad reputation as being cunning. On the other hand Hiren, the secretary of the cooperative was also very cunning, but he was not ostracized like Harka Bahadur. His wife had no reputation and was not a member of Women's Wing. He was educated. He probably did not drink as much as Harka Bahadur. He also had a job at a government school. Because of his class position people did not speak badly of him. However, he was criticized heavily by Women's Wing members because he played an active part in the cooperative's decision to not share the FLO premium with the Women's Wing.

People did not speak well about Punita, another active Women's Wing member. She was also nearing 30 and was not married, which was a major cause for gossip. Punita was very independent minded and had a very sharp tongue, but people talked about her also because she was an active member of the Women's Wing. Punita family had little land. Her parents farmed and her brother was trying to get into the Indian army each year. Even her brother was uncomfortable that she was still not married, and reminded her occasionally that he would not get a wife if she did not marry. Punita had told me numerous times that these comments in her household did not bother her anymore. She would not marry because she loved watching TV in the afternoons and was concerned

that her future husband might not let her. Women's Wing members who were single were very apprehensive of marrying men from the neighborhood, for the fear of being subject to the norms of being a "housewife."

These kinds of wealth and gender inequalities were regular in the cooperative area. Well-to-do men and their wives always maintained composure, but economically struggling families and their struggles within and outside the household were scrutinized by community members. Gender ideologies survived through these gendered discourses about men, women and their households. Women's reputations affected their husband's participation in the cooperative and their own household relations. These gendered politics were challenged by women tea farmers in the cooperative. Women plantation workers on the other hand are not able to challenge the domination of the management (and male co-workers) even in spite of greater freedom to meet outside the house.

Household Politics and Public Discourses of "Risk"

It was because of this gendered class politics that active Women's Wing members felt vulnerable. They blamed this not only on their husbands and family members but also on the cooperative and community who held on to gender ideologies about women's work. A recurring theme in women's narratives was a discussion of risk. Women used the English word risk but while pronouncing it sounded more like "*riks*." The theme of "*riks*" was a way for women to talk about the gendered struggles they continued to face in their

community and households. Through a discussion about risk, women found a way to connect their past sacrifices (before the cooperative was formed) with the present ones to justify their business plan.

At the time of my research, women thought that their biggest risk came from male middlemen who dominated the trade of produce and milk from the cooperative villages and were related to their families. Since their families had depended on middlemen for many years, women were having a hard time convincing their family members about their business venture. This risk was compounded when their family members did not realize or object to the extent of middlemen's exploitation of villagers (like Manju's brothers). Women told me that they had always been forced to take more risk for their families and communities without much support. By "*riks*," women not only implied greater workload but also the increased possibility of losing their reputations, especially if they were poor and became active in the Women's Wing. Some of the important members of the cooperative were middlemen, who collected vegetables and produce from the neighborhoods at very low prices and sold them in town for profit.⁸¹ Women often sold their produce to these middlemen. Spatially limited to the village, women did not have good contacts in town. Women did not get a proper price for their produce as every household produced the same things. The whole idea behind doing a separate group business was devised to secure a market in town.

⁸¹ As mentioned earlier, the cooperative regulated the trade in tea, but for selling other commodities villagers had to rely on middlemen.

After Women's Wing fought with the cooperative over the FLO money for their business plan, powerful men in the village spread rumors that the Women's Wing business was bound to fail because women were inexperienced. Poonam's father-in-law is one such man. *Goālās* (milkmen) even found out the milk depot in town to which the Women's Wing was selling their milk. The *goālās* told the depot owner that women were disorganized and were unethical. Women tea farmers now constantly felt they were at risk because their reputations were at stake. Their own family members at times felt the pressure of being loyal to some middlemen questioning women's skills. This created household anxiety. However, if women tea farmers succumbed to these rumors and stopped their business, they would risk losing their chance to convince villagers that they could conduct their successful business. Their failure would ensure that the cooperative never gave them FLO money for their projects.

In the December 2006 Women's Wing meeting, the driver of the car that carried the Women's Wing procured milk to town was called to a meeting to settle accounts. He never arrived with his car at the designated time to take the Women's Wing produce and milk to town. This was a major issue because of the perishability of milk and vegetables. Though he was very helpful to the Women's Wing's business, his immediate public response was to hide his delay. The car owner quickly added: "You women are blaming me for your business not doing well but you all do not even know how to talk to the milk depot owner in town. If you knew that then your business would have been running

smoothly.” The comment implied that village women were inexperienced about how to conduct business. At this Manju quickly responded,

Thanks so much for taking time out to come here and for helping us to realize our mistakes. However, it is also my duty to remind all you people from this neighborhood that no milkman was offering you Rs.8 per liter of milk before we started this business. We don't have a pliable road, so please remember the days when you had to throw away your extra milk in frustration for not getting a good price from the middlemen in other villages. None of you encouraged your *household members to start a business* [emphasis mine]. Now that we are doing well, you tell our brothers and fathers that Women's Wing members have become *bāthi*. We took a great risk by starting this business so that you all did not have to waste your milk and we women could also learn how to do organized business. We shell out our own money when the customers in the town delay their payments, just to make sure that our business is fair, and that you are getting your money on time. Please have some appreciation for the risk that we are taking here. We are here to learn, so let us have some productive discussion about how we can sell your milk more efficiently, instead of trying to create problems in our homes.

Reminders of risk-taking for the community were regular in meetings and in my personal conversations with women. Manju frequently reminded her brother (like in the last example) about the efforts of the Women's Wing to do *swaccha vyāpār* (clean/fair trade). Women told me that the cooperative was a microcosm of society where women's work outside their family farms was criticized. The conflicts they faced in the household were compounded by the attitude of comparatively wealthy board members and their wives.

On 16th March, 2007 there was a general strike in Darjeeling called by the GNLf. On the day of the strike women risked going to town to sell the milk. I met them in town and waited with them beside the train station. I quietly

listened to their conversation, which again centered on the topic of risk. In spite of a strike women tea farmers risked coming to town because they wanted to capture the market there. Women did not want potential customers to feel that they were not serious about the business. There were no cars running in Darjeeling that day. All schools were shut and all shops were closed. During such strikes, the government allowed only emergency service vehicles to ply on the road, which included emergency food supplies like milk. So the women made their own “emergency milk duty” poster and convinced the driver to take them to town. Apparently, all the other male milk vendors from hamlets within the cooperative and the driver were hesitant to travel to town. The men were not sure about the circumstances in town. They feared they would get caught by the police and would have to pay bribes to the cops. The Women’s Wing members said that because they agreed to pay up for any monetary loss the driver agreed to come to town.

Binu told me later, “There are lots of men who come regularly to town and know what a strike entails, but none would come for the fear of being caught. It was because the women took the monetary risk that the men could all sell their milk. Women are always asked for more sacrifices in the home and community; yet there is no faith in their capacity to do big business.” She felt pride and frustration at the same time. She was proud because they were able to sell their milk and frustrated because whenever the women’s group decided to start a new business venture their business integrity and capacity to take new

ventures was questioned. Men mobilized existing gender ideologies in the community to express doubt about whether simple village women would be able to conduct big business like men. Poonam's father-in-law kept telling her that joining Women's Wing was a waste of time because their business was a failure. Manju's brothers made fun of her when she spent time at Women's Wing. Binu told me that men, who perceive women as potential competitors, use these statements to show concern. In reality such comments are meant to create a lack of confidence about the Women's Wing's business. Once the women got their share of the FLO money, such concern had quickly turned into hostility. Active Women's Wing women were now defamed with negative representations like "*bāthi and chuchchi*,"⁸² which made their household relations tense.

Women farmers never interfered with the business of the middlemen who were friends of their male family members or their kin. Wealthy middlemen were active in the cooperative too. They had more land and kept very good relations with families who were well off. Class relations in the village worked through these inter-household ties. Women felt frustrated when these men defamed Women's Wing members. Women's Wing members who were engaged in small entrepreneurial activities felt that they had taken all kinds of risk in their community starting from selling illegal tea, to taking out micro-credit loans to support their families and now in this business, which the male middlemen were out to destroy. They were willing to take risks for the men, such as on a day of

⁸² Nepali derogatory terms for implying that women were street-smart and had a sharp-tongue.

strike. Such compassion could not be expected from the men. Women told me that they took risk but never let their temper overtake their diplomacy. They knew the motive of all men but never got into any kind of altercation with them because it went against notions of honor. Whenever they felt cornered, they found friendly ways to get their point across. In such a circumstance women felt that they could not let their group dissolve. It was through this group that women could critique male dominance and the use of their labor. The hope was that the group's continuation and success would convince their household members that they were on to something important. It would convince family members that their wives, daughters and sisters were trying to accomplish something important for their household and community by trying to raise household earnings by cutting out the middlemen.

When women took loans, they felt that they took a risk due to various reasons. Their husbands and other family members used this money for their own use, but the responsibility of returning the money fell on the women. Since the Women's Wing women had been taking out loans for the last seven years, they felt that they were being exposed to the risk of running their homes all alone. Manju had once told me, "Men just go out, earn a little bit of money and think that they are the ones running the household for which their wives should be grateful to them. The truth is that wives run the household, they stretch that little amount of money and make things look okay. It is because of the effort of the women that their husbands can feel a sense of pride which is highly

misplaced!” Sunita *didi* another committed Women’s Wing member once told me “The work inside the home is rarely seen, that is the nature of our work!” After my extended interview I realized that by “work inside the home” Sunita *didi* not only meant physical household labor, but the difficult process of negotiating identity and acceptance within the household. Women whose families owned cattle had a common joke, “We get the grass, he takes the milk,” to describe the inequality of resource sharing within cooperative households. Women spent a lot of time cutting grass for their cattle and most of them hated this work. This comment implied how men enjoyed the fruits of women’s labor.

Women tea farmers also used Fair Trade trainings and public events to address household issues. During the Fair Trade *Janaajāgaran Kāryakram* (People’s Awareness Campaign), Women’s Wing members made speeches about the significance of Fair Trade and urged people to remember why they were getting development money from Fair Trade. Somewhere in these speeches Women’s Wing members always mentioned that they were also trying to practice Fair Trade (*swaccha vyāpār*). Sabita mentioned, “When all of you trust and respect the Women’s Wing and value it as much as the cooperative then our community will see true Fair Trade happen. Every household member should send all their women to the Women’s Wing so that they can all learn business skills so vital in today’s world. Don’t make fun of your wives if they spend time in meetings; don’t make their lives difficult.” I had recorded many public speeches that women made in the cooperative in which they made these moral appeals to the

cooperative community to pay attention to how women were treated in their homes. In this particular speech Sabita related women's household relations and Fair Trade.

Gendered resource politics was thus compounded by economic hierarchies making economically struggling families and their women more vulnerable to the effects of inequality. Manju, Sunita, Kabita, Binu, Punita, Shanta had various economic disadvantages. Manju faced great opposition in her family because her brothers thought she did not need to take loans. When Manju's family did not need loans, she took it in her name and gave that to other women in the village who had not become Women's Wing members. Shanta and Sunita complained that their husbands were given a hard time in the community after the Women's Wing floated their business plan. Comparatively wealthy women also deplored Women's Wing members, saying that they were money minded. As I detailed earlier, the wife of a wealthy shopkeeper in one community who was previously involved with the Women's Wing told me, "These days women are just interested in loans, in our days we were doing social things. We were not business minded." When the Women's Wing started they were not involved in micro-credit but did health campaigns, campaigns against alcoholism, which were common programs, run by the Indian government (see Sharma 2008). When micro-credit started everyone welcomed loans and the only way to get one was by making their daughters, wives or mothers members of Women's Wing. Some women dropped out a couple of years later, mostly

because they had defaulted or their families now made enough money from selling tea. By this time, the local panchayats also started lending money to people in the locality. These wealthy ex-Women's Wing members were the most critical of the present Women's Wing members, implying that it was not appropriate for women to be interested in business. These women spoiled the reputation of Women's Wing's present members through village gossip.

In their monthly meetings women often spoke of solving the "household problem." In the January meeting, Punita raised her hand when the Women's Wing president was deciding on the meeting agenda. She said that women had to take greater risk, and the fault lay with the Women's Wing members. She requested women not to be dumb/*lāti*. She urged them to go home and convince their household members that business was not a bad thing. It was all for the community. Premlila, another Women's Wing member, mentioned that "Many of our community's problems were because of household issues."

Through their various endeavors women tea farmers tried to show how male power worked through the linkages between community and household relations. By publicly talking about the "household problem" during Fair Trade trainings women exposed their household anxieties.

Consequences of Differential Visibilities

Deborah Elliston writes that household relations emerge "as sites central in decision-making about laboring projects and as the moral and affective centers

structuring the ascription of meaning to labor activities” (Elliston 2004: 610).

These micro-contexts of everyday life become the testing ground for judging the effectiveness of ethical regimes for addressing structural gendered and socio-economic inequalities in certified communities.

In recent years the household studies literature has emphasized the study of intra-household relations to understand the consequences of women’s bargaining power within the household (Sen 1990). Kabeer stresses that the “visibility and extent of women’s gainful work” within households remains important to arrive at conclusions about women’s bargaining power within households (1994: 110-111). In her more recent work, emphasizes that women’s agency (read in her study as the ability to join public sphere) is not only influenced by particular household relations but to a large extent influenced by the social milieu in which households are immersed. Both Kabeer (2000) and Fernandes (1997) call attention to looking at gender identities in households in conjunction with class, caste or immigrant identity politics of the community in question. In this chapter, I have looked at household politics simultaneously with socio-economic inequities in the community to understand the significance of women tea farmers’ political action in the public sphere and their household politics. Women plantation workers and women tea farmers both live lives negotiating their respective social reputations with trying to cope with the growing economic concerns of their families. While Fair Trade related economic activities affected women’s household relations in the cooperative, in the

plantation, women women's household relations were not related in any way to Fair Trade. While in the cooperative women tea farmers used Fair Trade related public events to bring up household issues, in the plantation household matters were kept secret.

Chapter 5: Being “Tadpoles in Water” vs. “Police of our Fields:” Competing Subjectivities, Fair Trade and Women’s Political Agency

In the previous chapters, I have described the activities of the women tea farmers and women tea plantation workers. In this chapter, I turn to the question of political agency. In my analysis of political agency among women plantation workers and women tea farmers, I give equal weight to their practices and narratives around practice, in order to analyze how women tea farmers and plantation workers read institutional power structures and think about their own abilities to navigate them. To conceptualize political agency, it is important to see their situated practices and their own subjective interpretation of these practices.

Women use their “practical consciousness” (Williams 1977) to shape their political action and to also reflect on what kind of actors they become as a result of their actions. I also show that women tea farmers’ direct participation in Fair Trade related awareness workshops have increased their confidence about the purpose of their economic and political activities. While both groups of women take action to deal with the inadequacies of their lives, tea plantation workers’ narratives reveal a sense of decreasing possibility for action, while women tea farmers find new thresholds of action opening up for them, due to the advent of Fair Trade.

It is not my intention to see taking action as the ultimate form of political agency, but I start from the narratives of the women. It is in their narratives that I locate a preoccupation with “doing,” “changing,” and “not being able to

do/change/speak” that forms the basis of my argument about political agency. It is their narratives about capacity for action and change that I analyze in this chapter. Women’s political agency is best deciphered by looking at what women subjectively construct as possibility or impossibility. I see women’s political subjectivity as situated understandings of their own action at this given historical moment.

Women’s self-knowledge or subjectivity (Foucault 1994), was shaped by the institutional structures which governed their lives. Their specific self-knowledge affected the way they interpreted their own actions. I have argued throughout this work that women plantation workers found a situation more adverse to large scale collective organizing, limiting their capacity to mobilize federally granted labor rights. Even individual actions challenging systemic nepotism or workplace hazards – everyday resistance – are rare, as I will show later in this chapter. Women tea farmers, on the other hand, were engaged in activities which challenged male domination in the cooperative. They were refashioning themselves as entrepreneurs, trying to undo the exploitation of middlemen and seek respect for their activities in front of household and community members.

In this chapter, I locate how the difference in the subjectivities of women at two sites impacts the way women plan to use their specific collective organizing efforts. In the cooperative, women’s collective organizing was aimed at gaining a public voice; in the plantation women’s collective organizing was

aimed at surviving a system by not ruffling too many feathers. The specificity of the goals of their collective organizing influenced how women tea farmers and women plantation workers saw themselves as actors. The institutional structures also influenced the type of resource that each group could mobilize. In the cooperative, women's husbands owned the legal titles to their land and women felt that they had some ownership of what was produced in that land, as detailed in chapter three. Since individual tea farmers came together to form the cooperative in 1997 and in every matter each coop household had an equal vote, women tea farmers had a different understanding of their organization (the cooperative) and its relation to the Women's Wing. Women plantation workers were much more insecure about the status of their employment and there were limited ways in which they could use the plantation land. Although plantation workers had lived on plantation lands for generations, they feared being ousted due to wrongdoings. They could not use their quarters the way they wanted and always had to ask for permission. These kinds of differences influenced the way women interpreted their capacities as a group and as individual actors. The social milieu, institutional structures, and types of resource access, all combined to produce different kinds of "practical consciousness," which became part of their political agency – their ability to understand and navigate power through specific action.

Women tea farmers also found themselves in the midst of a less hierarchical organization than the plantation. In the plantation, the strict

bureaucratic hierarchy, top-down obedience structure, and corrupt labor union practices limit the ability of the women workers to know and bargain for Fair Trade benefits from the plantation administration. Thus, women in the plantation neither had a say in the ways in which the Fair Trade premium (that the plantation receives each year) should be used, nor did they have any clear idea of what Fair Trade entailed (its history and benefits). Most women from the plantation described the plantation as *zamindāri* or feudal domain, and asserted that their grievances mostly remained unheard. Plantations that were certified Fair Trade usually had a Joint Body that decided how the Fair Trade premium money would be spent in various labor welfare and development projects. In my participant observation and interviews, I found the effectiveness of this group to be limited in fulfilling this goal. While more than fifty percent of the members of the Joint Body (ten out of sixteen) at the plantation were women, they hardly ever participated actively in these meetings. While the plantation website and publicity material advertised that women made all Joint Body decisions, the reality was very different. Such an oppressive milieu had given rise to covert practices of economic reciprocity (*Ghumāuri*) among women plantation workers as described in chapter two.

In the small tea farmers' cooperative, the nature of women's participation was very different from that of women workers on the plantation. Male and female representatives of the cooperative and the Women's Wing respectively, were elected through unit wide public meetings. Cooperative elections were held

every year and candidates, whether male or female, had to stand up to the test of leadership skills. Joint Body members in the plantation, on the other hand, were hand picked by the plantation owner.

The more non-hierarchical, democratic structure of the cooperative provided more space for discussion and dissent among its male and female members in the coop decision-making process. Cooperative meetings were therefore important arenas where gender hierarchies were questioned by women tea farmers through open debates. While men outnumbered women in the governing body of the cooperative, some members of the women's group were always present in meetings. The women's group had a separate meeting on the 8th day of every month. Women cooperative members felt that the Women's Wing should receive a separate share of the Fair Trade premium money and were not afraid to claim it, as they knew they cannot be ousted from their land. These differences affected how women conceptualized their own capacities in the plantation and the cooperative. In their daily conversation, plantation workers frequently mentioned that they had "lost the power to speak." Women tea farmers, in recounting the evolution of the Women's Wing, emphasized that they were now "ready to beat the table," implying that they were not going to be taken for a ride.

In the rest of the chapter, I analyze how women tea farmers' and plantation workers' subjectivities were influenced by the institutional structures where women worked and lived. The latter also affected the scope their

collective organizing, through *Ghumāuri* / Women's Wing. The limits and nature of collective organizing, in turn, reinforced the subjective feelings women had about their own selves and future, affecting the tactics and intensity of women's negotiations with structural power.

Being "Tadpoles in Water" Vs "Police of our Fields"

In this section, I analyze through narratives, how the different institutional structures have influenced women's subjectivities at respective sites. I analyze the "patterns of talk" women use to describe their own condition.

In early March 2007, I was in Darjeeling town, doing research at the NGO office which has been working with the tea cooperative for many years. As I interviewed one of the male NGO members, on his perceptions about the activities of the Women's Wing, he made a comparison between them and the women workers from Sonakheti. He had seen both groups of women in action at a state sponsored women's development workshop in Siliguri. Women from both plantations and non-plantation areas were invited. The male NGO employee,⁸³ who had accompanied Women's Wing members to Siliguri, was very proud of the confidence and public speaking skills of the Women's Wing members. He said that the women from Sonakheti kept smiling when asked about women's development and its effects on their communities. He further added, "Our Women's Wing members on the other hand were prompt with

⁸³ Majority of NGOs in Darjeeling were run by Nepali educated middle- and upper- class men and women. This NGO worker was a Nepali upper-caste male.

responses. The workshop leaders were impressed. When asked about women's activities, Binu immediately sketched a brief history of the community's engagement with FLO and what the Women's Wing was doing. I could not believe how clear their understanding of Fair Trade-organic was." I suspected that this comparison was a publicity stunt, until the NGO worker's observations were corroborated by women plantation workers themselves.

Months after I had heard this comparison from the NGO employee, I was at a *Ghumāuri* meeting in Sonakheti. The meeting was taking place after a Joint Body meeting, where I was also present. In the *Ghumāuri* discussion, Sita asked me about my work with the women tea farmers. The plantation workers always spoke of *basti*⁸⁴ people (women tea farmers) with envy. Shinu, another plantation worker, teased me, saying that every time I returned from the *basti* I looked fresh because the *basti* people grew their own organic vegetables, which made me look good. Plantation workers had to depend on the bad quality vegetables of Kurseong town, the bad ration rice and *dāl* (lentils); they did not have their own land. I used to get the plantation workers vegetables from the cooperative area as gifts, which they otherwise had to buy at high prices in the market shops. Whenever I ate a meal with women plantation workers, they would ask me what I ate when I was in the cooperative area.

Sita (the nurse) had arrived to the meeting late because she had to make a couple of house visits to distribute medicine. Sita joined the conversation by

⁸⁴ *Basti* when literally translated from Nepali means an area of human settlement. *Kaman* is another local word for plantations. In Darjeeling, people talked about localities through the *basti/kaman* dichotomy

declaring that women in the *basti* were more aware about FLO. She soon started talking about a workshop at Siliguri that she had attended where there were women from the *basti*. I confirmed the dates with her and knew immediately that she was talking about the same workshop discussed by the NGO worker. She said,

I have never been so ashamed of myself. In our Joint Body meetings, we never discuss the history of FLO, we don't know why the white people are paying more for our tea, and what we are supposed to do with FLO. We only discuss useless (*fāltu*) things. The sisters from the *basti* knew it all. They were so smart (*chānkho*). Not only are the *basti* girls eating more nutritious food, they know how to speak, they know more about FLO. *Bahini* (younger sister) you must tell us more about this FLO business; we must learn more before you leave. Please tell us about FLO, we do not want to be *lāti* (ignorant/stupid) any more.⁸⁵

I was now convinced that the NGO employee was not being partial to the Women's Wing's members' performance at the Siliguri meeting. Sita then asked me the names of the Women's Wing members. I told them. Sita became very excited when she learnt that I had lived with the two Women's Wing members she had met at Siliguri. She told me "please take out your camera and show other women present here that you know the *bahinis* from the *basti*." I brought out my camera, and the entire group was excited about seeing the two Women's Wing members from the coop. Soon other comparisons ensued between *basti* and *kamān* women followed by quizzing me on FLO. I gave them information on FLO and they thought it was very complex. I told them what kinds of activities Women's Wing members were planning to do with FLO premium in the

⁸⁵ Participant observation notes by author

cooperative. They were very impressed. They regretted that they never had Fair Trade trainings. The management did all the talking at meetings and inspections. In fact, the women told me, they did not understand when the inspections had taken place, although outside officers interviewed them at times. Women plantation workers agreed that the meetings were a big waste of time. Pushpa said, "We attend so many meetings, yet we are still stupid, we have lost our ability to speak effectively. This is why I tell you sister, when you leave, take all of us with you so that we can all escape this dreadful life."⁸⁶

The above example is one among many narrative instances, which revealed women plantation workers' perceptions about themselves and their capabilities to change the plantation system for their own benefit. They frequently used the word "*lati*" (stupid, ignorant) to describe themselves. In their statements, there was emphasis on becoming stupid, almost implying that plantation work produces this negative effect on workers. Another phrase which recurred in their conversation was "*hami bolnu birsechu*/we have forgotten how to speak." The latter expressed their fear of arguing with the managers.

These negative reflections were aggravated by the poverty of their daily lives. They blamed the plantation for all their misery and complained incessantly about the lack of proper pay and effective unions. Phulrani, now 52 years old, told me, "Of course our condition is a bit better than when I started. Then we were threatened that we will be stripped naked if we did not pluck and clean

⁸⁶ Personal interview with author in May 21st 2007

well. The managers and *chaprāsis* were abusive. Even now they are very harsh, but at least we get our salaries.” She then said, “The last good thing that the union did for us was in 1984 (pre GNLF), when they fought for making most workers permanent,⁸⁷ and soon after, the retirement benefits started. That was 20 years ago, our wages are little compared to what the times demand, but we have been doing the same work for ages.”⁸⁸

The references to being “stupid,” “losing the power to speak” were always connected with the lack of options in women plantation workers’ conversations. When I was at a different *Ghumāuri* meeting a month later, Lachchmi made this revealing comment reflecting on the condition of plantation workers. She said,

I try to motivate the women in my group. My group’s record of plucking tea leaves in the factory is very good. These women plantation workers have no new ideas, no new ventures to take. How will they; nothing can happen without the owner’s permission, even if they spent their own money. We follow this dreadful routine everyday and are mostly interested in feeding our children and giving them some education, in the hope that they can escape the *thikā* (wage). If they want anything extra, anything good they have to depend on loans from the money lender. Women who are strong and fit can make some extra income during the plucking season.⁸⁹ For the average workers, they are tied to the dictate of the *thikā* (wage).

⁸⁷ Plantations in Darjeeling are very secretive about the percentage of workers whom they hire as temporary workers during the high season—the plucking season. Newspaper reports and conversation with NGO members reveal that at times plantations can keep the majority of the workforce as seasonal labor. In the plantation where I did most of my ethnography I was unable to find out the exact number of seasonal labor employed from the plantation management.

⁸⁸ Personal interview with author May 15th 2007

⁸⁹ While plantation workers get a daily wage, they can earn some extra money between the months of March and October when tea leaves grow in abundance. In the plantation where I did this research, they were paid Rupees. 3 for every extra kilo of tea they plucked beyond their minimum daily plucking requirement of 8 kilos a day.

This notion of being tied to the dictate of the *thikā*/wage was another recurring theme in many interviews. The phrase implied the discipline imposed by the insufficient wage that made workers options limited. The small wage limited the scope of better education for their children. It made them dependent on informal money saving ventures like *Ghumāuri*, to stretch their buying power. I also interpreted the use of the phrase, “being tied to the wage,” as a way for plantation workers to express how other systems of patriarchal control worked through the wage. Women workers could never ask for more wages because the management was tied by the state permitted minimum wage which was uniform through the Darjeeling area. However, the dictate of the *thika* was made ever more binding with the male union leaders devoting their attention to party activities (as outlined in chapter two). Women complained that the shoes, umbrellas and socks that the plantation was supposed to supply for safety were never replaced in a timely fashion. Women used their own money to keep them safe. In many ways the *thikā* was insufficient.

Thikā was also used to denote the strict disciplining of their work life, the verbal abuses from the male managers and male supervisors which guided how they lived in the plantation premises. Women plantation workers secretly kept their savings through *Ghumāuri*. The long work hours meant that they could not engage in other money making ventures, such as, like knitting or rearing animals, as much as they would have liked to. Women plantation workers also used the word *thikā* as work. I frequently noted them saying, “*Hāmilai thikāmā*

jānu parcha” / “We have to go to work.” They implied that they were bound by the wage which limited their freedom of movement. The *thika* became more binding as it could not be changed easily. A further layer of insecurity was added because *thikā* (or work) lead to household conflicts. While male members of their homes were envious of their work and wage (as demonstrated in chapter four), women knew that this wage was not enough to meet all household needs. The dictate of the wage was felt at many levels reflected in these sets of comments.

Lachmi concluded her reflections with this statement, “Women workers here are like tadpoles in water; they do not dare to come out of the known waters for the fear of being engulfed.” The tadpole analogy again drew attention to their lack of freedom and work options. Plantation work was the bread and butter; if they left one plantation, it was also very hard to get work in another plantation, especially as a permanent employee. Plantations rarely recruited new workers, since the new workers (whether temporary or permanent) were always recruited from the family of a retired plantation worker. Working in the plantation was also a way of holding on to the house. In spite of the drudgery of plantation work, women rarely left their jobs.

The example of the *thikā*, when read together with constant references to being stupid or losing the power to speak, point to women plantation workers’ subjective states. As I moved back and forth between the plantation and the cooperative, stark differences emerged as to how these two groups of women thought about their lives, their futures, and the collectives they had formed. This

self reflection of women about their capability at both sites was important for how they understood their political futures, the role of their collectives (*Ghumāuri* and Women's Wing), and their understanding and use of the Fair Trade-Organic production.

During my time at the cooperative, life was routinized as well. The 1pm lunch siren from neighboring plantations meant that women tea farmers, working in the mountain slopes, had to now return from work and make lunch. I was surprised that the plantations' routine had such hold on the lives of women tea farmers, at least temporally. Tea farmers (whether men or women) always made it a point to remind me that their work lives were very different from plantation people. I asked them why they followed the plantation siren. Premila told me that it helped them organize their day better. If they were away in the field, the siren reminded them that it was now time to go back and eat. After answering my question she paused for a moment and then said, "I know why you asked that question. You want to know what makes us different from your friends in the plantation." By this time Premila had a good idea of my research objectives; she always complained about my frequent stays in the plantation.

Women tea farmers, however, rarely envied anything about life in the plantation. They knew that being a plantation worker was difficult and was associated with negative gender ideologies in the region. One of the biggest complaints that plantation workers had was about their inability to possess land. In fact, male members of the tea cooperative always had the option of

agricultural work. Possession of land provided a disguise to the unemployment which plagued people in both plantations and the cooperative.

While the siren gave women direction in their lives at both sites, in the plantation the 1pm siren meant that workers had to start their afternoon shift. The women tea farmers had a choice to go back to the field after 1pm or to stay indoors and take a nap. This sense of freedom from a fixed schedule was something that the tea farmers relished and was a defining feature of their identity. They were not bound by the discipline of the *thikā*. The potential for choosing when and how much to work was critical to the women tea farmers' sense of freedom, which they shared with men. As the cooperative president explained to me, "Here any day could be a Sunday." This flexibility meant that tea farmers had more control over their time. Women tea farmers from wealthy households would spend the afternoon watching TV if they had the resources to employ other people from the village to work in their agricultural fields.

People in the two sites spoke about each other as if they came from two very different worlds; hence they were different kinds of people. While outsiders could not distinguish between the lives of the women who pluck tea and appear on the label of tea packets, there is a sharp difference between *kamān ko mānche ra basti ko mānche* (people of the plantations vs. people of the *basti*). These were different people, not because they belonged to different ethnic groups, they were all Nepali, but because their daily lives were structured differently. I took it upon me to analyze these different claims about work and freedom, which brought me

to explore the different effect that Fair Trade had on their respective lives.

Throughout this dissertation, I have shown that women tea farmers have been able to utilize Fair Trade to their benefit, albeit failures. For women plantation workers, Fair Trade was something that the management does. In this chapter, I show how the ability to claim some Fair Trade benefits has increased the existing confidence of women tea farmers, unlike women plantation workers.

It can be argued that women tea farmers needed to take aggressive steps because of their economic insecurity and their vulnerability in the tea industry. However, it is important to note that women tea farmers could take aggressive steps, in spite of being shamed, because they could not be fired, and they cultivated their own lands. The cooperative relied on their labor in producing tea and during important cooperative activities. Women tea farmers had de facto ownership of their land and what they produced, as was evident from the comment in the earlier chapter about women being the police of their own fields. Too often, economic wellbeing becomes a lens to gauge empowerment (Kabeer 1999). Women in the plantation of course had a regular source of income, but women tea farmers' household income was not terribly different from plantation workers. The average income from of households at both sites ranged from 1800-2000 Rupees per month. This economic explanation of political activism is therefore too simplistic as it forecloses the possibility to explore the complexity of how people understand themselves at the two sites.

Both groups of women played important economic roles in their families and community and had done so for years, yet women tea farmers retaliated against male domination and women plantation workers did not. Women tea farmers directly negotiated practices of defaming and the double standards that existed in their community against women. The difference lay in the way the two groups of women understood themselves, their self-knowledge vis-à-vis existing moral standards to which they were subjected, which impacted their actions. Women plantation workers constantly felt that they had lost their power to speak because of the dictate of the *thikā*, expressing their alienation from the fruits of their labor. Women tea farmers on the other hand felt that they had rights to everything that they produced. They used Fair Trade to make moral claims on their land and justify their economic ambitions. The two groups of women thought about themselves as different kinds of actors.

The question of institutional structure and resource access was also very important for the way women perceive possibilities and how they imagine their future. Hence plantation workers see their state accorded rights to ask for a decent wage, benefits, and health provisions decrease over time because of the changes in the union priorities. Women tea farmers take the opportunity of Fair Trade stipulations to put a price on their labor and efforts to secure the economic future of their families and community.

***Ghumāuri* vs. Women's Wing Meetings**

At both sites, women were highly aware of the systematic workings of structural power, yet there was a difference in the way women at both sites strategized to negotiate hegemonic practices. Their subjective states influenced the nature of their collective organizing. *Ghumāuri* meetings were a safe space to vent anxieties and make exploitation more habitable – a therapeutic space. Women's Wing meetings provide a place for careful planning to negotiate structural inequality. As I will soon show, Women's Wing meetings were used to plan how women could benefit from Fair Trade. They were more than places for venting, they provided time and opportunity for careful planning to change attitudes towards Women's Wing's ventures and publicly shame the male cooperative members for their double standards and their use of women for raising Fair Trade awareness.

Let me return to my previous example of the Siliguri workshop with which I began the previous section. In explaining the circumstances, Sita mentioned that the Joint Body meetings were useless, and they were not aware of inspections; they were never told about inspections. Fair Trade as a topic was also not part of their *Ghumāuri* meetings, although it was a space where they discuss plantation politics. As I mentioned in an earlier chapter, the *Ghumāuri* groups were very much under cover, having no formal presence. The meetings were held on holidays, every 1-2 months. Women plantation workers often

discussed issues of loyalty and productivity in the *Ghumāuri* meetings. Even when they discussed problems at work they tried to come up with help and solutions within the group. They strategized about ways of placing their concerns with the owner individually, not any organized plan of action to involve union members to take up the issue. There was no paper trail of anything that they proposed. *Ghumāuri*, as a collective space, had little potential to systematically address the structural constraints placed on women workers through a low wage, unsafe work conditions, nepotism and strict disciplining. In spite of this safe space, women felt that their futures were not going to improve any time soon; hence they are “tadpoles in water.”

In *Ghumāuri* meetings women often discussed the mistrust that the management displayed towards women workers in daily affairs. While otherwise extolling the skill and sincerity of women workers in front of visitors, plantation authorities would often accuse women workers of insincerity when they personally met women at work. One day, in the peak plucking month of June, I was with a group of women workers. The owner was doing his rounds. He came up to two women and made this comment, “*timihāru lakshmi chineko chainau.*” When translated literally from Nepali, the statement means “You don’t know your Lakshmi.” In Hindu custom, Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth and prosperity. The plantation owner implied that women workers were not loyal to their work, and they did not pluck enough leaves, this was read as disrespect for work. The statement was ironical because in the peak season, women were paid

extra rupees three per kilo of plucked tea, in addition to their eight kilos of daily plucking requirement. Women looked forward to the monsoon months in spite of all its dangers (like landslides, leeches and slippery terrain), because they could earn a little more. These kinds of comments from the owner really made women angry.

In the next *Ghumāuri* meeting the two women Nita and Kala started talking about this comment. They complained that the productivity of tea was much lower than when they started. There was a constant pest problem after pesticide use was stopped in the plantation. One of the retired male supervisors had also told me during an interview that the discontinuation of pesticide use was not beneficial for pluckers because there was loss of productivity, i.e. lesser leaves to pluck in the high season, hence, less extra income. Nita regretted that she could not talk back to the owner. She told the group that the owner thinks that only he knows how to care about tea. Then she said, “It is because we worship tea that he makes so much money. That is why for sāhib the plantation is like Lakshmi. For us, tea is like our second mother, we have to be loyal and careful. We offer the season’s first leaves to god, but he does not understand. We take pride in our work, and that is why we come back everyday to worship our Lakshmi. So what if we don’t have a temple in the factory.”⁹⁰ She made fun of the daily praying rituals in the factory temple that the owner performed.

⁹⁰ Field notes of participant observation February 2007.

The analogy of tea as mother was important. Most of the plantation workers were born and brought up in plantations. This was their social world and their lives had an indelible link with tea plants. The ties between the plantation and women workers were like those between a mother and her daughters – a strong bond. One could never sever ties from one's mother nor from the plantation because it was one's source of nourishment. Then Kasturi pointed out the key difference between a real mother and the tea mother. She said, "When a small child is upset, tired or sick, the child can rest on their mother's lap. They cry and mother soothes their pain, but the second mother (tea) is not that caring. We come to her, rain or shine. We soothe her pain, but she is loyal to her sons." Kasturi implied that tea as mother was more generous towards her son – the owner – who enjoyed the fruits of women's labor.

After this comment, Nita brought out a small container and opened it in front of me. She told me "Younger sister, now I will show you the real thieves of the plantation, we catch them often." Then as soon as she opened the small container, I could see small mosquito like insects, some half dead and some alive. These were the pests which drove down the productivity of the plantation. They could not be controlled by organic methods. She continued, "The owner does not have any idea how we protect our mother. She is only Lakshmi (wealth) for him, but she is our mother. We care for her; he is only interested in selling her." She kept saying that she would continue her work because if they stop then they will die hungry, the plantation will close. We *pahādis* (hill people) have no other

option but to toil in this land. We have to be a good worker; that's the only way we can survive." Kala told me, "You have to be sincere, and then you will have no guilt." Through these kinds of *Ghumāuri* sessions women plantation workers constructed meaning of their toil. The constant reiteration of sincerity was how women formed a parallel moral universe opposed to what people actually thought of them, as promiscuous, insincere and *bāthi* (street smart).

Ghumāuri meetings provided me the space to understand how women made exploitation habitable. It is in their reasoning that I saw how they were treated in the plantation and how that affected their self-knowledge. Women saw their labor as indispensable for the prosperity of the plantation in its organic avatar. While they protected their second mother – tea – from harm and blemish, they themselves had to live a scarred existence, always suspected, underpaid. *Ghumāuri* meetings were like group therapy – women narrated their stories while other women listened. Sometimes the meetings would be charged. Some women would break down, but by the time they left for home, they had new ideas about where to buy the cheapest books for their children on their next visit to Kurseong town.

Women's Wing meetings were very different. They were more regular (monthly) and provided critical space for planning. Although women tea farmers were subject to norms of obedience and respectability, they also found ways to subvert these norms creatively by participating and using Fair Trade events. The Women's Wing meetings were not mere safe spaces to vent; they were more.

Women tea farmers met on the 8th day of every month at 1 pm at the cooperative office. When they started in 1999, they were taught by the NGO to keep detailed minutes of the meetings; they continued this practice. They also had elections every two years when they changed their president, secretary and treasurer. The Women's Wing secretary kept written records⁹¹ of their requests to the cooperative board and their specific interactions with cooperative members. The cooperative households were spread across steep slopes and women from different villages used the meetings as a way to keep tabs on gossip about the Women's Wing's wings activities. There used to be small votes on issues such as who would be selected to go to training, who would go to the cooperative board meetings, who would collect savings. Women often discussed the adversities they faced in their homes.

Women's Wing meetings were also critical for consciousness raising about Fair Trade and how the Women's Wing could benefit from Fair Trade. Active women would frequently quiz new members or the shy ones to get them to speak up in the meetings. On special occasions, like the International Women's Day, the Women's Wing president would urge all the women to reflect on why they joined the Women's Wing. Shanta the new president was a really timid woman when I met her first. In the beginning of my work she was voted to be the new president so that everyone could share the leadership. In the beginning Shanta used to stammer and kept her speeches very short, but as the months

⁹¹ If the Women's Wing secretary was illiterate, then literate members helped in keeping meeting minutes.

elapsed her speeches grew longer and she stopped asking the other active members “What shall I say?” Sima told me at the end of one such meeting that she could not believe how far Women’s Wing members had come compared to their state in 1999. She said, “We used to sit at the back of the room during main cooperative meetings; we used to be scared talking to the men from the NGOs and our community. Now, we can also beat the table and argue when we want to.”

If a women tea farmer repeatedly failed to come for meetings, leaders of the Women’s Wing would make a big deal. If someone missed a meeting and justified her absence saying that her family members got upset if she came to meetings, then the leaders would ask them, “What did you tell them in response? Much of the problem lies with the fact that you all go home and don’t tell your family members what the Women’s Wing is doing. If you explain they will understand. You must tell your daughters and sons about the importance of our work. We are not here to chat; we make plans here. You have to explain what our *THulo yojanā* (big business) means for the community.” While making these kinds of allegations, women also knew that the problems with the Women’s Wings declining membership and the recent smear campaign by the middlemen and rich housewives had its roots in the cooperative. Women’s Wing members were concerned about the existing social and economic differences within the cooperative and how it impacted the future of the Women’s Wing. Meetings were crucial for strategizing on confronting the president of the cooperative.

In March 2007 the governing board of the cooperative learnt that the Fair Trade premium they were to get that year was considerably more than the previous year (a 40% increase). The sale of their tea had gone up in the Fair Trade-organic market, but there was also a note of caution from FLO. FLO had requested that the cooperative file legal registration with the West Bengal Government Societies Registration Act.⁹² The letter also mentioned that many people in the cooperative were not clear about the history and specificities of Fair Trade. Among other warnings the letter also mentioned that women would have to be made part of the main cooperative board. If inspectors found these issues unresolved by the next inspection date in December 2007, the cooperative's premium would be stopped by FLO from 2008.

The letter had caused great alarm for cooperative board members who immediately came up with a *FLO Janajāgaran Kāryakram* (FLO People's-awareness campaign).⁹³ They decided to use some of the 2007 premium money for these events which would be held in all the neighborhoods within the cooperative. Soon the cooperative sent letters to the Women's Wing members for a general meeting with them to discuss their formal inclusion in the cooperative board. Women's Wing members already knew about this warning from FLO; they wanted to discuss the possibility of their participation in the *FLO Janajāgaran Karyakram* after careful negotiation with the cooperative president. News spread

⁹² The tea cooperative where I did my fieldwork was not registered with the state government till 2006. The reason for it being un-registered is outlined in chapter 1.

⁹³ This campaign was conducted by the cooperative to raise more awareness of Fair Trade.

in these villages very fast. Women's Wing members knew that the president would soon request their labor for the *FLO Janajāgaran Kāryakram*. It was common for the cooperative president to request Women's Wing members to help out with the cooperatives activities. This was another way the cooperative appropriated women's time and labor in official matters. Officers of the Women's Wing decided to call a meeting with the coop board to straighten out the relationship between the Women's Wing and the cooperative and clear out the air between them. If women were going to give time and labor outside their homes for the awareness campaign, they needed some explanations from the president about his previous actions vis-à-vis the Women's Wing.

On May 8th 2008, 35 women tea farmers gathered at the cooperative office. The president of the Women's Wing, secretary and treasurer were all present. It was decided in the April 8th Women's Wing meeting⁹⁴ that the agenda of the May meeting would comprise a discussion with the president of the cooperative about the specificities of the relationship between the cooperative and the Women's Wing, and stocktaking of the activities of the women's group. In the light of recent decline in the membership of the Women's Wing, women were concerned and decided that they would use the *FLO Janajagaran Karyakram* to further their own goals of recruiting more women into the Women's Wing.

Active members of the Women's Wing thought that the cooperative's male

⁹⁴ The Women's Wing had monthly meetings on the 8th day of every month. The 8th day of the month was originally selected in 1999 by the NGO working with women tea farmers to spread awareness about International Women's Day and women's issues and every year on 8th March the Women's Wing celebrates women's day in their own style.

members had a role in this declining membership. Some Women's Wing members rationalized that the opposition women tea farmers faced at home about spending time in the activities of the Women's Wing, especially after the big business plan was publicized, could not be blamed on individual household members. Women tea farmers were aware of the gender and wealth differences in their community. The cooperative president's denial of sharing FLO money in 2006 (chapter three) and then again in 2007 propelled Women's Wing members to censure the wealth and gender politics within their communities which created impediments for the women's group who were out to start a new venture. These inequalities also affected household politics (as I show in chapter four).

At noon on May 8th 2007, Shanta *didi* the current president of the Women's Wing started her inaugural speech for the Women's Wing's monthly meeting. Shanta *didi* said that the Women's Wing will be successful when every household in the cooperative sends their mothers and daughters to the monthly meeting of the Women's Wing. Then she decided to answer why that was not happening. According to Shanta *didi*, the women's wing members could not effectively explain what went on in the women's group meetings to their family members. At the height of her speech, Shanta *didi* mentioned that women have to learn to better explain "What we do in these meetings." There was a need to justify the labor/time spent outside the house in a way which made sense to family members. "We have to tell our husbands and elders that we discuss important

matters of the community in our meetings which do not just concern women, but concern the well being of all the villages within the tea cooperative area. It is not just about chatting and taking loans, we are making plans here which will be beneficial for every household.”⁹⁵

At around 1 pm, the president of the tea cooperative arrived. Women’s Wing members greeted him and requested him to put forth his agenda. The president started explaining that with the new Fair Trade regulations the cooperative would have to include more women. The president of the Women’s Wing would now become the ex-officio member of the cooperative. The Women’s Wing would now have to make a new constitution and by-laws so that their by-laws would not negatively affect the cooperative or its members. In his speech, the president continuously emphasized how the rules of the Women’s Wing will only be effective once the cooperative governing board approves of it. These new Women’s Wing bylaws, which would include a list of Women’s Wing’s future business activities, would have to be approved by the governing body of the cooperative. He also requested that Women’s Wing members should help the cooperative in their FLO *Janajāgaran Kāryakram* as anticipated by Women’s Wing members even before the president arrived.

At this point Shanta *didi* interrupted the cooperative president’s speech and informed him that the Women’s Wing wanted to use this *Janajāgaran Kāryakram* to raise awareness about the Women’s Wing’s activities because the

⁹⁵ Participant observation May 8th 2007, field notes.

Women's Wing needed new energy. She emphasized that people need to know more about the new activities of the Women's Wing and the economic problems women faced. The president of the cooperative sarcastically replied saying that the Women's Wing was not doing "*rāmro kām*" (important work), did not have a proper agenda, and hence people thought it was a waste of time. He started complaining about the difficulties of running an organization, which women were just beginning to learn.

The meeting quickly turned into a heated session between the president and the Women's Wing members. I was present, but did not speak a word. I was recording the meeting. It was too emotional a moment. I knew from previous Women's Wing meetings that women were planning such a discussion for the last six months to express their collective anxiety about the cooperative board's attitude towards women's business ventures, which they related to the legitimacy crisis women faced in their households and neighborhoods.

Shanta *didi* continued her questioning of the president and then finally asked the controversial question regarding the president's household matters. At this point other Women's Wing members joined in and cornered the president. The Women's Wing members questioned the president about his and the cooperative's role in defaming Women's Wing's business and reputation. Here I quote a section of my recordings from this significant meeting to demonstrate how Women's Wing members related household politics and the cooperative president's actions. The cooperative president's constant disavowal of his and

the cooperative boards role in neglecting the Women's Wing was clear from his utterances. Women's constant repetition of references to the politics in the president's own home was an indication of their collective desire to shame the president for his actions. This kind of a meeting was in the books for the Women's Wing even since October 2006.

Shanta didi: But you are aware of Women's Wing's activities and you just now told us that Women's Wing was a part of the cooperative registration. Women's Wing's president will be an ex-officio member of the cooperative board, and you support the Women's Wing. Yet your wife, who is the member of our Women's Wing and has been part of our micro-credit ventures, never comes to our meetings; your house is next-door to the office. What do we make of this.

The photograph below captures the mood from the meeting.



Photo 5.1. By Author

The president was angry and grew extremely uncomfortable and some women started smiling (as evident in this photograph). Local village youth

peeped inside from the office windows as they heard loud exchanges in the office. The president pointed fingers at the active Women's Wing members accusing them of asking personal questions, which he was not entitled to answer. Shanta *didi* in the white shirt is seen on the right facing her back to my camera. Binu is beside her also with her back to the camera. The president kept insisting that women did not know how to keep organization and household matters separate. At this point Manju replied, "What happens in our homes is important for Women's Wing's future."

President: who is going to take charge of farming and household work? If she does not take care of my home, then how am I going to give my time for the organization? How is the cooperative going to run?

Binu: *Daju (elder brother)*, you must understand that your actions have far reaching consequences for the survival and legitimacy of the women's group. We need to know what happens in your household. If your wife does not come to our meetings, maybe you don't let her come, maybe she does not like us. We need to know. Maybe other women are thinking the same way as she. You are like our elder brother, a respectable member of our community. Because of your experience and contribution, our cooperative will prosper, but let me reiterate something which you seem to misunderstand. Please do not interrupt me. We need to know where we as a community are making mistakes.

President: You all are blowing my family matters out of proportion. You should not let these feelings of animosity creep into your organization. This is a mistake.

Punita: These are not your personal matters anymore especially if you are the board.⁹⁶ We want you to know the reason why we need a Women's Wing. You keep telling us that we are only interested in micro-credit money, but your wife also used to take loans by being a member of our

⁹⁶ Equating him as the "board," meaning cooperative board, was a way for women to show respect and at the same time make the president aware of the severe implications of his smallest actions.

group. Now your contracting business is going well, and she does not come. However, your family matters have far-reaching consequences. What happens in our families is important. You all keep saying in public meetings that women should have the same respect as men; they should move forward, be confident. In our homes women should be respected and they should take important decisions in the household. If all these things were happening we would not need a Women's Wing. Men have some responsibility to support Women's Wing.

President: My goodness....you are all too emotional....how can you run an organization if you bring up personal matters all the time?

Manju: For once don't speak to us as the president of the cooperative. Don't hide behind the cooperative banner. Talk to us as an average man who is the head of the family, who wants women in his family to succeed. Do you ever honestly tell your wife to go to the meetings?

President: She is a human being, not a sheep. Can I force her to come? It is her judgment. If women want to exercise their rights they have to do it themselves...no one will give it to them in a platter....men cannot force them...every individual should take their own decisions....if other people base their decisions on joining Women's Wing looking at my household, then they are like sheep.

Punita: If it's all an individual's own decision, then why have *FLO Janjagaran Karyakram* about Fair Trade. People will find out for themselves before the next FLO inspection....they do not need awakening, because they all have minds...they are not sheep! Why do you need the Women's Wing to spread Fair Trade awareness; people can just learn about these things on their own.

President: I am not sure why my wife does not come.

Manju: People need to understand that women's work is important both inside and outside the home....this should also be one of the messages about your upcoming *Janjagaran* (awareness) program. You have a duty towards Women's Wing. When you give your speeches please tell other people not to emulate your wife, because Women's Wing is doing important work....tell every women in your village it is time to awaken.

President: Do you think if I order women in my village they will listen?

Binu: Why do you think they won't? When you gather women in your village and put them to work on your farm or on your road-work business, they listen don't they? They all listen because they know they will get money; everyone understands the significance of money.....if we tell everyone that Women's Wing is doing something profitable just like the cooperative, I am confident, then will understand.

Manju: Please go and start a *Janajagaran* (Awareness Campaign) about the Women's Wing in your own village before you ask us to participate in the cooperative's business.

The Women's Wing meetings were extremely important for women to address economic and social inequalities in their communities which persisted in the present. The president constantly tried to put forth that the weakening of the Women's Wing and its present impediments were in no way related to the activities of the main cooperative. He emphasized that women have to become powerful by themselves; they could not ask for help. In the meeting, women's constant emphasis on the president's household matters and its relation to the defaming and weakening of the Women's Wing was a critical connection to expose the attitudes of upwardly mobile wealthy families towards the Women's Wing.

The Women's Wing members constantly made the president feel conscious about his double standards and opportunism. He sent his wife to Women's Wing as long as they needed loans. I had interviewed the cooperative president's wife, Hema, in 2004, which the president had forgotten. In 2004 Hema's husband was not the president of the cooperative. I had met her at the

Women's Wing's monthly meeting. She was introduced to me as an active Women's Wing member. She had told me in that interview that women had do more work in the home and there was constant need for money and she was taking loans. When I returned in 2006 for my formal fieldwork Hema was a different woman. She would never come to meetings. She watched TV in the afternoon when the Women's Wing had meetings. Hema's house had more expensive furniture, her husband was thinking of buying a Jeep (second hand car). She told me one day in 2006 that she did not have time for any organization work because she had to entertain her husband's clients in his new constructing business by making lunch and tea, and could not come to meetings because they were held at lunchtime.

Ghumāuri and Women's Wing were different kinds of spaces. They were shaped by the larger institutional structures in which they were embedded. *Ghumāuri* was largely underground, whereas Women's Wing saw itself as a parallel organization to that of the cooperative. This positioning gave women tea farmers a different kind of motivation, which affected the way they dealt with structural inequalities. Women's Wing directly participated in Fair Trade activities, they questioned it, whereas *Ghumāuri* members had very little to do with Fair Trade. Women's Wing members identified the socio-economic inequalities manifested itself in the sexism of cooperative board members. *Ghumāuri* members collectively narrated the indispensability of their labor for the plantation's wealth and found new hope and motivation.

The Politics of Clean Hands vs. the Politics of Clean Trade

Both women plantation workers and women tea farmers aspired to be economically better off, but their battles were pitched at different levels. As I mentioned before, instances of “everyday resistance” were sporadic among women plantation workers, but they found novel ways of protecting their bodies and souls. The focus of activism for women tea farmers was not merely protection, but also seeking economic justice and respect within their community and families for their labor and efforts. While both groups were highly conscious of the limits of their action, I contend that women tea farmers could take their struggle to a level higher than the women plantation workers. Women tea farmers’ used more confrontational tactics than women plantation workers, to question their exploitation.

As I spent time with plantation workers days on an end, I gradually started noticing what tea plantation workers did and said to make their harsh work environments more bearable. These acts were often reflections on the plantation surveillance structure and became evident after the first couple of months of fieldwork. I would start my days waking up with them in their homes, going to work, sharing lunch, returning from work, washing, cooking, watching TV, going to worship and chatting. I was close enough to also see how they kept themselves motivated and went about their daily work routines, which they frequently described to me as drudgery.

One such day I set out to the tea fields with Lachmi *didi's* group. After lunch we all sat in the shade till the 1pm siren blew. During lunch hour (between noon and 1pm) the conversation centered on what these women did to protect themselves, particularly their bodies from plantation work. Working in the plantation meant long hours away from home; the so-called “nimble fingers” were frequently scratched and there were dark red marks on their fingers from tea leaf stain. Women often wore plastic boots supplied by the plantation, and wore layers of socks to protect themselves from leeches, which were a daily threat to their health. Women had to carry umbrellas to protect them from the sun and rain. They also carried local medicinal herbs with them in case of a slight stomach pain or fever in the field.

During the time I spent in the plantation health center⁹⁷ the most common complaint from workers was fever, headache and body ache. A medical report in the plantation dispensary also noted that “women were thought to report more illness than men.” Being sick was a way for them to get a day off. Their work involved heaving climbing through the steep hill-slopes leading to fatigue. Women consumed a lot of pain killers. When I told one of them that pain killers were not good, I was told, “If we had enough time to rest our feet and hands we might not have consumed these medicines.” If women lived too far from the

⁹⁷ The dispensary provided basic services and medicines, with no provision for surgery, for which plantation workers had to be taken to town. Often plantation workers would not have money to afford town doctors. It was largely the owner's discretion about who he would pay for the doctor's expenses in town. You had to be in his good books for this service.

health center, they would just drink a glass of warm home-made rice wine to ease their pain.

Women were very interested in cleanliness. At 7am, they would be immaculately dressed, with their *sindoor* (vermillion used by married women), *bindi*, powder, lipstick and most importantly they would keep long nails decorated with nail color. The latter was forbidden by the plantation. Organic certification rules forbade any use of knife, blade, or plucking with nails. The correct way to pluck was with one's finger-tips. Women's obsession with clean manicured hands was a way of concealing their drudgery. When I used to travel to town with the plantation workers, they would never fail to buy a nail-color. Bindu told me that keeping clean hands was very important, especially when they went to town. They did not want people to know that they were plantation workers. "Our hands give out our occupation. When we go to town, we want to momentarily forget our lives of misery and hardship. We want to be clean for some time."

Women plantation workers often wore gloves while plucking leaves. If they were caught in the act of using gloves while plucking, they could be suspended. They stitched these gloves at home from old umbrella cloth, because the material from the gloves had to be water-proof. They never bought gloves in town, because word might spread that gloves are being used in the plantation. The obsession with a clean appearance was more pronounced among the young women workers, who were between the ages of 18-45. Older women rarely wore

nail color. Lachmi *didi*, their group leader, explained why these little ways of protecting their bodies were important. She further explained that the *thika*/wage allowed women to take these small steps to keep them happy, there is no one to care for them.

The Darjeeling tea logo, which distinguishes it from other teas from India, displays the hands of the plantation workers as perfect, not displaying how they are bruised and stained, making this representation different from the actual physical appearance of the workers.



Photo 5. 2. Darjeeling Tea Logo

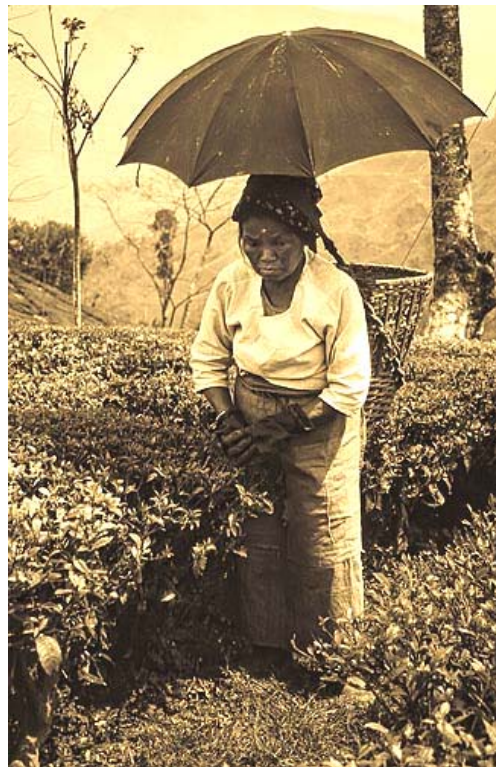


Photo 5.3 Women Tea Plucker with Gloves (Shared by an informant)

Women plantation workers' work routine and toil was written on their hands. They were proud of their work, but for them their hands embodied their struggle and their limited options. They never asked me to photograph them with their gloves on, but this is an image from the internet showing a plantation worker with a glove on. She is looking worn out from the heavy load she carried on her head and the umbrella which she carefully balanced by tucking it into the basket. The contrast between the smiling propaganda and this picture is stark. This is more like a regular day in the sun, tiresome to say the least.

In spite of these ways of protecting themselves, women plantation workers came back to work day after day, without fail. While the plantation owner used essentialisms to explain women's motivation, women put forward very different reasons for their motivation. Women who worked in the sorting department were exposed to different kinds of hazards; there was so much tea dust that they could develop breathing problems. These were about a dozen women in the sorting department. They would make fun of me and ask whether they would all fit in my *kameez* (Indian shirt) pocket so that they could escape.

Sorting department women were envied by pluckers. Plantation workers in the sorting department, who were slightly better paid than plain pluckers had their own anxieties. Ganga *didi* the leader in the sorting department, in her mid 50's, was a motherly figure. I was more helpful for the sorting department

women when I was around. Sorting involved less skill for a novice like me. Ganga told me that I should demand my *hazirā* (pay) since I spent entire workdays with them. Then she asked me whether I had a breathing ailment. Women who worked in the sorting department were exposed to different kinds of hazards; there was so much tea dust that they could develop breathing problems if they already had asthma. She told me “You think our work is easy than the pluckers, but the dangers here are silent, don’t you see that many of us wear glasses; we have to sort all the bad leaves out; it’s hard work. Come winter you will not even recognize your Ganga *didi*. When sickling begins, we spend days in the winter sun, we become black and our skin is burnt.” Ganga *didi* almost implied that in winter they step down in the plantation hierarchy to join the ranks of ordinary pluckers.

The politics of clean hands signified a struggle that women wanted to forget in their everyday lives. They were extremely aware of their misery and the limited options for organized resistance. A lot of thought went into keeping one’s hands clean. The plantation workers would frequently tell me, “The least we could do is keep our hands clean, What else can you do in this life of *thikā* (*wage*); maybe my next life will be better?” In the absence of large scale collective organizing, women plantation workers performed these acts as a form of escaping the governance of the *thika*. The subjective understanding of their possibility for action resulted in these small acts, accompanied by their constant lament about losing their ability to speak.

Women plantation workers and tea farmers were engaged in different kinds of visibility politics. Unlike women plantation workers, who were always trying to hide their toil, women tea farmers were engaged in making visible the value of their labor in the prosperity of their community. Male members of the cooperative would frequently talk about the cooperative as a movement of small farmers, reinforced by the rhetoric that they got from the NGO and the plantation to which they sold their tea.

In March 2007, the cooperative had an annual general meeting. During this time festivities were planned to greet the plantation owner and felicitate him for his support of small farmers. This was a way to ensure the durability of the plantation-coop contract. The plantation owner was the chief guest and in his public speech he extolled the efforts of the women. He said that women possessed the natural quality of *māyā* (love/care/compassion), which they infuse in the tea leaves through out the year. Without the *māyā* of women, the cooperative movement would not have been successful. He proclaimed that the plantation was their partner in fighting for the rights of small farmers, but it was the women who gave Darjeeling tea its quality through their *māyā*.

While the plantation owner made his speech, I was with the Women's Wing members, taking pictures. They wanted a picture of their activities at the ceremony. As soon as the plantation owner spoke of *māyā*, the women tea farmers laughed out aloud. Then Sushila laughed and said, "We don't believe in doing things for *māyā* anymore, those days are gone." Women's Wing members

had agreed to prepare the feast for the day for a small fee for Rupees 500 (\$11). Previously the Women's Wing would provide such services for free. In a recent confrontation, Binu had told the president of the cooperative, "We are not here to cook your rice and pluck leaves." The dispute was settled through an agreement through which the cooperative board agreed to pay money for the Women's Wing's services.

In the picture below we can see male cooperative members sitting in on the celebrations, while a board member makes his speech. On the speaker's left there are huge rocks behind which Women's Wing members were cooking the meal. The smoke coming out from the fire is also seen around the rocks. This time the Women's Wing members demanded money for their labor, which was previously mostly hidden.



Photograph 5.4. A Community Meeting

Photograph by author March 2007

Through this act, women made visible their silent work which was important for the cooperative's success. As Karuna later told me, it is because we have *māyā* that the men can count on us, but too much *māyā* will result in the obliteration of our group. It is also because of *māyā* that women can do *swāchchā vyāpar* (*clean/fair trade*). The comments of the plantation owner and the Women's Wing members were laden with gender essentialisms. Gender essentialisms became a way to communicate the battle over labor and resources in the cooperative. The desire for clean trade drew on a gendered moral economy through which labor was mobilized in the plantations and the cooperative. Women tea farmers, however, were able cash in on this essentialism by putting a price on cooking for this important occasion.

Conclusion:

Women tea plantation workers' and tea farmers' subjectivities and aspirations were affected by the institutions in which they worked and lived and resources they could access. Plantation workers subjectivities were affected by an understanding of the limited possibility within the plantation system. Their sense of limited possibility was reinforced because the *Ghumāuri* activities only helped them cope with the discipline of the *thikā(wage)*. Women tea farmers, on the other hand, directly negotiated with the cooperative to fulfill their desires. The possibilities available to them within the cooperative structure gave them

more confidence. Women tea farmer's narratives about their economic and political action revealed a sense of confidence, unlike women plantation workers. Women tea farmers frequently mentioned that they had come a long way and were no longer afraid "to beat the table."

Women plantation workers and women tea farmers were engaged in different kinds of battles – they mobilized at different scales. Also important to note here is the mobilization of Fair Trade ideas by women tea farmers in interpreting themselves and their struggles, through the invocation of *swāchchā vyāpar*. The greater exposure to Fair Trade training in the cooperative made women aware of what they could do with Fair Trade. Fair Trade gave them a new language to publicly enact their subjective desires. While both groups exercise agency, their battles acquired different proportions, expressing differences in the way they understood and navigated the inequalities of their lives.

Conclusion: Beyond Labels and Promises

This dissertation explores the differences that Fair Trade-organic tea production makes in the lives of marginalized women tea producers, whose labor is appropriated in the production of tea and other commodities in Darjeeling. It began by asking why Fair Trade has been more effective in lending a voice to women tea farmers with little legal rights over land, than women plantation workers who are represented by trade unions and work within the legal parameters of the Plantation Labor Act. My ethnography has upheld that the period after the rise of organic tea production and Fair Trade certified tea marketing is marked by two contradictory trends in Darjeeling's tea sector: growing prominence of women tea farmers in their own communities and progressive marginalization of women plantation workers in the context of a decreasing influence of labor unions in plantations that produce Fair Trade certified tea. In short, the dissertation addresses the paradox of this uneven impact of Fair Trade on marginalized women tea producers in Darjeeling, India.

By identifying and explaining this unevenness, this dissertation provides a critique of global ethical regimes—like Fair Trade—that seek to use the market to address the injustices of global trade in specific locations. I have argued that Fair Trade, like other development discourses, is depoliticizing, i.e. it does not pay much attention to the local inequalities and differences. As a privatized system of justice, Fair Trade leaves many structural issues outside its purview.

Nonetheless, the Fair Trade framework lends itself to appropriation and identity

formation, which has enabled women tea farmers to put forward their claims in their community. Although depoliticizing, Fair Trade can be re-politicized in certain contexts. However, such re-politicization happens under specific circumstances. To understand the complex and situated workings of Fair Trade, my dissertation has analyzed women's everyday actions and narratives by using the theoretical framework of women's political agency. Following Sherry Ortner (2005), I have defined political agency as a deep situated understanding of power and women's different styles of navigating power and domination. Whether Fair Trade articulates with women's struggles, can be located in their use of Fair Trade to understand and navigate the structures of power within the plantation and cooperative.

To understand political agency under Fair Trade, the ethnography in the foregoing chapters, has etched out the culturally particular ways of appropriating women's labor at the two sites – the cooperative area and the plantation. Women tea farmers and plantation workers are both primary producers of organic tea, but their labor is appropriated in different ways, and they have varying relationships with the commodities that they produce. The key difference in labor appropriation between the cooperative area and the plantation is that in the cooperative, there is no distinction between the site of production and consumption (work and home) unlike the plantation.

This difference in organization of production has had significant impacts on gender relations, household relations and relation between women and the commodities they produce. Different political identities have emerged, vis-à-vis dispersed male domination in the cooperative villages and strict routinized plantation production. Therefore, Fair Trade impacts the two sites differently. In the cooperative, where the women tea farmers demanded a separate Women's Wing, the association of work with home had important symbolic and material implications. It resulted in the misrecognition of women's labor through gendered spatial politics restricting women's mobility. In the pre-Fair Trade era, this misrecognition served very well to hide the contradiction between the gender ideologies that confined women to the household and the village at the same time that there was communal dependence on women's ability produce tea and market other commodities. In the post-Fair Trade era, women used their practical knowledge of production and importance in global ethical regimes to create greater recognition for the value of their labor. Women redefined Fair Trade through the moral and material discourse of *swāchchā vyāpar* (clean/fair trade).

Thus, the introduction of Fair Trade strengthened the already politicized consciousness of the women tea farmers, whose relationship with the commodities that they produce within the household did not just stop at simply producing them, but they also sold them, negotiating middlemen, bureaucrats, and family members. This involvement of the women tea farmers in the

movement of their products from the farm to the market gave women tea farmers a perspective on how power worked in their lives. They saw how constraints on their actions were generated not only in the public sphere but also in the private sphere, which had so long misrecognized their labor. Thus, they understood how intra-household relationships between men and women upheld inter-household inequality in their communities. The latter happened through restrictions placed on women that allowed middlemen to thrive, and permitted certain households to prosper. Thus, a local feminist consciousness developed among women tea farmers by taking care of household members and governing (“policing”) their agricultural fields. Women used their subjective understanding of institutional power structures to navigate these inequalities. Women’s political agency found expression in women’s struggles against inequality of wealth in the cooperative area. To address this inequality woman appropriated the discourse of Fair Trade.

In the plantation, the household and the production sites were separate. In the public sphere women’s work was recognized by fetishizing their natural ability to pluck and process tea. Thus, labor appropriation did not start at home, but began in the plantation where the women workers became commodified to produce tea. Therefore, the relationship that the women plantation workers had with the commodity that they produced was different. Women workers were alienated from what they produced. Women were made hyper visible in marketing and producing tea; yet at home they faced retaliation and plantation

outsiders used negative stereotypes to shame them. Therefore, their perspective on power was different from that of the women tea farmers.

Women plantation workers did not face direct male domination in the household; rather their husbands and male family members suffered a certain kind insecurity vis-à-vis the women. Women's narratives and consciousness grew out of this constant tussle to act against commodification of their labor, done through *thikā* (wage). Women plantation workers constantly complained about losing voice, in spite of participating in concealed *Ghumāuri* groups. They tried to overcome such feelings of alienation by further fetishizing their labor and relationship with tea, calling it their second mother. The male family members on the other hand, nurtured a feeling of insecurity because women could access work. Men expressed their anxiety by identifying with ethnic politics and collectively pursuing concerns based on certain fetishized notions of the Nepali identity. They used the labor union to secure better links with the local political party in order to get jobs in the local state, which was patronized by the plantations. Women's fetishizing of their own identities as good "*pāhāDi* " workers, in conjunction with male identification with fetishized Nepali identity, changed the focus of plantation labor unions from worker centric politics to subnational ethnic politics. Weakening of the labor unions further facilitated the exploitation and commodification women's labor. Thus women lost their power to mobilize the unions to overturn the stifling plantation hierarchy. They could not access Fair Trade benefits to appropriate it in the way the women tea farmers

did. They instead turned to *Ghumāuri* groups, which remained outside plantation public life.

Thus, what we see here is an important contrast within two Fair Trade certified institutions where women's political agency is expressed in two very different ways. In the plantation, Fair Trade has a depoliticized existence, away from women's ability to navigate power; in the cooperative, women are able to navigate power by using Fair Trade ideas in their everyday political battles.

In documenting and analyzing the struggles of women tea farmers and plantation workers, the dissertation contributes to recent feminist anthropological concerns about the fate of women producers under market systems and how they bring their struggles to speak to the transnational justice initiatives. Feminist scholars have nurtured a healthy skepticism about liberal empowerment strategies (Baltiwala 2007, Kabeer 1999, Rankin 2004, Spivak 1993); however little attention has been paid to the creative navigations women undertake to survive within multiple spheres of neo-liberal governance. While much has been written about the absence of marginalized producer communities within the workings of alternative trade movements, this dissertation theorizes instances where women successfully engage with the Fair Trade movement and what conditions make these interactions and understanding possible. In doing so, the dissertation illuminates the circumstances under which women creatively negotiate global systems of governance, which at times articulate with existing inequalities within the communities in which women live and work. As Mills

(2003:4) writes, “The question is not whether women can organize but rather what conditions enable them to mobilize despite daunting obstacles” (See also Gunawerdane and Kingsolver 2008). Inspired by this emerging trend within feminist scholars to understand circumstances under which women can navigate inequities in their communities, this dissertation analyses how some women can collectively appropriate Fair Trade to empower themselves, while others cannot.

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