

# The Darjeeling Distinction

*Labor and Justice on  
Fair-Trade Tea Plantations in India*

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Sarah Besky



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# The Darjeeling Distinction

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*For the tea workers of Darjeeling*

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## NOTES ON ORTHOGRAPHY AND USAGE

English, Tibetan, Hindi, and Bengali words are folded in to the Darjeeling dialect of Nepali; it is distinctly different from the Nepali spoken in Nepal. All translations and transliterations of Nepali in the text follow Ralph Lilley Turner's (1999 [1931]) *Comparative Entomological Dictionary of the Nepali Language*. For words that do not appear in the Turner dictionary, I consulted Ruth Laila Schmidt's *Practical Dictionary of Modern Nepali* (1993), as well as Mahendra Caturvedi and B. N. Tiwari's *Practical Hindi-English Dictionary* (1970), for spelling guidance. In the case of words that do not appear in any of these dictionaries (as many Darjeeling words do not), I have transliterated them to best reflect the pronunciation.

In my transliterations of Nepali and other South Asian languages, I have striven for readability over technical precision. In cases where Nepali words are commonly used in English (e.g., bazaar, Nepali, coolie), they are not italicized or rendered with diacritics. Place names, organizations, and personal names are also not rendered in italics or with diacritics. English words used in Nepali appear in italics and are phonetically written out (e.g. *industri* for "industry"). Similarly, *Chowrasta* and *Chowk Bazaar* are used in their popular spellings (substituting *chau* with *chow*). The word *Nepali* is used to describe both people and language. *Calcutta* is used for the colonial city, while *Kolkata* is used for the contemporary city, in congruence with the city's official renaming in 2001. Other words translated and transliterated from Tibetan, Hindi, or Bengali are noted in the text.

A quick guide to commonly used letters with diacritical marks: The letter *ā* is pronounced like the vowel sound in *cat*. The letter *ī* is pronounced like the vowel sound in *tea*. And the letter *ū* is pronounced like the vowel sound in *food*. For ease of pronunciation, the letter *ś* is rendered as *sh*. Instead of *c* and *ch*, I use *ch* and *chh* to better reflect pronunciation. Vowels with a tilde (e.g., *ã*) indicate nasalization.

Plurals of Nepali words have an unitalicized *s* at the end of them. A select few words I wish to emphasize have the Nepali plural marker and postposition *-han* at the end of them.

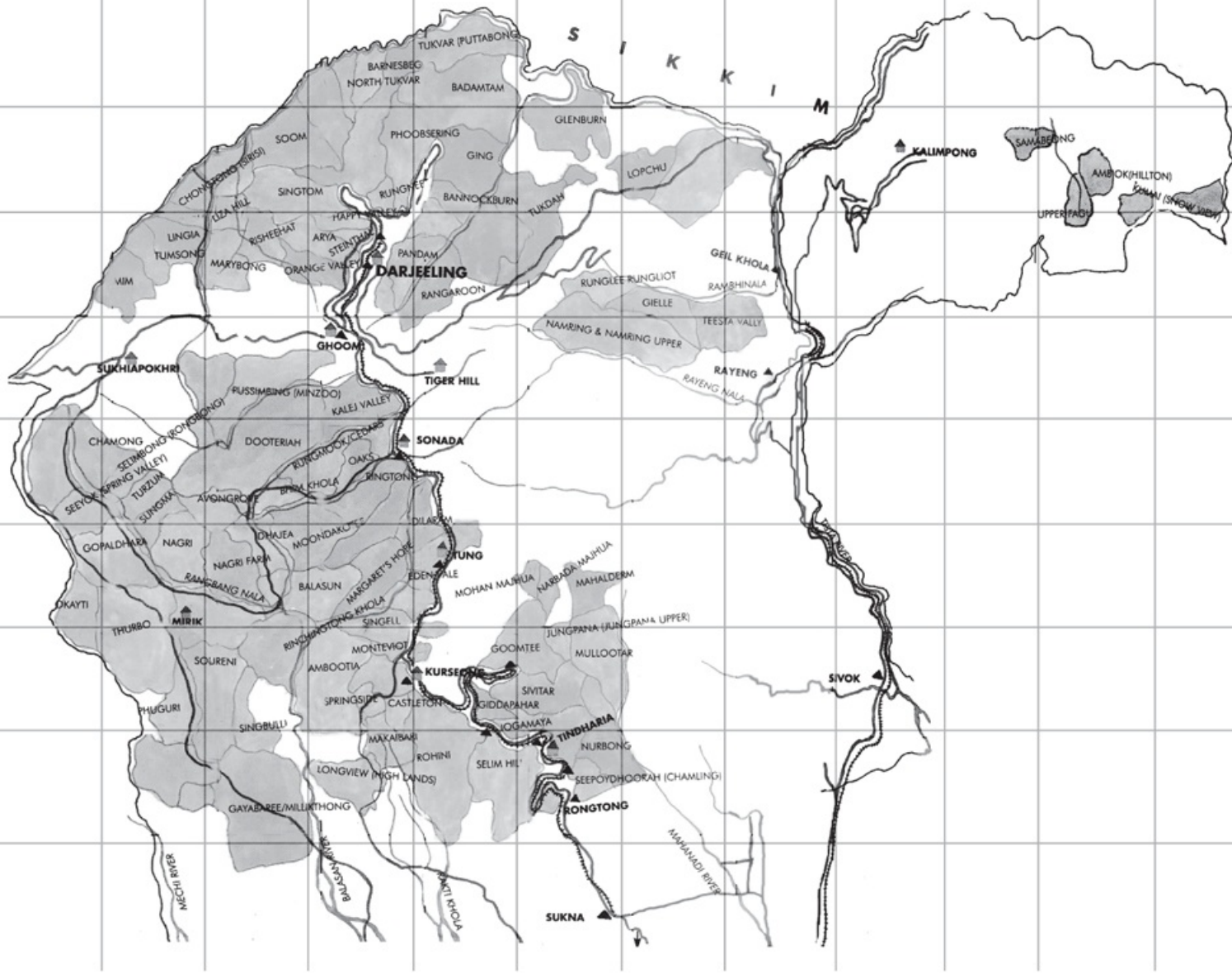
In general, all personal names and plantation names in this book are pseudonyms. The exceptions are well-known public figures (i.e., Madan Tamang, Subhash Ghisingh, and Bimal Gurung), and two plantations briefly mentioned in the text (Aloobari and Steinthal), neither of which were included in my field study.

Given that they are readily searchable, I also use the real names of plantation  
profiled in media reports I quote in chapter 3.

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MAP 1. Map of India, with inset of Darjeeling district.



MAP 2. Map of Darjeeling, with plantations shaded. Courtesy Tea Board of India.

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# Introduction

## *Reinventing the Plantation for the Twenty-first Century*

Darjeeling town, perched on one of the highest ridges in the northernmost part of West Bengal, is connected to the rest of India by a rough and bumpy road that begins in the dusty market town of Siliguri. At Siliguri, the railroad from West Bengal's capital, Kolkata, gives way to a narrow gauge, steam locomotive known locally as the "Toy Train," which carries tourists up the ridge on a smoky six-hour journey to Darjeeling. By car, the journey from Siliguri to Darjeeling takes just three to four hours, traversing through the foggy forests and tea plantations that fall off the road and plummet into the valleys below. Cars zig and zag back and forth up the mountain, weaving in and out of the path of the Toy Train, and passing a few villages precariously clinging to the sheer hillsides. Dense forests of *duppi* (*Cryptomeria japonica*) trees hug the road in a moist evergreen shade. They are planted in military-like formation—perfectly spaced, with impeccable posture—their armlike branches presenting bulbous clumps of needles straight up toward the sky.

The drive is mesmerizing (and for many, nauseating), and the landscape is striking. The tea plantations are immediately recognizable. Green and orderly like the *duppi*, the fields of tea go on for miles over and around the undulating landscape. But Darjeeling's is a beauty of a manufactured kind: the product of over 150 years of extensive capitalist extraction. The vivid greenness of colonial rooted tea plantations and *duppi* forests obscures the acute environmental and social effects of a long history of monoculture and marginalization. Long brown streaks left by landslides on the verdant slopes are reminders of the precariousness of people and plants here. These scars evoke questions about the sustainability of the entire place. This is the landscape of the twenty-first-century plantation.

This book tells a story about the social life of some of the world's most expensive and sought after tea. Darjeeling's tea laborers, planters,<sup>1</sup> and townspeople all know that Darjeeling and its tea are famous all over the world. Some trace the distinction of Darjeeling and its signature product to the misty mountain climate or the loamy soils; others talk about the work ethic of the laborers; and others mention the importance of the region's general *vāst* (meaning "property" or "place," in Hindu spiritual geography).<sup>2</sup> Whatever the

reason, since colonial times, Darjeeling tea has been associated with luxury and refinement, and the Darjeeling region has been a romantic “outside” within India—a cool, mountainous complement to the plains, and a home to exotic Nepali-speaking tea pluckers, recruited by British plantation owners beginning in the 1850s to staff what came to be known as “tea gardens.” This book narrates how Darjeeling tea workers’ ideas about value, plantation life, and social justice emerge through their encounters with tea’s colonial legacy. It shows how these ideas have been reshaped by strategies to reinvent Darjeeling tea for twenty-first-century consumers seeking not only escape and refinement, but also, through “fair trade” and other agricultural certification schemes, a sense of social solidarity in their daily cup.

Today, Darjeeling is a district of the Indian state of West Bengal.<sup>3</sup> The descendants of the Nepali migrant laborers recruited to work on British plantations constitute its majority, with migrants from across India, Tibet, and beyond making up the remainder of the population. The Darjeeling district sits in the northernmost part of West Bengal, pinned in by international borders with Nepal, Bangladesh, and Bhutan (Chinese-occupied Tibet sits just to the north above the small Indian state of Sikkim). In this unique and ecologically vulnerable mountain landscape on the periphery of modern India—populated by Nepali-speaking tea laborers, elite Indian planters, a multicultural *mélange* of immigrants, and the Anglo-Indian descendants of the British Raj—transnational movements for ethical trade have converged with a colonially derived system of tea production and a heated postcolonial discourse about economic and social rights. Over the past 150 years, consumers and marketers have given Darjeeling tea a specific territorial distinction as a luxury beverage. It is “the Champagne of teas.” At the same time, Indian Nepali, or “Gorkha,” laborers on tea plantations have developed a geographically and historically distinct identity, ideas of social justice, and feelings about the value of Darjeeling as both a product *and* homeland.

In this book, I trace the ascendancy, decline, and revitalization of Darjeeling tea—born in British colonial India, transformed through Indian independence, and thriving today as a globally recognized crop. Consumption of this delicate, expensive brew has long been a marker of class distinction. Since the earliest days of British colonial production, Darjeeling has been exceptional because of its delicacy and because, unlike other teas, it has *not* normally been consumed with milk or sugar. Darjeeling tea tends to be light in color, and its flavor tends to be smoky and slightly floral. (Indeed, the controlled vocabulary professional tea tasters and graders use to describe Darjeeling—with vivid adjectives like cheesy, biscuity, and knobbly—is reminiscent of the words sommeliers use to describe fine wine.)

Ideas about place tie labor firmly to distinguished commodities like Darjeeling tea. As an anthropological study of a luxury beverage, this book is also about the relationship of taste and value to place, of labor to product, and of production to consumption. It tacks back and forth among stories about a *place* (Darjeeling) about *labor* (how tea is produced there); and about *meaning* (what makes tea-

and Darjeeling in particular—special to tea drinkers and tea pluckers). This book melds a social ecology of tea, a study of the intimate relationships between laborers and the Darjeeling landscape, with a “food system perspective.” As geographer Julie Guthman explains, taking a food system perspective entails “incorporating the entire array of ideas, institutions, and policies that affect how food is produced, distributed, and consumed.”<sup>4</sup> An ethnography that adopts a food system perspective must look not only at production and circulation, but also at the spaces in between that make production and circulation possible and meaningful. To do so, it is important to be clear about the material conditions under which Darjeeling tea is produced. It is significant not only to this book, but to an understanding of Indian tea’s place in the global food system more broadly, that the vast majority of tea grown in the world, from Kenya to Sri Lanka to Indonesia to India (with the notable exception of China and Japan) is produced on *plantations*. And plantations are landscapes of empire, governed by processes of colonial consumption, production, and expansion. While plantation agriculture still predominates in India and much of the postcolonial world, we know little about how plantation workers themselves understand the plantation as a social and ecological form. This book is an attempt to answer that question.

## THE EMPIRE OF TEA

Records show that tea was cultivated and drunk as early as the fourth century B.C.E. in Taoist monasteries in China, where it was plucked locally from tall trees and processed by hand rolling the leaves against a screen perched over a fire. Tea consumption spread through China and into Japan in the late sixth century C.E. As in China, in Japan it was cultivated largely in monastic gardens to rejuvenate and purify the minds and bodies of mediating monks.<sup>6</sup> Over the centuries, tea cultivation and consumption spread beyond monastic contexts in China and Japan, as wider publics began drinking it with an eye to improving health and mental acuity. Despite being native to the Eastern Himalayas, tea was not cultivated on the Indian side of the range until the 1830s, and not adapted as an everyday drink in India until decades later.<sup>7</sup>

Exploration and trade throughout the seventeenth century introduced Portuguese, Dutch, and British sailors to the exotic materials of the Far East, such as spices, silk, and tea.<sup>8</sup> The Dutch East India Company began trading Chinese tea in the 1600s, and the British East India Company soon followed. Traders quickly realized that tea, like coffee and cocoa, gives the drinker a little kick. As a result, tea, like these other drinkable stimulants, was initially marketed as a pharmacological product. Though tea has long been considered the “national beverage” of England, in the early eighteenth century, there was little tea consumed there. Coffee and cocoa were initially more popular beverages, and these remained favored in the court and elite English social spheres. But by early nineteenth century, tea had become a commonplace beverage in households across social classes in Britain.



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