


Can a Plantation Be Fair? Fair Trade and Darjeeling Tea Production

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155 Baker Hall**



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Fair trade, organic, shade grown – on a trip to the supermarket, these labels guide our purchasing and attest to the conditions of production of the products they adorn; conditions that we believe are better as the result of our purchases. “Fair trade plantation” may seem like an oxymoron, as plantation workers are not cooperative farmers. They are industrial laborers who have little capacity to make democratic decisions in the face of the plantation’s structural oppression. In the late 1990s, however, tea plantations in Darjeeling, high up in the Himalayan foothills of Northeast India, became the first plantations in the world to receive fair trade certification. Hope was high among certifying agencies that fair trade would alleviate the inequities of tea production. Despite these hopes, the region’s plantation laborers, who produce some of the world’s most expensive tea, remain some of the tea industry’s worst paid workers. This talk explores the frictions between fair trade and the plantation system and highlights how in India, fair trade undermines existing state welfare structures.

