



What Makes Darjeeling Tea Authentic? Colonial Heritage and Contemporary Sustainability Practice in Darjeeling, India¹

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KEYWORDS: ORGANIC DARJEELING TEA, SUSTAINABILITY, COLONIALISM, ECOTOURISM, ETHNIC EXCEPTIONALISM, SMALLHOLDER TEA FARMERS, FAIR TRADE

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1. Introduction

Was everything about colonialism bad for Darjeeling? After all, aren't most of the roads and bridges on which we travel even today built by them? Aren't the best schools and hospitals of Darjeeling all established by the colonial rulers? [...] At times I wonder what we added to Darjeeling after we became independent in 1947 except for congestion of roads, scarcity of water, filth, unplanned urban growth and the like? Have we done one good thing for Darjeeling after independence? (Subba 2018: 263)

Dr. Tanka B. Subba (son of Darjeeling and prominent scholar working on important issues about the area), through his pointed discussion of the place of British colonial rule in Darjeeling, draws attention to the political and developmental impediments facing post-Independence Darjeeling. His comments draw necessary attention to complex forms of belonging in contemporary Darjeeling and the place of the colonial in people's subjectivities. While not as clearly articulated as Dr. Subba, men and women of different generations, class backgrounds, and locations, recollect colonial-



ism in complex and often contradictory ways. The desire for recognition (Sen 2012) to belong respectfully within the Indian nation (through a separate state Gorkhaland), hope for Darjeeling's development and better employment, and imaginaries of a better tomorrow, are laced with complex entanglements with colonial aesthetics and forms of ethnic classification. Such entanglements are present in the emerging narratives and practices around sustainability practice and associated deliberations around Brand Darjeeling.

In this article I uphold how Brand Darjeeling articulates colonial-era aesthetics and colonial categories of ethnic classification. Both tropes are mobilised firstly in the service of regenerating plantation tea production, and secondly in popularising artisanal non-plantation tea production. In the last thirty years, plantation tourism (also sometimes referred to as Heritage Tea Tourism or Plantation Eco-tourism) and men's tea-based entrepreneurial initiatives in non-plantation produced organic Darjeeling tea have intensified. In this context, I put forward that to understand the full scope of sustainability practices in Darjeeling over the last two decades it is essential to reckon with emergent cultural productions (Katz 1998; Ramamurthy 2003, 2010) around space, identity and claims to authenticity that are inflected with attachments to colonial categories of comfort and ethnic exceptionalism. These cultural productions of place and people make possible certain forms of transnational trade and solidarity that question as much as they rely on colonial categories of ethnic classification.

The intellectual anchoring of this article comes from my long-term interest in thinking through what sustains sustainability in particular places. My focus has been on questions of social sustainability, the most underemphasised aspect of sustainability initiatives (Redclift 1997; Sen 2017). Social sustainability is important for me as a feminist scholar of sustainable development since feminist development specialists advocate for persistent attention to the intricate workings of culture, power and gender in analysing development discourse and practice. In pushing for more attention to social sustainability, feminist scholars' foreground that a true commitment to sustainability has to reckon with existing power structures that hinder inclusivity, produce vulnerability, and prevent access to resources for men and women in their communities (Gezon 2012; Gunewardena & Kingsolver 2008). Current feminist research on sustainability regimes, such as sustainable agriculture, is often 'drowned



out by research from the natural and sometimes even social sciences that tend to see sustainability as concerning only measurable outcomes' (Pilgeram 2011: 375). Still, feminist political ecologists constantly remind us to consider

gender as a critical variable in shaping resource access and control, interacting with class, caste, race, culture, and ethnicity to shape processes of ecological change, the struggle of men and women to sustain ecologically variable livelihoods, and the prospects of any community for sustainable development. (Rocheleau & Thomas-Slayter 1996: 2)

Such an epistemological departure point necessitates long term research engagements in communities of practice. The data for this article consists of interviews with men and women working in Darjeeling's sustainable tea initiatives in plantations and among non-plantation smallholder tea producers, social media-based research on tea entrepreneurs in the West (UK and USA), review of associated texts and documents, as well as participant observation in various eco-tourism/heritage tea tourism locations in Darjeeling over the last fifteen years of my longitudinal ethnography in Darjeeling district. The rest of this article is divided into three sections. In section two, I elaborate on how colonial heritage is used to diversify income generation in Darjeeling's Fair Trade and organic-certified tea plantations. It is followed by a discussion on the play of colonial categories of ethnic classification and its impact on the dynamics of non-plantation area smallholder tea production.

2. Colonial heritage in sustainable plantations

Colonial coziness in *Gorkhaland*. There will always be an England at this venerable establishment in planter country. (Outlook Traveler Print Edition Feb 2002, emphasis added).

Step into the idyllic world of Glenburn, a tea estate established by Scottish tea planters in 1860. It sprawls over 1600 acres of verdant forests, rolling hills, tea picker villages and a pair of river valleys. Set in the heart of the tea estate, two colonial-style planter bungalows overlook the rolling hills on one side and the mighty Kanchenjunga mountain range on the other. *The aroma of fresh flowers hangs in the air and the four-poster beds, hand embroidered linen and open verandas lend a very English country air to the bungalow* (emphasis added).²



Set seventeen years apart, these narratives are representative of dominant tropes of plantation tourism in Darjeeling. The second one comes from the website of an esteemed tea company, Glenburn Tea Estate Darjeeling, which prides itself on being part of a transnational network certifying sustainable tea production. Glenburn's website states:

[...] participants in the Ethical Tea Partnership, a non-profit organisation whose aim is to improve the sustainability of the tea sector and regulate the living and working conditions on tea estates. The Ethical Tea Partnership, in a sense a "Fair Trade" organisation, consists of buyers of tea who together cover around 50 brands on sale in over 30 countries.

The stamp of ethical certification of colonial-era plantations thriving in a post-colonial context may seem like an oddity for social justice-minded entities promoting sustainability via ecologically sound Fair Trade and organic methods of agriculture. Examination of such unique practices is important as they stand witness to the complex colonial legacies of gendered labour recruitment, migration and development of regional cultural discourses of belonging. The celebration of plantations in their ability to provide a salubrious escape to the purity of a bygone era is real and revenue friendly.

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Organic and Fair Trade certified plantations flaunting colonial comforts in Gorkhaland (which is yet to be politically achieved by Indian Nepalis) entrenches colonial aesthetics and forms of placemaking into dynamics of modern plantations certified as sustainable by transnational justice regimes (Sen & Majumder 2011). Darjeeling plantations' general legacies of indentured labour fueling commodity production and a racist and demeaning heritage of sacrificing human dignity and wellbeing for a profitable business in commodities is covered up through peculiar forms of placemaking. In the proliferating world of Fair Trade/Ethical Trade and continually evolving sustainable tea industry, ethical plantations thrive.

The intensification of these peculiar juxtapositions has particular political-economic context. Darjeeling and adjoining mountain areas served as a place of rejuvenation of mind and soul for British bureaucrats weary of harsh humid plains life. The Darjeeling settlement started with sanitoriums and soon followed by plantations engendered cultural productions of place and people to mitigate insecurities of the agents of the Empire. Art historian Romita Ray states 'with its sprinkling of horti-



cultural societies, churches, boarding schools, malls, clubs, and "cottages," this secluded enclave localized white colonial culture in the midst of Nepalese, Sikkimese, Tibetan and Bhutanese inhabitants while relentlessly invoking the rural charms of the English countryside' (2012: 2). References to the purity of mist and air in Darjeeling created unique possibilities of making the tropics habitable while providing the possibility of mist to 'unlock new horizons for erasing, constructing and indeed validating colonial whiteness' (ibid.).

Similarly, historian Queeny Pradhan describes the setting up of the hill stations by the British. In the process she details various types of evidence about the recreation of a European home amidst the harsh, suspecting and conflict-ridden tropics.³ Enacting discovery of picturesque pristine temperate havens and their re-creation in a European imaginary to navigate 'otherness' is amply documented by Pradhan (2017: 5) when she writes:

An unknown writer felt that 'when Darjeeling is reached, the European finds a climate in many respects like that of Europe' (Anonymous 1857: 201). Buck (1925 [1904]: 21) wrote: "Just as in England and a cloudless day of delight follows a week of mist and rain, so in the Himalayas of northern India, weeks of paradise follow months of purgatory." The Loreto Sisters on reaching Darjeeling could not help commenting on similar climatic conditions in Darjeeling and England: "Here in Darjeeling the climate is rather like our own". (Loreto Convent Records 1900-35).

This sense of escape from the tropical harshness has taken particular commodified forms in Darjeeling's new Fair Trade certified plantations. In plantations practising heritage/eco/plantation tourism, reliance on such unique juxtapositions is not very different from the late nineteenth-century context that Pradhan mentions. Staying in 'cottages' 'bungalows' and enjoying pure organic air amidst the lush green aesthetics of monoculture driven tea production is quite attractive for foreign and domestic tourists who have the desire to experience the past in present comfort while supporting a worthy cause. Added to this is the safety of living among trusted and loyal Gorkhas in 'Gorkhaland.'

It is important to note that *Outlook Traveler* used to be a very well-respected magazine in India at the turn of the century. It was widely circulated among the middle and upper-middle-class residents of India,⁴ who are progressively embracing commodified leisure activities to be in



tune with 'cosmopolitan'⁵ westerners. Middle-class Indians and NRIs (Nonresident Indians) in the last few decades have warmed up to heritage and sustainability-focused tourism. From the early 2000s to the present I have witnessed a proliferation of organic agricultural, food and health/beauty lifestyle-related commodities in grocery stores and markets. Along with their cushy private sector jobs responsible/eco/alternate tourism is emerging as a new class defining activity for this group of Indians. So corporate houses and state bodies who are trying to publicise the merits of responsible, westernised ecotourism use this magazine as a vehicle for local audiences. Ecotourism with Victorian charm is aimed at tourists who have the more spending power.⁶ The earlier quote is emblematic of the recent attempts to rebuild Darjeeling as a valuable production niche for organic tea as well as an eco-tourism hot spot. At this juncture, using ecotourism to recreate Darjeeling's colonial heritage is significant.

Darjeeling is a small hilly plantation town in the north-east corner of India which is famous for being the production niche for black tea and a gateway from India to exotic locations like the Himalayas, Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet and the rest of north-eastern India. It has served as an urban centre and a node for the export of tea to Calcutta from where it would reach its consumers. It had become famous almost two hundred years ago when the British authorities in India tired of the tropical heat of the then Capital, Calcutta (now Kolkata) had established it as the summer capital of colonial administration in India. This was only one reason for the popularity of this region in the Indian as well as world imagination. The other most important reason was the touted 'discovery' of the possibility of producing 'tea' in India.

Tea consumption in Britain had become widespread in the 1800s, and the British had to depend upon the Far East, especially on China and Japan for its import (Chatterjee 2001; Rappaport 2017). Since the latter were not colonies of the Empire, the possibility of 'home grown' tea in Darjeeling under the British protectorate was a reason to rejoice for the British. The celebration of Darjeeling was thus natural. It is this heightened celebration that is part of creating nostalgia in the present for the bygone era of the Raj where comforts were provided by the Gorkhas.

In Darjeeling claims to an organic past in tea production necessitates celebration of British ways, British aesthetics. Plantation owners in the process of converting their conventional holdings into organic frequently



recount that when the British began production of tea, there were no artificial fertilizers used. The organic certification of tea is apparently enabling a more authentic return to the past. In my interviews with tea tourism ventures, I have heard connections being made to healthy tea production and the setting up of sanitoriums for wounded/sick British soldiers and bureaucrats. Interestingly this narrative strategy falls in line with tropes about an escape to the hills in Indian films (especially Bengali popular as well as Indie/art films like Satyajit Ray's 'Kanchenjunga'). Darjeeling and other hill stations thus remain very popular with middle-class Indian tourists also escaping the summer heat of the metropolis. The turn to organic production in Darjeeling's plantation dominated tea industry thus finds a new conjuncture to sell purity and escape to a bygone era in its sustainable twenty-first century avatar.

In a post-colonial setting, marketing that heritage as national is a survival strategy for the small hill town of Darjeeling in the north-eastern India. Darjeeling has been suffering from setbacks in exports of tea because of international competition and most recently the hundred- and four-days' strike in 2017 when the recent round of Gorkhaland agitation had intensified. Plantation owners and local governing bodies in this 'post-colonial' town are constantly looking for ways to diversify their earnings. Such diversification is necessary because organic tea production is a labour intensive process compared to chemical-induced tea production methods. Another reason for the diversification is the new Fair Trade mandate with which exporting plantations have to be compliant with.

The latter has resulted in innovative cultural thinking. Authorities are increasingly using 'cultural' tools to boost the dwindling economy. On the one hand we see the growth of organic tea production in the plantations and also converting the plantations into resort-style tourist accommodations so that one could experience the 'restoring' of these lucrative 'heritage' sites. But what and whose heritage are they preserving? Needless to say, the heritage is that of colonial occupation and its related cultural/social practices. Most of the plantation accommodations are bungalows built almost a century back, which earlier used to be occupied by the European settlers. The process through which the heritage restoration is underway is the export-oriented organic tea revolution which will fetch more revenue to restore these authentic sites. As it comes across from the various kinds of literature, organic tea is popularised as the 'authentic' Darjeeling tea, which was produced without chemicals by the



British. This 'authenticity' or the 'original' tea was destroyed in the post-independence nation-building period due to export pressures and application of chemical-intensive green revolution technology. On the other hand, preserving the colonial heritage Darjeeling town in conjunction with plantation properties was the way to sustainability, and it has been successful to some extent since the "toy train" has been able to get a label from UNESCO. The latter declared the 'narrow-gauge' toy train as World Heritage Site status together with some 200-years' old plantations. It is the second railway system in the world to get the 'heritage' status after the Zimmerin Railway in the gorgeous Austrian Alps. DHR now rubs shoulders with VIP sites around the world such as the Grand Canyon and the Niagara Falls (*Outlook Traveler*, March 2001). One has to remember that the narrow-gauge train was built to facilitate quick movement of tea to Jalpaiguri, and subsequently to Calcutta. Thus, all elements of production are now part of the heritage celebration.

Tea plantations are usually breathtaking (at least in popular discourse), especially if they are located in the middle of a tropical country full of tall broad-leafed evergreen varieties like in Darjeeling's adjoining areas. The sub-Himalayan region where most of these plantations are, have a much cooler temperature, and more rainfall. The monoculture of tea production accentuates the beauty of the surrounding region which diverts attention from the fact that the acidic residue that tea plants leave on the soil have resulted in the loss of other vegetation resulting in landslides common in this area. The tea plants are pruned to boost production, and the resultant uniformity gives a distinct manicured look that is so emblematic of Darjeeling's identity as a tourist destination. The plantations are usually on hill slopes, and the snowcapped Himalayas in the distance form their backdrop, together with pine trees and orchids rarely found in India. This process of trimming is done to ensure that new leaves come out at the right time and in the right proportion. These tender tips are then plucked by majority Nepali women who have, as I said earlier, migrated to Darjeeling to work in the plantations.

Like Don Mitchell's California landscape, the beauty of the plantations is elusive. The obsession with preserving the almost 200-years-old fragile tea bushes in organic ways ensures continued gendered labour recruitment (the usual nimble finger logic now enabling sustainable tea production). It is these women who cut and maintain the uniformity of tea bushes to ensure the superior quality of tea. The physical appearance of



tea plants and their maintenance enhance the aesthetics of the plantation landscape, and this fact is always highlighted by plantation owners. The post-colonial plantation owners (majority Indians) also lend to the current imagination by underscoring that this peculiar aesthetics was produced by the British. What tea tourism/heritage plantation tourism wants to market to Indian and western consumers is a process of regeneration where restoring organic sustainable tea cultivation accompanies celebrating colonial aesthetics and leisure (as evident from the 2nd quote where there is a discussion of recreating English air). The association between tea and healing, tea and purity are amply evident in the marketing documents of British tea production, tea was a wartime drink, Indian tea was imbued with special properties to re-energise ailing soldiers who were fighting the allied forces as part of the 'British army' (Erika Rappaport 2017).

In their continued efforts to create a seamless connection between colonial heritage and authentic organic tea, what is left unaddressed are issues like wage stagnation, dwindling working conditions, suicide by workers, starvation, and soil pollution. As stated before, my interviews with owners and workers also reveal that the colonial period was also marked by superior 'organic' production techniques. The current motivation for harkening back to the golden days of the Raj when Darjeeling was not just a broken piece of dear England but produced the most wholesome cup.

The greenery that the plantations produced made tea production a wilderness manufacturing machine.⁷ The incidence of beauty with productive possibilities could not have found a better combination. It is this property of the plant which now helps in the flexible accumulation by combining spaces of production and spaces of leisure. It also helps preserve the wilderness in Darjeeling's identity, in spite of the fact that Darjeeling is hugely populated and Darjeeling town from where most of the tea is exported is urban.

Though the spatial history of parks and safaris reveal particular spatial formations of colonial imagination, I would argue that such exclusions between spaces of production and spaces of leisure are becoming less significant in corporate environmental imagination when it comes to 'packaging regeneration' at particular sites. In some cases, the aesthetic logic based on a particular form of placemaking facilitates the introduction



of new economic forces in tune with the global 'flows'. In my case study, the aesthetic logic of producing eco-friendly chemical-free tea and sanitised sustainable landscapes invigorate a particular production logic of 'organic tea' and related ecotourism practices. The rediscovery of tea plantations and its related production apparatus as simultaneously national as well as a localised global heritage is another instance of the aesthetic and cultural logic strengthening the process of economic regeneration. Though 'preservation' and restoration still are bulwarks of corporate and in many cases state environmental management, 'regeneration' also becomes a key concept to mobilize resources for transnational placemaking.

As pointed out earlier, in Darjeeling production of organic tea is interpreted and advertised as a regenerative process which makes the area suitable for ecotourism. Organic tea production is not only good for the 'development' of the town and its adjoining spaces but helps 'preserve' the colonial aesthetic. In colonial thinking, Darjeeling and its adjoining areas were not only close to the port city of Calcutta but also as I noted earlier had the scenic attraction which was accentuated by the having lush green tea plantations. This aesthetic depiction concealed a process of extraction. Tea growing thus has a dual aesthetic logic which fit in well with the beauty and serenity in this tropical country. The dual aesthetics were (a) the possibility of having a source of perennial supply of this exotic drink, (b) the consumption of the landscape. Placemaking was thus a colonial enterprise, which as I will show in the coming sections becomes the basis of ethnic exceptionalism and used for strategic purposes by Darjeeling's smallholder tea producers.

3. Darjeeling's tea artisans and colonial tropes

Plantations provide the order of reason in Darjeeling, and while globally GI⁸ support regional artisanal producers, in Darjeeling the Geographical Indications (GI) for brand Darjeeling is confined to tea produced in 87 plantations. The arbitrariness and limitations of the GI and its gendered consequences for smallholder tea farming is the subject of my monograph (Sen 2017). In the last few years, the dynamics of small farmer mobilisations to over what can be designated legally as "Brand Darjeeling" has intensified and is reflected in the following statement by legal anthro-



pologists examining how state and transnational institutions implementing GIs marginalise niche commodity producers in:

Rather than see GI regimes as apolitical technical administrative frameworks, we argue that they govern emerging public goods that should be forged to redress extant forms of social inequality and foster the inclusion of marginalized actors in commodity value chains. In many areas of the world, this will entail close attention to the historical specificities of colonial labour relations and their neocolonial legacies, which have entrenched conditions of racialized and gendered dispossession, particularly in plantation economies. (Coombe & Malik 2018: 97)

In this context Darjeeling's youth entrepreneurs in the non-plantation sector are navigating their marginality in the tea industry and as ethnic Gorkha's through imagining their version of the "Brand Darjeeling" to contest limitations of the GI articulated in the mandates of the local state about the legalities of tea production. Their discourse and practices to create a niche within the western market for organic speciality Darjeeling tea draws on the two-hundred-year colonial history of Nepali labour in Darjeeling tea production and aspects of militarized tropes of contemporary Nepali subnational identity to create new dimensions of "Brand Darjeeling". In the process they put into play imaginaries, narratives and practices that ground Darjeeling tea in a seemingly different regime of value that produce what I call a form of 'hybrid indigeneity'.

Despite generational outmigration from Darjeeling, many young men in rural and urban areas still aspire to find something close to home if they can mobilise good networks and have some capital to invest. They discuss the psychological exhaustion of discrimination and constant everyday racism (Bora 2019) they face in the major urban locations they make their home. It is quite common for young Nepali men who are in the army or any other moderately lucrative career to invest in a piece of land back home which for them is a place of belonging for their weary souls. Urban youth in Darjeeling often use the word "Darjeelingey" to demonstrate pride of hailing from Darjeeling. This perhaps gives young men a sense of subjective collective agency in a national cultural climate marks them in pejorative ways. This form of belonging is articulated in discourses and practices around the authenticity of non-plantation Darjeeling tea. These emerging cultural productions of region and location-specific hybrid indigeneity has now become part of sustainability discourse.



Therefore, in this section of the article, I analyse how upwardly mobile Nepali men in Darjeeling are questioning the limitations of plantation production by cultural productions of self and community that mobilize militarized colonial identities. To question the colonial structures of plantation, the emergent interruption or subversion comes through this very round-about interesting process where militarised identities are mobilised to establish a non-plantation Gorkha/Gorkhey palette.

Two key questions that guided this aspect of my enquiry are: How do male tea artisans maintain their edge in the niche tea economy of Darjeeling where colonial-style plantations still dominate tea production? How do they disrupt the familiar plantation aesthetic of Darjeeling as a place that enables the production of a distinct tea taste influencing ideas about authenticity as it pertains to Darjeeling tea?

My contention is that they do so by strategic cultural engagements of suturing aspects of Darjeeling's colonial past and present-day sustainability practices by situated placemaking. This involves drawing on the long struggles and ethnic locations of Darjeeling Nepalis (known to most in India and the West as the Gurkhas or Gorkhas) to make claims about indigeneity. The generic label Gorkha developed during the time of British occupation has cache in contemporary imaginings of Darjeeling in places where a large quantity of speciality Darjeeling tea is marketed, namely England, Australia and Europe. The mighty *khukri*/knife yielding Gurkhas were celebrated as the loyal hard-working servants of the British empire as opposed to Darjeeling's original inhabitants like Lepchas (Pradhan 2017: 73). This image is still held in contemporary representations of Gorkhas (see Editors 2017). Using archival evidence, Pradhan also details practices of ethnic sorting of Nepalis from Lepchas and also plains people:

Their dexterity and resourcefulness was expressed in the various ways in which they used their *khukri*: "slim, genteel, smiling, nimble Nepaulese [...] armed with their universal *kukri*, or short knife, stuck in their girdles, with which they do most of their wonderful things, and which is at one and the same time, a pen knife, a carver, an axe, a tooth-pick, a hatchet, a spoon, a knife and fork, all in one as well as a weapon of defense should occasion require". (Avery 1878: 16)



Pradhan further writes that this kind of trait-based evaluation of labouring capacity, dexterity and skill led to classifying systems,

a visible hierarchy was discernable in the colonial discourse on Darjeeling. The Nepalese emerged as the largest and the most important component of the indigenous community in Darjeeling due to the policy of deliberate encouragement by the colonial state [...] the Nepalese were placed on the highest rung on the labour pool, the Lepchas were placed at the bottom of the scale. The rest of the 'polyglot' population of Darjeeling was placed in between. (Pradhan 2017: 77)

Contemporary labour and resource politics in Darjeeling is fought along these classificatory schemes. In Darjeeling today, Nepali youth articulate their subnational identities through very similar tropes of hard physical labour, dexterity and their unwavering loyalty to the Indian state as protectors of the nation's security through generational military service. Amidst their general marginalisation in mainstream Indian nationalist discourse as outsiders (alluding to the fact that they belong to Nepal) these essentialisms provide necessary psychological anchoring and a sense of cross-class shared experience as Gorkhas (see also Sen 2012; Subba 2018; Chettri 2018b).

The effect of such discourse of ethnic distinction and ethnic exceptionalism is evident in men's narratives around tea production and entrepreneurship. Ethnic exceptionalism by the promotion of pan-Gorkha militarised identity enables a particular claim to authenticity and hybrid indigeneity emboldening the now hundred-year struggle of Darjeeling Nepalis to secure their state within the Indian nation (Sen 2017). Ethnic exceptionalism is part of contemporary Gorkha men's search for respect as evident in this twitter post by a local news outfit reporting on the yearly ritual of military recruitment that takes place in the autumn in Darjeeling.



Figure 1



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Source: *Darjeeling Chronicle*, 15 October 2019.⁹

The search for respect by proving their loyalty to the nation (India) stems from Indian Nepalis being labelled as outsiders who should go back to Nepal (Sen 2012, 2017). Along with these, they have to psychologically cope with stereotypes like that of violent rowdy Darjeeling youth (Chettri 2018a) and a real everyday concern for Nepali men. To cope with marginality middle to lower-middle-class Nepali men often engage in the cultural play of donning military-themed gear showing their pride for military work and the contribution of Nepali men to India. Amidst high substance abuse rates among men, mental health crisis, successive failed movements of autonomy within the Indian nation and the growing unemployment that plagues the future of men from this district, display of Darjeeling pride routed through the Darjeeling Brand of small farmer tea takes distinct forms.



One of the most culturally and economically significant aspects of this display of Gorkha pride recurred during my conversations with male interlocutors in plantations and non-plantation tea production areas. In my ethnographic research in Darjeeling since 2004, a recurring theme in discussions around the inequities in the tea industry has focused on discussions around how Darjeeling Nepalis or Gorkhas/Gurkhas have been deprived from appreciating the taste of Darjeeling tea. There is a financial reason for such deprivation since Darjeeling tea is a high-value tea item, and although it is only a fraction of India's total tea exports, it is significant for revenues. I now present narratives of two male smallholder farmers/ entrepreneurs, who are emerging leaders of the small-holder movement despite their varying privilege and positionalities.

Tamang and I met in 2004 when he worked in a Darjeeling NGO working and also as a certified 'organic inspector'. Born and brought up in urban Darjeeling, Tamang developed close ties with non-plantation tea producers in Darjeeling's first oldest organic and Fair Trade certified cooperative "Sanjukta Vikas Sanstha" whose tea in the Western alternative tea market is known by the name of Mineral Springs Organic tea. A few years ago, Tamang opened an ecotourism business called Tathagata Farms approximately twenty kilometres from Darjeeling town. In the land that he used for this ecotourism business, there were wild tea bushes. Tamang nurtured them and with his small group of employees from the adjoining villages started harvesting organic tea which he calls Darjeeling yellow. He regularly hosts tea tastings with his foreign and domestic clients visiting his beautiful farm. His Tathagata Farm has been rated by the global tourism-related website Tripadvisor as one of the best eco-friendly homestays in Asia. Tamang, to this day, continues harvesting yellow tea and experimenting with ways to process and market them locally and beyond.

In a recent conversation with Tamang about the future of Darjeeling's smallholder tea producers he made the following comment to me: 'Deb, we need to develop a Gorkha palette, we Darjeeling people need to let the world know that we are capable of understating our teas, processing them and educating the world about it.' This comment was powerful and resonates with so many other remarks made by plantation workers who are much less privileged than him. Tamang voices a desire for distinction, value and respect that Nepali men struggle for daily. They may toil hard at home, in the Indian Army and in India's big cities, but they remain



victims of cultural racism directed at India's 'mongoloid races' (Bora 2019: 854, 859). Due to such racial dynamics, the 'idiom of cultural exclusivity' (Chhetri 2018b: 156) shapes mobilisations of Indian Nepali's for subnational autonomy and recognition by articulating a language of ethnic exceptionalism as a subjective coping mechanism but also as a political strategy.

The trace of these claims to ethnic exceptionalism is evident in everyday discourse. A decade ago, a male plantation worker placed in the Manager's office 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. (Sen 2017: 78)

This observation was made with sarcasm amidst the pride that male and female plantation workers display every day about their distinct contributions to the resilience, renown and taste of Darjeeling tea.

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Among Nepali's in India, the invocation of pahadi-ness is pronounced because Nepalis find in this usage an effective way of maintaining their distinctiveness from plains people, whom they perceive as smart and privileged with greater access to resources and lucrative networks for professional success. PahaDi-ness simultaneously expresses marginality and pride/difference. Nepali plantation workers and tea farmers took pride in their pāhāDi identity. Many Nepali people farmers and plantation workers tell me, 'hami pahaDi majale kam garchu' (we pahaDis work with great zest) or 'India lai bachaunu ko lagi pahaDi lai chahincha' (to save India you need a pahaDi, alluding to the presence of Nepalis in the Indian army). Political parties in the hills also used pahaDi-ness strategically to build local party loyalties. Smallholder tea farmers, many of whom are women, use military metaphors to joke about their back-breaking work to harvest organic tea stating 'we are the police of our fields' (Sen 2014, 2017).

The continuity of colonial ethnic classification in Darjeeling that I detail enable Darjeeling's new age tea entrepreneurs to make arguments about indigenising Darjeeling tea by articulating ethnic exceptionalism. This process is a way of recognizing the skill and labour of Indian Nepalis associated with Darjeeling tea. It is important to note here that while



Gorkha pride is widespread among Indian Nepalis, in Darjeeling and its diaspora, it is being strategically deployed to fight the domination of plantations where average Nepali workers have no control over taste and systems of value addition which take place once green tea is harvested. The domination of plantations has been further emboldened by the transnational GI system also supported by the Indian central government's Tea Board. The claims to indigenous expertise by creatively recounting the history of Nepali plantation workers toil, commitment and their ability to contribute to the resilience of the Darjeeling tea industry tea allude to these forms of exclusion that are seen as a facet of generational marginalisation of Indian Nepalis within the Indian nation and specifically the state of West Bengal.

The intertwining to cultural and political struggles of average Nepali men is channelled through the catch-all marker of ethnic exceptionalism—being Gorkha. Here I return to another notable comment by Dr. Tanka Bahadur Subba (2018: 264) who writes in detail about the contemporary predicaments facing the Gorkha community of Darjeeling and its internal tensions. Dr. Subba writes: 'interplays of identity and politics in the hills—Gorkha, tribal, and otherwise' stays and further '[w]hile it is true that about a dozen communities are engaged in rediscovering their tribalness in their bid to be recognized as Scheduled Tribes, one must simultaneously remember that the Gorkha issue has neither been buried nor put on the backburner.' This performing Gorkha through style, comportment and associated cultural practices in Darjeeling is an everyday assertion of that unfulfilled dream of Gorkhaland. It is natural that this kind of deep-seated subnational desire lives on and finds its way into discourses of sustainable Darjeeling tea production that is otherwise critical of colonial forms of tea trade regulation through the legitimacy and dominance of plantations.

The label Gorkha is also a way of articulating Brand Darjeeling especially for its international advocates, consumers and financiers. This is palpable from the recent description of the operations of Niroulas Tea Farm. Mr. Niroula is by far the most ardent and successful advocates of expanding Brand Darjeeling to smallholder tea producers.

Mr. Norman a tea sommelier and expert tea blogger writes:

What makes the Niroula operation so unique is not the fact that it's a smallholder farm or a bought-leaf factory, but rather that it is a locally owned outfit. *Bhawesh is Ghorka* [emphasis added], and



he's producing recognized Darjeeling teas. That's kind of a big deal, and I'll explain why. Trigger warning: politics and history.

The Ghorka inhabitants of the Darjeeling region aren't originally from there. They were brought over by the British from Nepal, over a period of a hundred years or so, to work the newly planted tea fields. Before their arrival, Darjeeling was mainly populated by the indigenous Lepcha—who were too few (and too uninterested) in the labour-intensive process of picking tea. With good reason.

At present, 90% of all the Darjeeling tea estate labour force is predominately Ghorka. Pay is low, working conditions can be grueling. Plus, the tea plantation model hasn't changed much since the British era. Granted, some changes are happening, but not at a rate that can be considered quick or sustainable. Because of the low pay and working conditions issue, political unrest has resulted—including the monumental strike of 2017.

In the interim, Ghorka owned and operated farms have cropped up here and there, some even producing their own teas by hand. However, their teas aren't officially recognized as "Darjeeling" teas because they aren't recognized by the Tea Board of India. That's where Niroula's operation differs. Not only are the teas produced by Niroula's Tea Farm considered Darjeeling teas officially, but it is the first Ghorka-owned operation to be considered so.¹⁰

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I quote at length from Mr. Norman's 2018 blog post to make apparent how the politics of hybrid indigenisation unfolds in the minds of westerners who want to support establishments like that of Niroulas tea farm. These kinds of media representations and blog-based advocacy are critical for the popularity and sale of Darjeeling teas of high quality that are contraband in the eyes of the state and local tea bureaucracy. The demand for Gorkhaland is also recognised as a legitimate power struggle by new socially conscious and creative sustainable tea entrepreneurs in the US who source from Darjeeling. This is evident from the accompanying hashtags #gorkha #warriors.

The image below shows Ms. Elyse Peterson celebrating a successful partnership with another smallholder tea farming initiative in Darjeeling called Yankhi Tea. The owner of Yankhi Tea and Ms. Peterson pose in Yankhi's farm. Elyse Peterson (CEO of Tealet) runs a very successful and socially responsible organic tea wholesale business and tearoom out of Las Vegas, NV. In my long conversations with her I have understood what young entrepreneurs like her seek out when sourcing ethically produced teas from Asia. Entrepreneurs like Ms. Peterson are passionate about



partnering with smallholders, and they are critical of largescale monoculture-based plantation operations. Peterson episodically leads tea tours across Asia's many tea growing regions so that tea traders and entrepreneurs are able to learn more about struggling tea farming communities in which prized organic tea varieties are produced. In fact, other ethically conscious tea entrepreneurs from the US, as evident in their social media posts and personal conversations with me, use hashtags such as #freedomfighters #gorkawarriors to show their respect for marginalised producers.

Figure 2



Source: Picture and associated text, courtesy: Elyse Peterson with permission received on 20 October 2019.

Mr Niroula also relies on similar solidarity-based marketing as evident from high praise showered on him by Mr. Norman. He has emerged as the leader of the smallholder tea farmer initiatives going by his presence in the World Tea Expo, associated awards and owning the first small farmer's tea boutique and café in Darjeeling town. Anuradha Sharma, a journalist covering the Darjeeling hills, writes this about Mr. Niroula in detail stating that,

He was an electronic engineer with U.S. computer maker Dell in Bangalore, came home for good and restarted the business. He even went a step further, setting up a mini factory the first of its kind in the Darjeeling hills, to process the leaves from his 2.8-hectare garden and those of other small growers like him [...] Niroula's Tea



Farm now sells traditional black tea in India and abroad, including the U.S., Canada, France and Germany. Its Niroula's Pride won the gold medal at the 11th International Famous Tea Appraisal held in China in May 2016. Niroula's operation marks the coming of age of the small tea growers movement in the Darjeeling hills, where tea production is concentrated on 87 large estates. (Sharma 2018)

In a recent book about Darjeeling's tea industry Michele Comins, a specialty Darjeeling tea seller in England quotes Mr. Niroula:

Bhawesh :The story starts with my father, Bikram, a retired government employee who started planting tea in 1999 as an alternative crop because all the other conventional farming was not successful due to the local wildlife destroying it [...] My father has always talked about helping the poor small tea growers in Darjeeling, so we started thinking about how to make tea farming in our village a viable way of life again. After a year of research and the confidence of a bank in me, we started Darjeeling's first farming cooperative in 2015 and built our own manufacturing unit to support it. We now collect leaves from neighbouring farmers at a very good price (two to three times the average rate), a model that is encouraging new local plantations. People who may previously have given up on farming and left for more lucrative possibilities in the city are starting to see the opportunities that can come from cultivating tea [...] ¹¹

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Mr. Niroula's description of his operations have some interesting slippages since his comment about encouraging 'new local plantations' was perplexing to me. But what explains it probably is that apart from farming, processing and marketing his farm's tea he helps one hundred and eighty small growers from the adjoining areas process their tea in his small factory. Additionally, he conducts regular training programs for the smallholder tea farmers he supports and gives them a greater price for unprocessed tea which he sources from them and processes in his unit. He states in a self-made promotion video:

Success for Niroulas Tea Farm means a *better life to my community in Poobong and in Darjeeling and the sense of [a] pride to deliver the Darjeeling tea as it is meant to be delivered [...]* as employment is a big issue in Darjeeling so ninety percent of the youth go out of Darjeeling in search of work and now since I came back and now I am I am happy enough I have been able to contribute a little to the society in which I am giving opportunity for them to work. (Bhavesh Niroula, 19 October 2017, emphasis added)



Mr. Niroula describes his work as a way of community building where he fights for the recognition of marginalised indigenous smallholder tea growers' ensuring international recognition which they have been deprived from for the last two hundred years (Niroula 2018). This is the key ask of leaders in the small farmer mobilisations of Darjeeling in search for economic viability as well as a search for respect as Nepali men who are otherwise mistreated, racially stereotyped in the rest of India which I have described earlier in this article.

Like Mr. Tamang, who discussed the Gorkha palette, Mr. Niroula displays Gorkha pride in small farmer grown tea businesses as a way out of the employment impasse for Darjeeling's young men. In addition to direct advocacy, Mr. Niroula's tea room in Darjeeling is called *Camelia Sinesis* (a deliberate play on the botanical name for a tea plant *Camelia Sinensis*). He has described this as a deliberate error as a form of claim-making on the Darjeeling brand.

Understandably Mr. Niroula literally wears Gorkha pride on his sleeve. As evident from his social media posts, Mr. Niroula is often dressed in a jacket resembling the green printed military gear of the Indian army flanked by his co-conspirators and employees in his store. He embodies a picture of Gorkha male pride. The search for respect is a real everyday concern for Nepali men from all walks of life, and its expression takes material form in donning military-themed gear. Amidst high substance abuse rates among men, successive failed movements of autonomy within the Indian nation and the growing unemployment that plagues the future of men from this area, display of embodied Darjeeling pride routed through the Darjeeling Brand of small farmer tea takes distinct forms. But there is also increasing focus on indigenising taste referenced in Niroula's comment about making Darjeeling tea as it is meant to be.

Many small tea growers, a majority belonging to the other tea cooperative consisting of more than 430 members, have been denied claims to 'Brand Darjeeling;' to this date these small farmers depend on certain plantations for processing and marketing of their tea (Sen 2017). New contractual arrangements also regulate these smallholder farmer cooperatives' access to dividends from the transnational sustainability initiatives (routed through the Fair Trade movement).

In this environment of intense dependency of Darjeeling's average non-plantation grown (near contraband) smallholder tea producers, Mr.



Niroula is hailed by local journalists as a freedom fighter. They describe him as the first Nepali-speaking Gurkha in an industry dominated by 'outsiders' such as British, Marwaris, Bengalis (as evident from the excerpt from Mr. Norman). His brand of dissident tea production and trade in an industry where large tea conglomerates in Kolkata have the hegemonic material grip is seen as revolutionary. Champions of alternative Darjeeling tea trade celebrate him stating 'Niroula will be the real, real hero, the inspiration for next-gen self-respecting entrepreneurs of Darjeeling.'

Mr. Niroula's legal activism to question the boundedness of the Geographical Indications for Darjeeling tea along with his cultural production of Gorkhanness seems to complicate the idea of 'ethnocommodity' as proposed by John and Jean Comaroff (2009: 20). For the Comaroff's 'ethnocommodity' provides a conceptual tool to understand how culture itself is used to locate products in distinct cultural places to enhance the brand identity of commodities in a market based transnational economy. In case of Darjeeling's small farmers, counter-branding of Darjeeling tea through cultural tools could be seen as a way of building resilience in a neoliberal market. But what these new cultural productions around Darjeeling tea make evident is unmitigated ethnic marginality finding new ways to express itself.

4. Conclusion

Throughout this article, I have shown how the economic viability of Darjeeling's organic and Fair-Trade certified plantations and the future of its smallholder tea farmers is shaped by mobilisation of colonial aesthetics and associated forms of classification of place and people. These social aspects of contemporary sustainability practice are missing in most engagements with transnational sustainability initiatives. My discussions in this article is an attempt to ethnographically illuminate how agency and success of organic tea producers from certain regions of the world rely on cultural productions dependent on colonial imaginaries.

Endnotes

¹ I am grateful to Dr. Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt (Australian National University) and Dr. Haripriya Rangan (University of Melbourne) for their fruitful engagements with drafts of this article. I would like to



express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Queeny Singh for her feedback and support for this piece. Thanks also to Prof. Dr. Michael Mann at Humboldt University (Germany) for his support. I thank Elyse Petersen of Tealet for sharing her own images with me. I take responsibility of any errors in this article.

² Times Travel Editor. *Things to do in Darjeeling*, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/travel/things-to-do/Glenburn-Tea-Estate/ps35786112.cms> [retrieved 10.17.19].

³ Based on a careful review of archival material Queeny Singh lays bare the colonial discourse and rationale behind the propagation of a particular colonial aesthetic and related depictions of people and place as it pertains to British era 'hill stations'. It is important to note that she underscores the hegemonic tussle between the colonial production of people, places and aesthetic and the challenges to them as well. Singh also lays out points of ambiguity and fractures in these overarching tropes. In this article I have tried to show how traces of these powerful tropes make an appearance in the tea tourism sector which is trying to re-invent itself in a new age sustainable avatar.

⁴ The middle class in India has been growing due to liberalization and the expansion of private sector jobs and small businesses. This has led to growing consumption due to monetization. One arena where the spending is diverted is tourism. Specially resort style leisure activities. The latter for a long time was out of reach for middle class Indians, but now local resort owners are opening their doors to local tourists with adequate spending power since the international market fluctuates all the time.

⁵ One of the ways in which the tradition/modernity game is manipulated by the media and corporation and sometimes by state in India is through creating symbolic manipulations of signifiers of development. One of the peculiarities of the post-colonial condition is the fetish of western leisure activities (largely translated through diverse consumption practices in the west). This becomes a destiny for many Indians. Here is a glimpse of the famous family run Windermere Resort which prides itself on providing Victorian charm and style, <https://www.outlookindia.com/outlooktraveller/stay/story/32039/the-windamere-hotel-a-heritage-hotel-in-darjeeling>

⁶ Here is a glimpse of the famous family run Windamere Resort which prides itself on providing Victorian charm and style, <https://www.outlookindia.com/outlooktraveller/stay/story/32039/the-windamere-hotel-a-heritage-hotel-in-darjeeling> [retrieved 11.11.19].

⁷ The wilderness is used here to draw attention to the fact that plantations and tea bushes actually confirmed and helped produce a people less, pristine landscape (see also McGregor 2003).

⁸ 'The 1994 Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Agreement (TRIPS Agreement) established GIs as a distinctive category of intellectual property. Indications of source, appellations of origin, denominations of origin, and collective trademarks and certification marks are herein collectively denoted as marks indicating conditions of origin. European Union has promoted their extension across the Global South as a rural development strategy that, not incidentally, supports European interests in global trade. Asian countries have seen in GIs a means to protect artisanal knowledge, viewing human factors such as producer know-how, skills, and practices as linked to a particular territory and its means of production' (Coombe & Malik 2017: 96-9). GIs in Darjeeling disenfranchise organic smallholder organic tea producers. Coombe and Malik use data from my monograph (Sen 2017) to make this criticism.

⁹ <https://twitter.com/TheDarjChron/status/1183978377079742464> [retrieved on 11.7.19].

¹⁰ Geoffrey Norman. 2018. The smoked Darjeelings of Niroula's tea farm,



<https://lazyliteratus.teatra.de/niroula/> [retrieved 10.11.19].

¹¹ Excerpt from Comins Michelle (Comins Tea). 2018. First flush Darjeeling tea: Niroula's Tea Cooperative, <https://cominstea.com/products/first-flush-darjeeling-tea-2018-niroulas-tea-cooperative> [retrieved 11.11.2019].

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