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Debarati Sen
Rutgers University

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DEBARATI SEN

FAIR TRADE ORGANIC TEA PRODUCTION AND WOMEN'S POLITICAL FUTURES IN DARJEELING, INDIA

BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Based on research conducted in Darjeeling, India, between August 2006 and August 2007, this dissertation project sought to explore a paradox in Fair Trade-organic tea production: why, in spite of producing the same commodity -- Fair Trade organic tea -- do women tea farmers (independent farmers growing organic tea in their own land) tend to be more politically active than women plantation workers (wage laborers)? This comparative ethnography analyzes the circumstances under which two groups of women in the tea industry in Darjeeling can exercise their autonomy and improve their livelihoods by engaging with the transnational Fair Trade movement. Based on intensive ethnographic fieldwork in two distinct communities (women tea farmers and women plantation workers), the research concludes that institutional structures of collective bargaining, existing gender ideologies of work and varying histories of political involvement in previous movements among women determine where they will be more successful in deriving benefits from the Fair Trade movement (like using Fair Trade premium money for their own business ventures, and utilizing Fair Trade certifier directives to become more active in collective bargaining institutions). This 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. In contrast, women plantation workers, many of whom were politically active in previous nationalist and labor movements, are relatively incapable of mobilizing the Fair Trade movement to their own benefit.

Three primary questions guided my comparative ethnography: (1) How do institutional structures of collective bargaining affect the way women use the material and symbolic resources of the Fair Trade-organic Movement among the two groups; how many and what positions do women occupy in collective bargaining procedures? (2) How do gender ideologies of work and household relations at the two sites affect resource sharing within households and women's political presence within communities? How do these dynamics then

impact women's engagement with Fair Trade? (3) How do women in the two groups connect to the Fair Trade movement and locate themselves within it? Is there increased political consciousness among women tea farmers compared to women plantation workers about their place in the wider Fair Trade movement?

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Collective Bargaining and Women's Engagement with Fair Trade

My research reveals that plantations and cooperatives in Darjeeling have significantly different institutional structures, which in turn impact strategies and patterns women use to negotiate hierarchy and male domination within these institutions and the overall benefits they derive from Fair Trade.

Women Plantation Workers: In the plantation, the strict bureaucratic hierarchy, top-down obedience structure, and corrupt labor union practices limit the ability of the women workers to bargain for Fair Trade benefits from the plantation administration. Thus women in the plantation neither have a say in the ways in which the Fair-Trade premium (that the plantation receives each year) should be used nor do they have any clear idea of what Fair Trade entails (its history and benefits). Most women from the plantation described the plantation as *zamindari* or feudal domain and asserted that their grievances mostly remained unheard. Plantations that are certified Fair Trade usually have a "joint body," which is supposed to decide how the Fair Trade premium money will 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 fifty percent of the members of the "joint body" at the plantation were women, they hardly ever participated actively in these meetings. While the plantation website and publicity material advertised that women make all "joint body"

decisions the reality was very different. Such an oppressive milieu has given rise to covert practices of economic reciprocity called *ghumauri/ghurni* among women plantation workers. *Ghumauri* is an informal savings group run by women plantation workers. It provides a space for women to discuss their daily economic and social problems. Activities of a *Ghumauri* group are strictly confined to group members and information about the groups activities are protected from the gaze of the management.

Women Tea Farmers: In the small tea farmers' cooperative the nature of women's participation is very different from that of women workers on the plantation. Tea farmers from ten settlements (called 'units' by the NGO working there), living in adjacent areas on a hill slope, have come together to form this 450 member tea farmers cooperative. Male and female representatives are elected through unit wide public meetings. Cooperative elections are held every year and candidates (whether male or female) have to stand up to the test of leadership skills. The more non-hierarchical, democratic structure of the cooperative provides more space for discussion and dissent among its male and female members in the decision-making process. Cooperative meetings are therefore important arenas where gender hierarchies are questioned by women tea farmers through open debates. While the men outnumber women in the governing body of the cooperative, members of the women's group are always present in meetings. The women's group has a separate meeting on the 8th day of every month. Women cooperative members feel that the women's group should receive a separate share of the Fair Trade premium money. In addition to open debates and discussions, women sometimes write in the quarterly journal of the cooperative about their economic anxieties over how they can better use the Fair Trade premium.

Gender Ideologies of Work, Household Relations and Fair Trade

While women plantation workers and women tea farmers are held accountable to similar gendered norms of obedience within their communities, there is more acceptance of plantation workers spending time at "work"; women tea farmers' efforts to occupy public space and capital for starting their own business results, for now, in more household and community level gender conflicts.

Women Plantation Workers: There are both positive (like "deft tea workers", "expert pluckers") and negative (like "promiscuous" and "prone to alcoholism") representations of women plantation workers in Darjeeling. These images, which were popularized during colonial times to legitimize strict field and shop floor disciplining of women's bodies, continue even now. In the realm of household relations, however, there is a greater acceptance of "seeing" women in the public space of the factory, the sorting room and the field. Even when women workers are called for "joint body" or union meetings and interviews with Fair Trade certifiers, it is

acknowledged as part of their regular work routine. *Ghumauri* meetings among women are usually held during lunch break. Acceptance of gendered patterns of work results in fewer household and community level conflicts within plantations. The advent of Fair Trade does not alter this dynamic.

Women Tea Farmers: On the other hand, women tea farmers engaged in household tea production are seen as dutiful tradition-bound wives. By farming at home, women give their husbands and in-laws the impression that they are doing "household work" and not "going to work." Ironically, women tea farmers and plantation workers are engaged in the same task of growing and harvesting tea, but the ideologies associated with their work are significantly varied. Women tea farmers face problems because of their active participation in the Fair Trade activities of the cooperative if they spend much time outside the home. Women tea farmers within the cooperative feel very conscious about doing business since business is considered a male activity. The increased consciousness among women tea farmers about their activities with the cooperative and their identity has an effect on debates between men and women within the household. Women tea farmers often have to hold community meetings in their own villages to make sure people sell their products to them instead of middlemen from within and outside the cooperative. While women tea farmers are active in Fair Trade related activities of the cooperative, in the realm of the household they face greater challenges than women plantation workers.

Women's Political Consciousness and Fair Trade

Despite more intense community and household conflicts, women tea farmers have greater political consciousness and connect more with the goals and resources of the Fair Trade movement compared to women plantation workers.

Women Plantation Workers: Women plantation workers have very little knowledge about the Fair Trade movement because they are not formally informed about Fair Trade. They are also disillusioned about the plantation labor union, which according to them, has become partial towards management demands and party politics. Interestingly, the interviews reveal that many women plantation workers were active union members about twenty years ago when the Communist party dominated union activities and later women joined the GNLFF (Gorkha National Liberation Front) to participate in the Gorkha agitation for a separate state. In the present scenario, women plantation workers complain that union leaders devote their energy to party politics, paying no attention to workers' everyday struggles and the management does not involve them in the "joint body." Women told me that they miss the days when the union gave them a sense of community.

Women Tea Farmers: In order to attract an international audience, the Fair Trade organic tea produced in Darjeeling is marketed internationally as a commodity that supports a progressive movement. NGOs and plantations use gendered representations of women (like "deft pluckers" popularized

in colonial times) to attract support for Fair Trade. These representations have made women tea farmers very conscious about their place within the larger Fair Trade movement (mostly controlled by men). Hence women tea-farmers, skeptical about their stereotypical representations, strategically use interview responses and media to tell their stories. This level of consciousness is absent among women plantation workers, where Fair Trade is business as usual. It is important to note that women tea farmers unlike plantation workers have no history of prior activism in labor unions.

CONCLUSION

These findings compel us to think more broadly about the effects of globalization and alternative agriculture and its

impact on women in the global south. Fair Trade has created new structures of entitlement for women tea farmers in co-operatives and has thereby spurred the desire among women to be more active in the male and public domain of trade and entrepreneurship. In the plantations, marked by old colonial patterns of labor domination and greater acceptance of women's physical presence in public spaces women's awareness of Fair Trade and activism is minimal.

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Debarati Sen is completing a doctorate in anthropology at Rutgers University.

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