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Rural Vulnerability and Tea Plantation Migration in Eastern Nepal and Darjeeling
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This paper will analyze migration from rural eastern Nepal to tea plantations in eastern Nepal and Darjeeling and the potentials such migration might represent for coping with rural vulnerability and food scarcity. I will contextualize this paper in a regional history of agricultural intensification and migration, which began in the eighteenth century with Gorkhali conquests of today’s Mechi region and continued in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the recruitment of plantation laborers from Nepal to British India. For many Kiranti ethnic groups, agricultural intensification resulted in social marginalization, land degradation due to over-population and over-farming, and eventual migration to Darjeeling to work on British tea plantations. The British lured Rais, Limbus, and other tribal peoples to Darjeeling with hopes of prosperity. When these migrants arrived, they benefited from social welfare like free housing, health care, food rations, nurseries, and plantation schools – things unknown to them under Nepal’s oppressive monarchal regime. For almost two centuries, Rai and Limbu migration to Darjeeling was an escape from rural poverty and oppression in Nepal, but plantation life introduced them to different forms of inequality.

Since the end of British colonialism, tea plantation development in Darjeeling has declined, and rural Nepalis have diversified their migration coping strategies, traveling much further abroad to work in service sectors from Dubai to Tokyo. In the last fifteen years, the Nepali tea industry has come into its own, and Nepal now exports nearly 93% of its tea. Formerly a regional product, Nepal tea is gaining consumer demand in Japan, Germany, and the United States. Known primarily for jute, ginger, and potato crops, the eastern districts of Ilam,
Dhankuta, Tehrathum, and Sankhuwasabha are becoming important centers of tea production, although eighty percent of Nepal’s tea comes from Ilam. The manager of Ilam Tea Producers claims that the promise of steady work on tea estates across eastern Nepal has attracted farmers from Nepal unable to meet their needs under subsistence farming. He estimates that nearly 7,000 families have benefited from the recent boom in Nepal tea production. The manager of Guranse tea estate in Dhankuta claims: “If we create the proper atmosphere, we can make five Darjeelings in Dhankuta and attract buyers and tourists at the same time” (Pohkrel 2006).

Cooperative tea production for the global market is a fast growing solution to rural poverty in the middle hills of eastern Nepal. Other attempts at commercial agriculture benefit only those in the lower lying regions of the country, the Terai. At the same time, tourism schemes, developed by international NGOs, benefit mountain people. The middle hills, between these two ecologically distinct regions, are an interstitial space, not only geographically but also in terms of development aid and investment. Land degradation and political strife have led to out-migration and further poverty. International development organizations see the tea industry, with its growing attention to fair-trade organic production, as a way for Nepali farmers to enter a world market for products made in a socially and environmentally sustainable way. This often leads to many farmers to abandon their subsistence plots for work on tea cooperative farms, producing high-quality tea for the world market. There is money in tea, but for tea laborers, cooperative tea production is attractive beyond its potential for alleviating rural poverty. This paper will explore potential ways of studying: 1) whether rural indigenous people also view cooperative farming as a way to achieve tangible resilience against land degradation. And 2) whether cooperative farming is a way for indigenous eastern hill people to maintain tribal/ethnic identity, which for the Kiranti people of eastern Nepal is tied to a communal land tenure system,
“kipat,” which was abolished in 1994 after centuries of government policies aimed at its erosion. Research in this area will extend existing ethnohistorical research on the eastern Himalaya by focusing on the recent emergence of the Nepal tea industry and its relationship to a history of marginalization, land degradation, and migration among Kiranti people.

This paper will explore whether the Nepal tea industry, which requires internal migration, presents a sustainable alternative to transnational migration for rural Nepalis. I will specifically address the emergence of organic and fair-trade practices on tea plantations and the potential of such agricultural strategies to improve the lives and health of rural Nepalis. Though this research in Nepal is preliminary, I bring to it my experience examining fair trade organic tea production in Darjeeling, India. My intention is to extend and historically contextualize my current dissertation research on fair-trade organic tea production in the Himalayan region.

Geographic Background: The Middle Hills of Nepal

The marginalization of the Kiranti and the history of Himalayan tea began in the mid-1700s, when Hindus from Gorkha, led by Prithivi Narayan Shah, conquered and annexed the fertile low lands of the Rai, Limbu, Sunuwar and other “tribal” groups living in the eastern Himalayan foothills. For these tribal groups, known collectively as the Kiranti people, the Gorkhali incursion and the subsequent consolidation of Nepal under the Rana monarchy resulted in social marginalization and land degradation due to over-population and over-farming. Tibeto-Burman speaking indigenous people became subject to these Hindu rulers, who quickly controlled the region and institutions within it. The British East India Company capitalized on Kiranti marginalization and recruited Rais, Limbus, and other tribal people to Darjeeling to work their new tea plantations. Lured by myths of gold growing on tea bushes, Kirantis used migration to Darjeeling as an escape from rural poverty and oppression. When these migrants arrived in
Darjeeling, they found no gold, but they benefited from social welfare practices unknown to them under the oppressive Gorkha and Rana regimes. Few returned to Nepal, and over time, they developed a single collective Nepali identity in Darjeeling, merging the tribal identities that distinguished them in their own country.

After Indian independence in 1947, tea development in Darjeeling stagnated. At the same time in Nepal, the Rana regime fell, and the Gorkhali Shah dynasty was restored. For the Kirantis in the eastern hills, this regime change meant the restoration of policies aimed at eradicating kipat in favor of private ownership (Regmi 1965, 1978). Over the last thirty years, there has been an increasing tendency for rural households in Nepal’s eastern hills to rely on non-agricultural income. Fathers travel to urban centers to work in the tourism industry; mothers join handicraft cooperatives; and children work abroad in various facets of the service industry and remit the majority of their earnings to their parents. Though migrants have provided substantial remittances for their families, transnational migration has significantly affected the structure and dynamics of rural livelihoods. A potential exception to this trend is the Nepal tea industry, which has blossomed in the last fifteen years despite the decade-long civil war that ended in November 2006. Like their ancestors who migrated outside of Nepal to work on Darjeeling tea plantations, some contemporary Rai and Limbu people have begun to migrate to cooperative tea gardens inside Nepal, seeking not only sustainable livelihoods but also refuge from the political and agroecological ravages of the civil war (Seddon and Adhikari 2003). This paper is concerned with this recent development in Nepali agriculture and labor migration.

Consumers and connoisseurs regard Darjeeling tea, with its light smoky flavor, as the “champagne of teas.” Though Nepal and Darjeeling share the same climate and altitude, connoisseurs do not hold Nepal tea in such high regard. Demand for Darjeeling tea continues to
exceed its supply. Even though consumers purchase 40 million kilograms of Darjeeling tea yearly, the Secretary of the Darjeeling Tea Association alleges that only 10 million kilograms of this tea are actually produced in India’s Darjeeling district.\(^1\) Darjeeling planters accuse Nepali planters of marketing their product as from “Darjeeling,” while Nepali planters claim that Indian planters are buying raw tea from Nepal and processing and marketing it as “authentic” Darjeeling tea. Notwithstanding the semantic debates among tea-growing elites, there is little substantive difference between Darjeeling tea and Nepal tea. Migrant Rais and Limbus from eastern Nepal overwhelmingly make up the labor in both locales. Darjeeling and Nepali tea taste similar, come from the same species of bushes (\textit{camellia sinensis}), and are grown and processed in similar climatic and geographic regions.

Recent developments in the lives of those people who did not leave rural Nepal as the result of the Gorkhali conquest, permanent labor migration to British India, temporary migration abroad in the service sector, and most recently Nepal’s Maoist “People’s War,” remains an important area of inquiry. Unlike in Darjeeling, where colonial classification homogenized tribal and ethnic groups under a single “Nepali” identity, Rais Limbus, and other Kiranti groups in Nepal maintain a strong sense of tribal ethnic identity. Despite pressure from the central government in Kathmandu to abandon such loyalties in favor of a national Hindu identity, the Nepali tribal groups have continued to practice ethnically distinct forms of land tenure (Burghart 1984). Neither the government nor persistent food security and land degradation problems have managed to erode ethnic identification in the eastern hills.

In addition to land degradation and food security problems, in recent decades Kirantis have witnessed a gradual government phase-out of their communal land tenure system, “\textit{kipat}.” The last \textit{kipat} parcel became private property in 1994 (Forbes 1995, 1999). Unlike their distant

\(^1\) Personal communication, June 2006.
relatives who work on tea plantations in Darjeeling, Rai and Limbu laborers on Nepali tea cooperatives remember a time when they were still managing their lands communally. *What, then, is meaningful to Kirantis about participating in tea production?* I hypothesize that laborers in Nepal’s new tea producers see cooperative tea production as a way of reasserting ethnic identity through a form of *kipat*. The question remains whether tea production is just another way that Kirantis are being subjugated by the Hindu elite in the form of tea brokers or if tea cooperatives enable Kirantis to express ethnic identity through a new form of communal land tenure. Since former kipat lands have been degrading for decades, it would also seem useful to ask whether communal organic tea production for the global market is seen by laborers as a way of conserving and revitalizing the degraded environment of their traditional homeland.

Known primarily for jute, ginger, and potato crops, the eastern districts of Ilam, Dhankuta, Tehrathum, and Sankhuwasabha are becoming important centers of tea production. International NGOs, such as Winrock International, along with Tazo Tea, an American subsidiary of Starbucks, claim that tea is “one of the few hopeful arenas of Nepal’s economy” (Winrock n.d.). Tea has been grown in Nepal for over a century, but until recently, Nepali planters have exported green leaf to be processed by Indian manufactures, thereby losing out on the most profitable part of production, the “Darjeeling” distinction. Today, Nepal growers are optimistic: The manager of Guranse tea estate in Dhankuta claims: “If we create the proper atmosphere, we can make five Darjeelings in Dhankuta and attract buyers and tourists at the same time” (Pokhrel 2006). Unlike Darjeeling, where there are few small farmer cooperatives, all Nepal tea is grown on cooperatives. For this reason, Tazo and Winrock International see eastern Nepal as an excellent place to bolster small farmer cooperative production. They are also aiding with fair-trade and organic certification in several tea growing cooperatives. Consumers
are increasingly looking for labels of sustainable and socially equitable production, like “small farmer cooperatives,” “organic,” or “fair-trade.” I hypothesize that such labels present an opening for Kirantis to reassert their communal ties to the land; a quality now privileged in first-world markets for ecologically sustainable and friendly consumer items as well as receive a higher premium for their product. In Nepal, indigenous people’s connection to global capitalism has heretofore been limited to ecotourism (Stevens 1992; Zurick 1993).

Kirantis and Kipat

Land tenure and kipat have long been the focus of eastern hills ethnography (Caplan 1970, 1991; Forbes 1999, 1995; English 1982). Each of these studies embodies a larger tradition in the ethnography of Nepal of focusing predominantly on the region’s two main ethnic groups, the Rai (McDougal 1979; Hardman 2000) and the Limbu (Caplan 1970; Jones and Jones 1976; Sagant 1976). Some scholars have attempted to explore how these ethnic groups identify with larger groups, for example, with the Mongol (Hangen 2000), the Kirata (Subba 1999) or as Nepalis in India (Sinha and Subba 2003; Schneiderman 2005). Anthropologists working in Nepal have historically focused on the ethnography of particular ethnic groups, notably the Sherpa (Ortner 1989; Fuer-Haimendorf 1965, 1975), Magar (Hitchcock 1966[1980]; Ahearn 2001), Thakali (Vinding 1998), Newar (Gellner 1992; Gellner and Quigley 1995; Parish 1997; Levy 1990), Thami (Schneiderman and Turin 2000), Tharus (Guneratne 2002), Yolmo (Desjarlais 2003), and Gurung (MacFarlane 1976, 1989; Messerschmidt 1976). An ethnographic study of land tenure and ethnic identity in the context Nepal’s entrance into the global commodity market has not yet emerged. One potential area of focus is kipat, a traditional land tenure system shared by many eastern groups and a central concept in the ethnography of Nepal.
In the mid-18th century, Hindu warriors from the contemporary district of Gorkha conquered an expansive territory, from Kangra to Bhutan. In these regions, Gorkha rulers encouraged Hindu settlement on indigenous lands for rice paddy cultivation and irrigation and imposed a caste system on indigenous people predicated on the purity and power of Brahmans and Chettris. Rana rulers particularly encouraged their subjects to settle on the communal lands (kipat) of the Kiranti (Caplan 1970, 1991; Forbes 1999, 1995; English 1982). First, upper caste Hindus settled in the fertile lowlands, but they quickly expanded onto kipat lands, pushing Kirantis into more marginal areas (Burghart 1984:101). The Kiranti were amazed by the yields of Hindus’ irrigated and terraced fields. They abandoned shifting and swidden agriculture to apprentice themselves to the new elite to learn more intensified methods of settled agriculture (Sagnet 1976). They became integrated a tribute bearing peasantry which was subject to prerogatives of a Hindu aristocracy housed in Kathmandu (English 1982: 29).

By the 19th century, wet rice cultivation was the productive base of the indigenous economy (English 1982: 54). Gorkha rule in the 19th and early 20th century resembled feudal systems in Medieval Europe, whereby farmers had to give one-half of paddy harvest to central government (English 1982: 58; Regmi 1971, 1978; Blaikie et al 1980: 28-31). Farmers who did not grow rice, had to pay taxes in cash to central government. The more non-Kirantis settled on kipat lands, the more compromised the authority of lineage headmen and the autonomy of the Kiranti became (Regmi 1965; Caplan 1970). In addition to power, upper caste Hindis brought money with them. Lionel Caplan describes how, after, villagers in Indreni in Ilam put up their kipat lands as collateral for loans to pay annual taxes, in the 1960s, upper caste Hindus owned two-thirds of most villagers’ kipat and all the kipat lands of over half the villagers. Upper caste Hindus constructed themselves as a new class of moneylenders in the eastern hills and took over
the cultivation rights of lands put up as collateral for cash loans (Caplan 1970: 92-3). This relationship between high caste Hindus and the Kiranti is important to both historicizing why Kirantis moved to India and also why they might be adverse to working in tea gardens in Nepal, which are run by high caste Hindu elites.

In the early years of colonization of India, the British East India Company wanted to expand into Gorkha territory, which led to the Anglo-Nepal wars from 1814-1815. After the war, the British annexed present day Darjeeling and all territory east of the Mechi river and significantly reduced Nepal’s western possessions. The East India Company gave Darjeeling to Sikkim, only to request it back shortly after to build their tea plantations. The British also annexed much of the lowland Terai, as it was the most fertile part of the Gorkha empire (Burghart 1984: 113). To offset the loss of land, Nepal’s central government pressed for the reclamation and agricultural intensification of more marginal lands in the eastern middle hills (English 1982: 258). After 1815, often with the support of the central government, the British recruited tens of thousands of hill people to work as soldiers in Gurkha\(^2\) regiments, woodcutters in jungles of northeast India, and as laborers on tea plantations in Darjeeling and Assam. Lacking the resources to pay domestic taxes, many eastern hills people eagerly migrated. In addition to prolific accounts by British soldiers, anthropologists have explored British-Nepal relationships via the Gurkha regiments (Caplan 1991, 1995, Des Chene 1991). Research on Indian tea has neither looked into the development of tea plantations in Darjeeling nor focused on the affects such permanent migration had on kinship patterns in Nepal (see Chatterjee 2001).

For Kirantis in the middle hills, the incentives for permanent migration were high, considering the oppressive conditions at home. Emigration meant an escape from financial

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\(^2\)“Gurkha” is a mispronunciation of “Gorkha.” Today, the Nepali regiments in both the British and Indian armies are still referred to as “Gurkha” regiments (see Caplan 1991, 1995).
oppression, while resettlement promised opportunities for steady wage labor and reliable supply of food grains. Additionally, the British hired whole families to work on Darjeeling plantations, not just males. By 1845, the British Superintendent of Darjeeling had attracted 10,000 settlers from Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan, who came to work as laborers, porters, woodcutters, builders, and servants for the expanding British hill station (English 1982: 264; Griffiths 1967:88). Each plantation provided housing and medical services for resident laborers and set aside land for cultivation and herding. As the plantation economy flourished, education was provided to children of laborers. Under the Ranas in Nepal, on the other hand, education was only open to upper caste people (Griffiths 1967: 267). Unlike other British colonial enterprises, such as the mines, jungles, railroads, and factories, children on Darjeeling tea plantations could pluck and sort tea alongside their parents. By 1867, Nepalis made up 27% of Darjeeling population, one-half were Kiranti (English 1982: 264).

In 1950, Nepal ended its century-long isolation and opened its doors to both tourists and its Indian border, enabling Nepalis to migrate to India easily. The 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship gave residents of both India and Nepal what Aihwa Ong (1999) calls “flexible citizenship.” India alone employs 700,000 Nepalis - 400,000 are working in the private sector, 250,000 are working in the public sector, and 50,000 are working in the Indian army, which is still called the “Gurkha Rifles” (Seddon 2005). The Labor Act of 1985 further facilitated Nepali migration to certain countries in the Middle East, East Asia, and Southeast Asia. In the 1980s, Nepalis migrated primarily to East and Southeast Asia, but recently Nepalis have increasingly turned to the Middle East. In 1997, Gulf remittances constituted $25 million USD, in 2002, that number grew ten fold to $250 million. According to Seddon’s own studies, in 2005, total Nepali remittances reached $1.5 billion (The 2006 GDP was $7.15 billion.). Internally displaced
Nepalis have saturated the labor market in Kathmandu, the only city in Nepal (Shreshtha and Adhikari 2005). Why do some people turn to tea cooperatives when most others rely on labor migration to escape poverty. Why do they stay in Nepal, when there is so much pressure to leave? How are the Kiranti who stay in Nepal trying to mediate the damage caused by migration and centuries of land degradation?

**Land Degradation and Conservation: Political Ecology in Himalayan Studies**

The political ecology and ecological anthropology on the Himalayas privileges the mountains, focusing primarily on tourism and forests. Cristoph von Fuer Haimendorff (1975), with specific reference to Nepal, argues that regional trade, which includes tourism, are the only ways to avoid ecological damage from a population that has outgrown its resource base. Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) argue that trade flows themselves cause land degradation by marginalizing land and people within a wider economic system. Forsyth (1991) suggests that tourism can reconcile development with conservation by giving authorities an incentive to protect the landscape. Forsyth calls for tourism agencies to focus closely on local cultures, so that demand for local goods and services can relieve pressure on agriculture (Forsyth 1991: 65; see also East and Luger 1998)

Geographers Barbara Brower and Ann Dennis criticize environmental management programs in Sagarmatha (Mount Everest) National Park as “arborcentric” (Brower and Dennis 1998: 185). I would extend this critique by also pointing to the arborcentric nature of scholarship in general on the Himalayas. Studies of agrarian communities in the Himalayas focus on forests, an important colonial and postcolonial natural resource, but do not consider the role of commercial agriculture in these peripheral areas (Agrawal 2001, 2005; Sivaramakrishnan 1999; Guha 1990).
Though Nepal is only the size of Tennessee, it is classified into three geographical regions: the mountains, the hills, and the plains, or Terai. Only twenty percent of Nepal’s land is arable, most of which is in the Terai. The middle hills are cooler than Terai, but the valley slopes are unstable and have less fertile soil than the lowlands. The eastern hills have some of the most fertile land outside of the Terai, though still very rugged, only ten percent is arable. Land on these slopes requires extensive irrigation and terracing to cultivate rice, Nepal’s major food crop (English 1982: 9). For centuries, people have been vying for this land for their survival.

As good lands in the eastern hills became overcrowded with Hindu settlers, the less powerful Kirantis were forced to farm on more marginal lands. The over-terracing and over-irrigating of the eastern hills has caused many landsides. Kiranti villages were usually the ones to slide down the steep hillsides. Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) in one of the first studies of political ecology with specific reference to Nepal, assert that the reasons for degradation are natural as well as social, but the management of degradation, or the lack thereof, is a distinct social problem. Degraded lands are less resilient, and the people who live on these lands are more vulnerable to other environmental perturbations (Adger 2000, 2006). Blaikie et al. (1994: 9) describe vulnerability as “characteristics of a person or group in terms of their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist, and recover from the impact of natural hazards.” Bohle (1995:6) defines vulnerability as “an aggregate measure of human welfare that integrates environmental, social, economic, and political exposure to a range of potential harmful perturbations. Chambers (1991) adds that vulnerability is rooted in human ecological conditions, sociopolitical situations, and transportation.

Situating the Kiranti within such discussions of the reciprocal relationship between vulnerability and resilience is important because many different actors in development,
academics, and conservation deploy the discourse of vulnerability. Vulnerability and resilience are defined and redefined in ways that suit a particular purpose or location.

The Kiranti in the eastern hills are marginal people in a marginal place (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987: 19-23). Land degradation has caused Kirantis to migrate in search of safer environments. Ives and Messerli (1989) challenge the narrative of Himalayan degradation, calling attention to villagers ability to revitalize devastated lands, but they do not address the ravages of over-population and over-farming in the eastern hills as the result of racist policies from the central government (see also Ives 2004). Adhikari and Bohle (1999) outline three primary strategies for coping with food shortage in Nepal: migration (temporary or permanent), work in Indian or British armies, and farming on marginal lands in the Terai. All of these coping strategies involve migration, which since the mid-1980s has left hill villages sparsely populated; there are fewer people to rebuild the terraces as many rural farmers move on, claiming there is nothing worth rebuilding. Following Blaikie and Brookfield, the research agenda I propose here would help us understand not only the relationship between land degradation and society in the eastern hills of Nepal, but also what social steps the Kiranti are taking to manage their landscape through collective tea gardening. Do the Kiranti agree with development agencies and view tea as the right ecologically resilient crop to reduce vulnerability and develop social resiliency? (Adger 2000)

Conservationists in Nepal and across the world call for “sustainable” forest use. Arturo Escobar (1995), however, argues that “sustainable” development does not significantly shift the power relations of classical development projects because there are no criteria for distinguishing sustainable from unsustainable development. All parties in environmental debate (Brosius 1999) or political debate (Kearney 1996) can engage in the discourse of sustainability (see also Shiva
2001). According to Kearney (1996), sustainability implicitly assumes that rural poverty in the Third World is not going to be developed out of existence and that the Third World should adapt to persistent poverty in ways that are not economically, ecologically, or politically disruptive; they should use organic compost instead of expensive agrochemicals and solar cookers instead of gas stoves. To extend the literature on and critique of sustainability we should examine how ideas of sustainability and dreams of organic and fair-trade certification are taking root in Nepal. In order to evaluate the efficacy of sustainable tea cooperative development and production in Nepal, we must understand if the concept of sustainability is meaningful in the daily lives of tea farmers in Nepal.

Scholars in many fields discuss sustainable consumer goods, namely organic and fair-trade products and how, through consumption, people embed them in a set of environmentalist practices (James 1993; Atkinson 1980, 1983; Loureiro and Lotade 2004; Elkington and Hailes 1989). According to Lester Thurow (1980), “green consumerism,” such as purchasing fair trade organic tea, is a component of the environmentalism of upper middle class industrialized societies. Ramachandra Guha (1997) explains that green consumption practices are part of an “ecology of affluence,” in contrast to the “environmentalism of the poor,” which in India is signaled by local conflicts and struggles, beginning with the Chipko movement of the Garhwal Himalaya in 1973. Guha argues that the Chipko Movement, the Narmada Bachao (“free Narmada”) Movement, and lesser known instances of the “environmentalism of the poor” are rooted in techniques of direct action, which Gandhi popularized during India’s freedom struggle from British rule (Guha 1997, 1990). Tad Mutersbaugh (2005) found that organic coffee farmers in Mexico identified with conservationist practices (see also Bacon 2005; Hudson and Hudson 2003; Renard 2003; Rice 2000; Tovar et al. 2005). Following Mutersbaugh, do organic and fair
trade tea producers in Nepal consider their farming practices as an act of environmentalism, conservation, or social action?

Towards an Ethnography of Tea Production and its Benefits

While quantitative methods may be able to show that fair trade organic practices are beneficial because they statistically increase revenue or access to health care, ethnographic methods can show how people operationalize the concepts of fair trade and organic and give them substantive meanings. I have developed the preceding framework based on my preliminary exploration of two tea cooperatives, Kanchenjunga Tea Estate in the Panchtar district and Guranse Tea Estate in the Dhankuta district as well as several tea cooperatives and plantations across the Darjeeling district. At present, they are the only USDA organic and Transfair fair-trade certified tea gardens in Nepal. Many others are currently undergoing certification.

An ethnographic approach reveals how workers feel about their workings conditions, specifically whether they view tea production in Nepal as just another way that Kirantis are living under Hindu dominance, or a new way to express ethnic identity through communal land tenure. To answer these questions we must ask not only Kiranti workers about their own feelings of marginalization, but we also must talk with the Hindu elites that manage these cooperative tea gardens and broker their teas from both offices in Kathmandu and bungalows in the eastern hills. How do these managers discuss the potentials for Nepal tea? Do managers and brokers tell a story of rural poverty alleviation or are they more self-interested? How do workers discuss their personal freedoms under tea production for the global market?

We must ask Kiranti farmers if they remember when they farmed kipat lands. Through detailed oral history collection, I am exploring workers’ understandings of the history of marginalization in the eastern hills and its relationship to the erosion of kipat and how workers
perceive the cooperative structure as an analogue to kipat. These oral histories reveal what tea farming means to them and why individuals stay in Nepal instead of migrating elsewhere. In Darjeeling, I found that tea cooperative members, unlike plantation workers, have a keen awareness of domestic and international prices for their tea and understood the marketing differences between Nepal and Darjeeling tea. They also have a distinct vision of the consumer who drinks their tea.

Since former kipat lands have been degrading for decades, communal tea production and organic and sustainable methods are attempts at conserving and revitalizing Nepal’s degraded soils. Tea production in Nepal, with its reliance on organic and fair trade methods, is a kind of “environmentalism of the poor” not rooted in actions of direct protest (Guha 1997). Most importantly, cooperative tea production reduces rural farmers’ perceptions of their own vulnerability. Cooperatives, unlike plantations, also enable workers to be more food secure, as management often allows allots workers subsistence plots to provide food for themselves and their families. Do workers feel less vulnerable or more vulnerable? While picking tea with workers and cooking dinner with them in their homes, I will specifically explore how large workers’ subsistence plots are and if they are better able to provide food for their families under tea production?

It also seems that tea might be the right crop in the right place at the right time. The tea market, especially the organic and fair trade tea market is booming. The British introduced the tea bush to the hills of their empire. In Darjeeling, it flourished. Tea is not a characteristic plant of the Himalayas, but it grows well in its misty foothills. The Mechi region of Nepal is geographically similar to Darjeeling and tea is thriving there as well. Tea also does not require extensive irrigation. Its collection cannot be mechanized. Plucking and processing tea employs
hundreds of people on a single plantation or cooperative. Also, scientists have not developed genetically-modified varieties of tea. Genetically-modified crops such as cotton and wheat have swept though the plains of India, causing many farmers to become dependent on industrial seed manufacturers and in many cases farmers become so economically devastated from buying these seeds it leads them to suicide (Stone 2002, 2007).

Conclusion

Research in rural Nepal has dwindled in recent years as the result of the Maoist “Peoples War.” This research on Nepal tea growing cooperatives will contribute not only to Nepal and Himalayan studies, but also to wider discussions about the link between land tenure and identity. The market for fair trade organic products, like Nepal or Darjeeling tea, is booming, but little research has looked behind the smiling faces pictured on packages of fair trade organic tea or other certified products. I will contribute to this literature by comparing tea production on cooperatives in Nepal with plantations in Darjeeling, India. I will explore why Kirantis in Nepal are choosing to enter tea production instead of migrating to India or further abroad for wage labor. This research analyzes the ideas of vulnerability and resilience held by those individuals who are steeped in Nepal tea and deepen understandings of fair trade organic production by questioning if those involved perceive sustainable farming practices as an act of environmentalism or conservation. With this research on Himalayan tea production, I aim to advance scholarship on the anthropology of land tenure, ethnicity, labor, the environment, and social justice; to educate the public by writing popular articles; and to advise certification agencies about the daily lives of tea laborers, with the intent to devise strategies for making worldwide tea production more equitable.
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