

# A MORAL ECONOMY OF LABOUR? TEA COOPERATIVES IN EASTERN HIMALAYAN AND SUB-HIMALAYAN BENGAL TEA ZONE

Swatahsiddha Sarkar (North Bengal University)

Miriam Wenner (University of Zurich)

# Introduction – Crisis of tea labour

2

## Hunger deaths stalk Bengal tea country

Tol, 30.7.2014

Pinak Priya Bhattacharya & Jayanta Gupta | TNN | Jul 30, 2014, 05.34 AM IST



A-

A+

## Plight of tea garden workers in North Bengal raised in Lok Sabha

By PTI

ET, 22.12.2015

Hungerlöhne in Indien

NZZ, 29.8.2015

## Der Tee macht die Pflücker nicht satt

**SPEZIAL** / von Volker Pabst, Siliguri / 29.8.2015, 10:00 Uhr

Die Nachfrage nach Tee steigt weltweit, doch für die Produzenten in Westbengalen zahlt sich das nicht aus. In den Anbaugebieten am Fusse des Himalajas herrscht schiere Not.

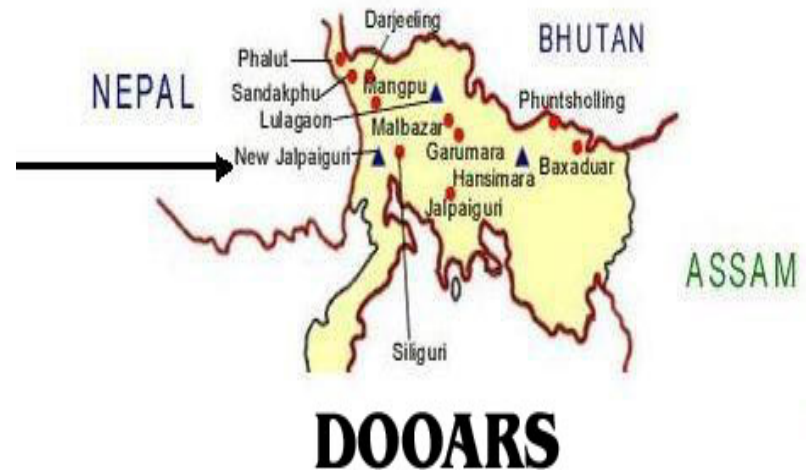
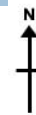
# Table of contents

3

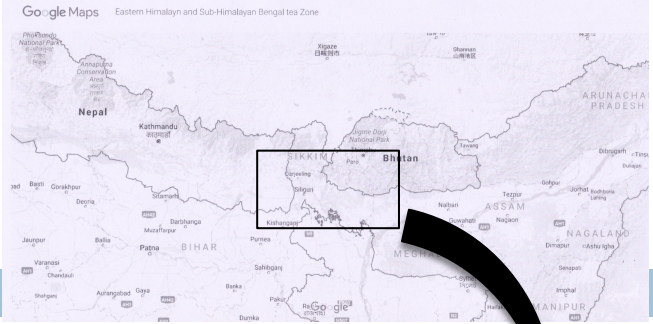
- Introduction
  - ▣ Background
  - ▣ Crisis in tea belt
- Initial experiences – notes from the field
- Research questions
- Approach
- Outlook



## DARJEELING (West Bengal)



# Eastern Himalayan & Sub-Himalayan Bengal Tea zone



# Background

6

## □ Origin

- ▣ Nepal: 1863 (Ilam) (but no further expansion till 1960s)
  - smallholders, for ~20 years
- ▣ Darjeeling: 1856; Dooars: 1874

## □ Production mode

- ▣ Nepal: Small tea growers, cooperatives; plantations
- ▣ Darjeeling: Plantation estates (less cooperatives)
- ▣ Dooars: Plantation estates



# Background...contd.

7

- Employment/ labour
  - ▣ Nepal: 50,000
  - ▣ Darjeeling: 53,363
  - ▣ Dooars: 16,9412 (including small tea growers)

# Background...contd.

8

- ❑ Crisis in tea belt: Dooars-Darjeeling
  - ❑ Abandonment, closure, lock out
  - ❑ Casualisation
  - ❑ Non-payment of legal entitlements (PF, Gratuity, PLA non compliance)
  - ❑ Low wage (\$2) / no wage
  - ❑ Unsafe migration, outmigration
  - ❑ Malnutrition, starvation death
  - ❑ Denial of workers human rights



# Relevance and background

9

- Shifts in production
  - ▣ Increasing divestment from plantations (esp. Dooars; e.g. TATA Tea, Unilever)
  - ▣ Trend to smallholders:
    - India: 36% (2015); 27% (2011)
    - Kenya: 60% (2015)
    - Nepal: 42%; Ilam: 64% (2014/15)

# Cooperative principles

10

- What is a cooperative?
  - ▣ “an autonomous association of persons unite voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically-controlled enterprise” (ICA 2016)
- Principles (ICA 2016)
  - ▣ Voluntary and open membership
  - ▣ Democratic member control
  - ▣ Member economic participation
  - ▣ Autonomy and independence
  - ▣ Education, training and information
  - ▣ Cooperation among cooperatives
  - ▣ Concern for the community

# Ilam (Nepal): Experiences

11

- Field site: Ilam district
  - ▣ 64% of tea production by small-holders
  - ▣ ~7,000 farmers, 2,654 MT (plantation: 1,491 MT) (NTCDB 2014/15))
  - ▣ 5,500 registered with CTCF
- Importance of cooperatives (Nepal Cooperative Act 1992)
- National Tea and Coffee Development Board 1993; National Tea Policy 2000
- 2010: Central Tea Cooperative Federation Limited (Ilam)
- 78 tea cooperatives (Nepal), 38 Ilam (CTCF 2016)

# Visit to Tinjule Tea Cooperative

12

- Established: 1995
- Members: 214 (63 female, 151 male)
- Institutional affiliation:
  - ▣ District Tea Federation Ilam
  - ▣ CTCF
  - ▣ Tea Board (Govt)
  - ▣ Commercial Agricultural Alliance
  - ▣ ...



# Pros-/and Cons

13

Advantages/achievements	Problems
Infrastructure development (road, drinking water)	Fear of exploitation (green leaves prices)
Factory built	Disagreement and fights over factory (“they didn’t understand”)
Democratic decision making...	...takes long time
Socially inclusive	Marketing, market access
No politics (unions, parties)	Capture of support funds by “big” players
	Labeling (eco)

...according to the manager

# Darjeeling Experience

14

- Cooperative run small farmers initiative: Four
- Mineral Spring Sanjukta Vikas Sangstha (MSSVS)
  - Abandoned Harrison tea estate
  - Lebong spur Darjeeling
  - Established in 1996 as SVC
  - Registered as MSSVS in 2001
  - 11 hamlets 448 registered farmer members
- Land ownership & family labour
- Multi-cropping
- Democratic organisation
- Community participation
- Role of women
- Organic farming & livestock
- Dependence on BLF
- Depoliticisation
- Social capital

# Dooars Experience

15

- Sonali Tea Estate first cooperative 1974-79
- DCPWR Defense Committee of Plantation Workers Rights
- OMC Operating Management Committee
- Central Bank of India (CSR) proposal
- Dekhlapara (closed since 2010), Bandapani (closed since 2013), Ramjhora (Sick garden)
- Life is PDS dependent
- People are apprehensive of cooperatives as a reincarnation of OMC
- Godhulibazar North East Society for Empowerment of the People (G-NESEP) alternative cropping



# Research questions

16

- Can tea cooperatives be a viable alternative mode of production to the crisis ridden tea plantation zone of Eastern Himalayas and northern Bengal?
  - ▣ How do tea cooperatives function? Aims and activities? Advantages and disadvantages?
  - ▣ What are the prospects for tea cooperatives' integration into the global tea market?
- What are the effects of tea cooperatives on broader social, economic, political and ecological structures?
  - ▣ Inclusiveness, participation, democracy, economic performance?

# Approach

17

- Moral economy
- Operationalisation?
- Methods: Qualitative
- Primary data (field work, interview, case study)
- Secondary data (news paper coverage, extensive review of theoretical literature on plantation studies, cooperative experiences)

# Moral economy

18

- “social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community” (Thompson 1971)
- Normative roots of peasant societies (Scott 1976)
- ⇒ vs externalisation of moral issues in economic models
- ⇒ Relational conception of legitimacy
- ⇒ Economy not autonomous from the social world

# Moral economy (cont.)

19

- Social disembeddedness characterises plantation industry as lacking any moral concerns
- Denial of 'right to subsistence' (Thompson)
- Plundering of 'subsistence ethics' (Scotts)
- **Assumption:** *Workers concern to labour and production are grounded in moral & ethical standards which are at odds with the concerns of capitalist tea entrepreneurs*
- Cooperative – the meeting ground

# Operationalising Moral Economy

20

- How subsistence ethics, right to subsistence, social equity are challenged ?
- Globalisation, political transformation, role of the state, trade union, civil society engagement
- Avoiding economic reductionism of market and economy vis-à-vis tea as a commodity
- People's conception of right and wrong in economic matters

# Outlook

21

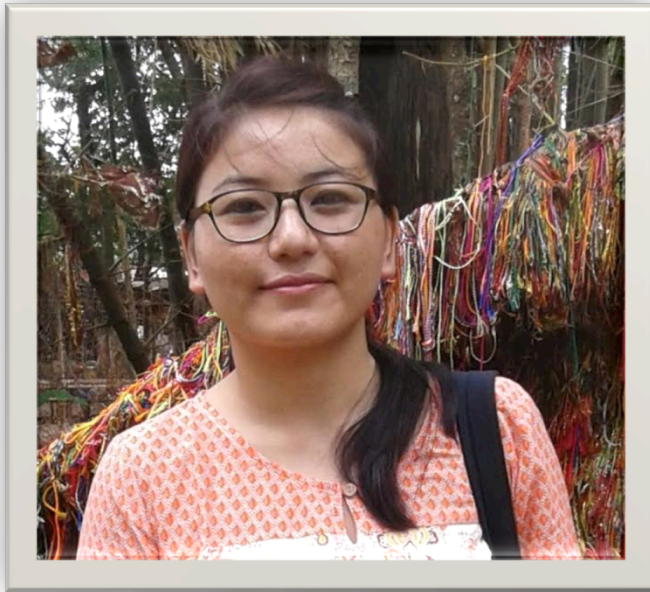
Desk study/preparation	August-December
Field work (Darj/Dooars/Ilam)	December-February
Workshop (NBU)	Mid-February
Summary results Draft papers	March-May
Workshop (UZH) Paper writing (UZH)	June
Final report Finalisation of publications/submission Plan for follow-up activities (proposal?)	July-September

# Engaging research students

22

□ Babika Khawas

□ NBU PhD Student



□ Viveka Gurung

□ NBU PhD Student



□ UZH Masters Student