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*Review of Darjeeling Distinction: Labor and Justice of Fair-Trade Tea Plantations in India* by Sarah Besky.

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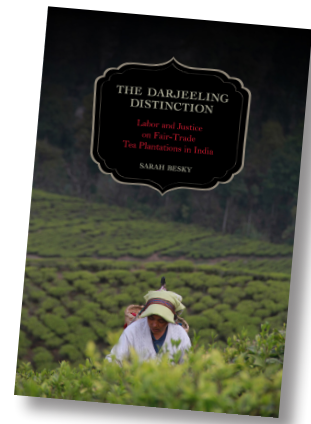
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***Darjeeling Distinction: Labor and Justice of Fair-Trade Tea Plantations in India.***

**Sarah Besky.** Berkeley: University of California Press. 264 pages. ISBN 9780520277397.

**Reviewed by Debarati Sen**

One way of enquiring about our global everyday is to examine goods around us in their cultural, geographic, and political economic contexts. Such an approach has produced wonderful studies of sugar, coffee, banana, French beans, and more agricultural commodities. Tea—its production, consumption, and marketing—despite its colonial lineage, has never been studied with equivalent critical gusto as compared to coffee, except for Piya Chatterjee’s *Time for Tea: Women, Labor, and Postcolonial Politics on an Indian Plantation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001) and Debarati Sen’s *Everyday Sustainability: Gender Justice and Fair Trade Tea in Darjeeling* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2017).

Perhaps tea’s relatively low prominence in the United States (except for southern states) compared to the greater consumption and critical scrutiny of the products mentioned above may be a cause. Tea, until most recently, rarely appeared in the U.S. with a demarcation of the geographical indication of

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*Sen on Darjeeling Distinction: Labor and Justice of Fair-Trade Tea Plantations in India.*

its sourcing. Lately this tendency has changed. Sarah Besky's book *Darjeeling Distinction* alludes to the recent popularity of tea in the U.S. and its proliferation because of Fair Trade labelling. She rightly points out the clever marketing strategies of tea's new avatar that specifies the geographical and organic sourcing of tea. In doing so, Besky also brings within a singular analytical frame the colonial and contemporary significance of tea and related practices to probe the legacies of colonialism in contemporary tea production and, at the same time, underscore Fair Trade's reliance on those colonial forms.

Besky's *Darjeeling Distinction* is a historical and ethnographic foray into understanding the intersections of multiple justice initiatives with a focus on Darjeeling's tea plantations. The book is a critique of the plantation form and related modes of producing tea that began with the British colonization of India. Frontiers of the colonial empire, such as the mountainous regions of northeast India, of which Darjeeling is a part, were designed to serve as sites for secure escapades. Spaces within these frontier regions were used to begin tea mono-cropping to compete with China in the then global commodity competitions.

A product embodying various kinds of colonial interests and desires, plantations still dominate tea production in Darjeeling and

Besky tells an interesting tale about its contemporary problematic persistence. The irony, she points out, is that Fair Trade certification and Geographical Indication (GI) labeling evolved in the West to make capitalism and global sourcing of goods ethical and promote small farmers, farmers' cooperatives, and artisanal farming. Instead, Besky finds large Fair Trade certified plantations in Darjeeling employing Nepali women workers. This contradiction drives Besky to question the organizational arrangements and optics that make this bizarre juxtaposition work. She explores how the image of women tea pluckers is used to simulate an image of artisanal production. Rather than rendering labor invisible as in the case of U.S. organic production, Besky notes a hyperreal image of the women worker that is projected to market teas produced in plantations and claim the Fair Trade label.

Such contradictions also raise questions about the justice that undergirds the notion of fair trade. Besky shows that Fair Trade's notions of justice and justice imagined by people who work in the plantations are at cross purposes. The money that the plantations earn by selling green-washed-Fair Trade certified, GI labeled, and organic certified tea is hardly pulled back into the community. A top-down arrangement in the name of a joint-body constituted by management and workers seem to disburse the

funds but, in reality, management tends to dominate the marketing and fund disbursal. Thus, for Besky, Fair Trade is reduced to a simple rhetoric which sells dreams of an alternative capitalism and trade but actually strengthens the plantation form.

Besky demonstrates how the plantation form has evolved over the years to prioritize productivity over labor and nature. She frames the production relationships in the plantation in terms of what she designates as a "tripartite moral economy" (p. 32, 85) drawing on James Scott's ideas. The plantation workers care for the trees and bushes alongside the management who have a deep relationship with the "gardens" (read: plantations) they manage. The informal understanding between workers and management complete the third axis of the tripartite relation. Besky tries to complicate our understanding of the idea of moral economy by presenting aspects of tension and contradiction within its layers. According to her, the plantation management's discourses of care drown out neglect of garden laborers. The management often does not care for the trees or the old tea bushes. The plantation workers, on the other hand, are more caring of the trees and bushes, tending them and maintaining them with sensitivity. Besky's key point in all of this is to underscore how plantation workers note a distinct decline in management styles between the

contemporary and colonial styles of plantation governance reflected in her discussions around “*facility-haru*” (p. 36).

Finally, Besky locates the plantation economy and the general marginality of Darjeeling and its people in the wider political demands of and from the region for securing a constituent state within India. Subnationalism, Besky notes, does not also question the plantation form and thereby remains inattentive to questions of economic justice and injustice that haunt the lives of ordinary Nepali plantation workers. The conundrum that emerges from Besky’s book is that the plantation form refuses to go away. At this point, one is pushed to probe further why or how this plantation form persists in a post-colonial and neoliberal context.

Besky immerses herself in the rhythms of Darjeeling plantation life and the lives of workers to explore their world and see the workings of Fair Trade from their perspective.

*Darjeeling Distinction* is a great introduction for undergraduates from North America who are gradually being initiated to tea drinking—Fair Trade style!

*Dr. Debarati Sen is the author of* *Everyday Sustainability: Gender Justice and Fair Trade Tea in Darjeeling, which won the Gloria E. Anzaldúa Book Prize from the National Women’s Studies Association and the Global Development Studies Book Award from the International Studies Association. She is a cultural anthropologist who has worked on gender, sustainable development, and ethnic subnationalism in Darjeeling, India for the past fifteen years.*