Affective Solidarities?
Participating in and Witnessing Fair Trade and Women’s Empowerment in Transnational Communities of Practice

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ABSTRACT: The popularity of fair trade products has engendered new possibilities for consumer citizens in the global North to demonstrate solidarity with producers in the global South. Fair trade enthusiasts not only buy labelled products as an act of solidarity with producers in Darjeeling’s tea plantations; but also extend their affective solidarity by voluntarily visiting certified production sites to witness how fair trade affects workers’ livelihoods. Fair trade as transnational praxis has inadvertently pushed justice seeking and delivery to a non-state sphere that is not accountable to the workers in terms of citizenship rights; however, it must address the bargaining power of producers since wages and benefits are baseline determinants of quality of life. Fair trade-engendered solidarity practices erase the complex history of workers’ struggle with the state and established systems of power through collective bargaining. These acts in turn produce new kinds of transnational praxis affecting the plantation public sphere.

KEYWORDS: collective bargaining, fair trade, plantation workers, praxis, public sphere, solidarity, state, transnational voluntourism

When we were young it was the age of unions; now it is the age of NGOs, they are the ones who can bring real reform to these plantations with their new ideas and projects. See how they have involved all these young people from the West to improve our workers’ lives. (Mr Pradhan, manager, Sonakheti tea plantation)

These celebratory comments about how effectively nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) involve volunteers and visitors from Western countries in plantation reform came from the manager of Sonakheti, a fair trade certified tea plantation in Darjeeling district. Mr Pradhan’s observations reflect the increase in ‘voluntourism’, a combination of aid work and tourism. Voluntourists practice sustainable tourism, corporate social responsibility and ethical consumption (Vrasti 2013: 9). As a feminist researcher interested in women’s political lives within fair trade certified plantations I was naturally interested in the effects of fair trade-related voluntourism on women’s everyday political and work lives. But my interest was heightened even more when plantation authorities urged me to observe the activities of these volunteers rather than the operations of traditional labour unions that had recently negotiated an across-the-board wage increase for plantation workers.

As I spent time in Darjeeling’s fair trade certified plantations I realised that the popularity of market-based sustainability and social justice initiatives like fair trade had engendered new possibilities for consumer-citizens in the global North to demonstrate their affective solidarity with producers in the global South by visiting certified production sites to participate in and witness the effects of fair trade on worker’s livelihoods. Their acts of participating in, witnessing, recollecting and documenting the effects of fair trade in turn produced new kinds of knowledge about plantations while affecting the plantation public sphere. Ethnographically documenting these emerging acts of

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voluntourism is important to understand the reach, dynamics and effects of emergent ‘communities of practice’ in the playing field of sustainable development. While existing research, most notably Brown's work (2013), examines U.S.-based actors in these new communities of practice, it is important that we document the new self-appointed voluntourists who operate transnationally to shape fair trade practice and discourse in the developing world. While feminist scholars have examined similar dynamics between Western and non-Western actors within transnational campaigns for women’s human rights (Chowdhury 2011), in this article I use similar feminist frames to attend to the politics of voluntary ‘small acts’ (Brown 2013) as they unfold in Darjeeling, India.

The potential these voluntary acts of solidarity and related transnational praxis hold for increasing the bargaining power of producer-citizens (plantation workers) vis-à-vis the state becomes salient in India since the state regulates wages and other plantation benefits via the plantation labour act. Fair trade as an empowering venture must address the issue of bargaining power of producers since wages and benefits are baseline determinants of quality of life for plantation workers. As I witnessed, fair trade-engendered solidarity practices are erasing the complex history of workers’ struggle against the state and established systems of power through collective bargaining. Fair trade enthusiasts operate on a limited understanding of the political lives of women plantation workers. I argue in this article that, in Darjeeling’s tea plantations, fair trade as transnational praxis has inadvertently pushed justice seeking and delivery to a non-state sphere that is not accountable to the workers in terms of citizenship rights, often articulated through labour organising affiliated with political parties. Further, this privatisation of justice indirectly undermines the possibility of using fair trade to strengthen collective bargaining institutions and inadvertently decreases the state’s accountability to workers. My article contributes to the new line of enquiry in sustainability research that centres on making meaning around sustainability practice and creation of new forms of value (Brown 2013; Sen 2014; West 2012) within communities of practice.

In the rest of this article I provide ethnographic evidence of the growing disconnection between these new kinds of solidarity-based transnational praxis and their effects on plantation associational life, concluding with some theoretical reflections on these affective solidarity practices and their effects. These findings are based on my ethnographic research in Darjeeling district, West Bengal, India, between 2004 and 2011. I conducted participant observation and semi-structured interviews with forty-seven fair trade enthusiasts who visited two tea plantations, Sonakheti and Phulbari, where I conducted most of my research for this article. These fair trade enthusiasts fell into three broad groupings: six tea buyers, thirty-one student visitors and ten student NGO volunteers.

Practicing and Witnessing Fair Trade

My analysis of the forty-seven interviews revealed certain key phrases fair trade enthusiasts used to describe their purpose for visiting fair trade certified plantations. The most frequently cited reasons reflected their affective states: ‘to connect with workers’; ‘to help in fair trade projects’; and sometimes ‘to learn about workers’ lives’, ‘understand them’, or ‘show our support for workers’. Most enthusiasts were European or North Americans who came from diverse backgrounds. The students, who worked as interns in local NGOs, were between eighteen and thirty years old and had some involvement with fair trade related activities or alternative sustainability initiatives in Western countries. The independent tea buyers and NGO volunteers were slightly older, ranging from their late twenties to fifty years of age. Most were consumers of fair trade products in their home countries. A few were tourists travelling on their own who decided to spend a week or two on a sustainable farm. Some had searched online for places where they could participate in fair trade initiatives. They were interested in organic agriculture in the global South and came to experience it on plantations.

Their first point of entry into fair trade related work was the plantation management. Upon their arrival they were assigned to a ‘host’, usually a plantation worker placed fairly high in the plantation hierarchy, who participated in a plantation ‘homestay’ programme. These living arrangements spatially limited fair trade enthusiasts by slotting them within the plantation hierarchy, which closed off certain forms of spontaneous interaction with workers. They were exposed only to a certain class of plantation workers, usually better-off ones, and were inundated with well-rehearsed fair trade propaganda. If visitors wanted to interview workers, their hosts picked the interviewees and also served as interpreters. Those enthusiasts who walked about the plantation on their own expressed surprise at how closely the owner kept tabs on where each visitor went on such excursions. This monitoring was explained as a safety measure.

The only way enthusiasts could learn about fair trade or participate in actual ‘fair trade’ processes was
through participating in Joint Body-managed ‘capacity building’ projects. As new worker-management associations, the Joint Bodies are outside the purview of state monitoring and lack any institutionalised transparent means of operation. All plantation workers in Darjeeling are members of local labour unions that are connected to regional political parties and at times broker deals with the state-controlled tea authorities. It is important to understand that local labour unions are also instrumental in mobilising support for Nepali subnationalism within India.

The two plantations I researched held more frequent Joint Body meetings when the concentration of fair trade enthusiasts was high. Volunteers and visitors were invited to attend Joint Body meetings, which were represented as proxy unions and as sites of critical dialogue and discussion between workers and management. In contrast, the trade unions were portrayed as organisations of violent outsiders who disturbed the peace in plantation communities by politicising simple workers trying to maintain their traditional ways of life. A junior manager, whom fair trade enthusiasts assumed was an average worker, usually convened these Joint Body meetings. The worker-representatives, mostly women, were treated respectfully in front of the visitors.

In a typical meeting the manager would begin with a long list of projects being planned or undertaken with the fair trade premium funds. The manager questioned the workers, who usually responded by describing the ways they benefitted from these projects. Workers seldom brought up any grievances about the projects or the general condition of the plantation in these meetings. Even though workers’ complaints about the Joint Body were widespread, they never brought these up in front of fair trade enthusiasts, who were equated with management. There was absolute silence on the issues of wages, overtime work, casualisation of workers, water shortages and inadequate medical facilities that workers would otherwise discuss.

Fair trade enthusiasts were kept busy engaging in meetings and myriad projects during their short visits. During my interviews with them I probed to see how they understood the everyday reality of Darjeeling’s plantations and the agency they gave fair trade in shaping it. As an interlocutor and interviewer, I came to view the picture taking shape in the visitors’ minds. They would eventually transmit their views of the plantation community and production locales to sites of consumption (in the West) through narrating their eyewitness accounts of fair trade in their home communities and occasional online forums.

I asked Denis, a student volunteer, what he found out about the plantation and the effects of fair trade on women workers from his visit. He replied:

Thanks to Phulrani, I could attend a Joint Body meeting. I know that the children could now access the newly stocked library because of fair trade. She told me about organic agriculture. I had heard that plantations are really harsh on their workers, but it seems that is not true for the fair trade-certified ones. There seems to be a lot of projects going on. I even helped the local children to pick plastic on Sunday.

Knowing that Denis had mentioned wanting to connect with average workers and learn about their struggles, I probed further. I asked what else he knew about Phulrani’s life besides her involvement with the Joint Body. At this Denis looked completely puzzled and we ended our conversation there for the day.

As I reflected on my interactions with fair trade enthusiasts like Denis I realised how certain institutional arrangements framed their orientation to and experience of plantation life. Coupled with this dynamic, their interest in learning about plantation life post-fair trade was a barrier since they had already summed up pre-fair trade plantation life as a case of one-sided worker exploitation. While they were not mistaken about worker exploitation in the postcolonial plantation system in India, they assigned a remarkable amount of agency to fair trade for rectifying such exploitation, which foreclosed possibilities of seeing women plantation workers as having active political lives beyond fair trade and of recognising where the structural issues in the plantation came from.

Therefore Denis and his like never found out that Phulrani had also been a very active member of the labour union since 1985 and was planning to resign her Joint Body membership very soon because she had been refused a loan for her husband’s medical treatment. Phulrani told me she was tired of the Joint Body and its projects. I asked why she, a long-time member, wanted to leave the Joint Body. I asked, ‘Don’t you like taking visitors around?’ Phulrani replied sarcastically, ‘They are nice people, they are our guests, but they are only interested in fair trade and not in us. They want to know more about what the Joint Body is doing than what we are doing. That is why I do not want to tell them anything about myself. Badmouthing the Joint Body is out of the question; I will lose my job then’.

Thus, the stories workers shared with fair trade enthusiasts were always incomplete.

Denis’s and Phulrani’s descriptions of their encounter point to a disconnect typical of exchanges between fair trade enthusiasts and plantation workers.
Workers like Phulrani did not value the Joint Body—hence her comment that fair trade enthusiasts are ‘not interested in us’. Workers considered it their duty to tell fair trade enthusiasts about the fair trade projects because those were what a lot of visitors wanted to participate in. Meanwhile, fair trade enthusiasts participated in fair trade-related projects in a misguided attempt ‘to connect’ with producers. As I mentioned earlier, the most common purpose that fair trade enthusiasts identified for their visits was the desire to connect with local initiatives. The process of connection, as we see here, is fraught with irony since the interactions follow a defined pattern, always within a certain frame.

Ellie told me that she approached the Joint Body at Phulbari plantation to introduce her and Andy to ‘indigenous organic cultivation’. I asked how they found out that the organic methods were indigenous. Andy explained that he had long conversations with the plantation managers, who told him about local shamanic traditions and their effects on the practice of organic and biodynamic agriculture. Andy said, ‘I am so glad that fair trade certification is also reviving these local shamanic traditions’. When I asked what they learned, Ellie said, ‘We met the local shaman, and he told us that fair trade and organics had improved the air which surrounded the plantation, and it improved the average worker’s health’. I knew that the local shaman had given them his stock narrative about fair trade improving workers’ health. He had told me the same thing when I first met him. The same shaman, in other contexts not involving visitors, constantly complained about the acute water shortage on the plantation that was producing various kinds of ailments. He complained, ‘We might breathe fresh air, but cannot control what we eat and drink’. He implied that average workers could not access good nutrition because of all the chemical-laced conventionally grown food that formed their staple diet. He often joked that ‘the tea plant is better cared for than we are’. The form of storytelling about their lives that workers engaged in was limited by their scripted roles when interacting with voluntourists.

Unlike students and volunteers, the tea buyers perhaps had the most deprecatory views about the workers whom they were ultimately aiming to support. I was able to meet and interview seven independent tea buyers who came to the two plantations. Overall, their stated purpose for visiting was to understand how workers lived and worked in fair trade certified organic plantations in Darjeeling. Tea buyers were always housed in the plantation guesthouse instead of homestays, which is how they maximised their interactions with the plantation owner to negotiate good buying deals. Among fair trade enthusiasts I interacted with, the tea buyers spent the least amount of time with average workers.

A fair trade tea buyer proudly commented to me, ‘At least fair trade is doing something good for these illiterate workers, or they would create so much union trouble’. Later, while researching another independent buyer online, I found an interview about the status of a fair trade certified plantation this buyer had visited in Darjeeling in which she proclaimed that ‘plantation workers never go on strike, while strikes by the local militant Gurkha population are rife at other plantations’.3 She seemed to be unaware that all plantations in Darjeeling have unions and all plantation workers receive similar benefits through a uniform wage structure mandated by the federal government. But missing in this tea buyer’s analysis is the fact that union activity for workers’ rights has taken many critical turns in Darjeeling over the last two or three decades because of situated historical and political developments related to ethnic subnationalism and pressures of new market-based interventions. Most alarming is her subtle celebration of the plantation owner’s ability to quell agitating Gurkhas/Indian Nepalis through fair trade, perpetuating the age-old colonial and orientalist representational trope of Nepalis as a martial race with a streak of useless rebelliousness. Although the tea buyers were enthusiastic about connecting with workers, their image of plantation workers in Darjeeling contrasted with their desire to understand workers’ actual lives in fair trade certified plantations.

Similarly, many American volunteers who returned from Darjeeling would contact me in the U.S. to tell me about presentations they made at their universities or churches about the benefits of fair trade in Darjeeling. Through site visits and narratives, these enthusiasts cultivated a sense of themselves as activist consumers participating in real change. However, the effects of their visits and the publicity they gave to plantations can only be understood by examining how the management and workers felt about the changes brought about by fair trade in the years since 1990.

The significance and effects of the witnessing practices created by these peculiar solidarity initiatives can be best understood by locating these practices as a continuation of the longer history of sidelining unions prevalent in Darjeeling’s plantations since the 1980s. Such practices began with the weakening of labour-focused leftist unions. Through long-term research I discovered that fair trade’s entry into plantation life in
the early to mid-1990s coincided with a period of union busting peculiar to Darjeeling district. It became apparent that fair trade inadvertently provided a necessary cover for the gradual creation of a privatised political field within plantations. The building of fair trade-related institutions within plantations, like the Joint Body, only furthered this process. The Joint Body gradually became the face of plantation public life and a poor proxy for elected collective organising bodies. It constantly deflected fair trade enthusiasts’ attention from labour unions as agents of structural change within plantations and valorised the Joint Body as a point of introduction to learn about the region and plantation life. Outside visitors could rarely independently engage with workers and learn about their home-grown efforts to improve their livelihoods and their struggles for justice.

Conclusion

The world-renowned Darjeeling tea industry is an important revenue earner for the Indian state. Over the past few decades prevailing collusion between plantation owners and the local tea bureaucracy has succeeded in keeping wages and benefits for workers stagnant. Regional political mobilisation for many years has also been influenced by the collusions between plantations and the state in terms of decisions to put the wage issue on the local political agenda (Sen 2012). In such a situation it is imperative that we ask what fair trade enthusiasts are able to volunteer for and change amidst these regional modalities of state intervention in plantation life. The celebration of NGO-isation within plantations is the most recent incarnation of plantation profiteering where fair trade-related resources (people and money) are being deployed to detract from productive conversations about the effectiveness and presence of unions in plantations.

Whereas movements like fair trade aim to create global accountability structures to stop exploitation and promote empowerment for producers, some of its self-selected advocates through their voluntourism and transnational solidarity projects actually end up localising accountability in a way that undermines workers’ collective bargaining rights and their citizenship rights vis-à-vis the state at the regional and national levels. In Darjeeling’s plantation workers’ struggles for economic and social justice have in large part been voiced through labour unions. In recent years it has been labour union activism and important shifts in regional politics of subnationalism – not any fair trade project – that has brought about plantation wage increases.

These ‘small acts’ (Brown 2013) of solidarity that unfold in postcolonial space and time are central to the fair trade movement in many ways: fair trade secures a market and makes the movement real for its consumer participants. Fair trade volunteers identify and work towards meeting the ‘needs’ of the dis-enfranchised and documenting their successes. Ironically, the solidarity projects enabled by fair trade enthusiasts produce partial truths about associational life in postcolonial fair trade certified places. These half-truths circulating in virtual and real space in turn sustain relationships of material and discursive dominance of the North over the South. Sadly, the exercise in de-fetishisation that the fair trade movement promises to its supporters and beneficiaries is fraught with contradictions that often render postcolonial plantation workers as ‘people without history’. In transnational communities of practice fair trade practices illustrate forms of neo-colonialism and have potential to reinforce a dependent, subordinate position of developing nations vis-à-vis advanced capitalism societies (Brondo 2013: 155–6).

The way that power works in transnational communities of practice within the fair trade movement prevents fair trade enthusiasts from asking different kinds of questions that could revitalise existing collective bargaining institutions instead of creating new institutions like Joint Bodies. The creation of new standards for witnessing, experiencing and measuring fair trade’s success systematically make labour unions and workers’ citizenship rights vis-à-vis unions and the state progressively less relevant. The practices of fair trade enthusiasts and their effects on plantation politics in Darjeeling remind us of Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty’s (2013: 971) caution about the rhetoric of social inclusion in neoliberal times in which ideas about social justice, empowerment and social transformation take queer forms such that radical ideas can in fact become a commodity to be consumed … no longer seen as … connected to emancipatory knowledge. … Neoliberal governmentalities discursively construct a public domain denuded of power and histories of oppression, where market rationalities redefine democracy and collective responsibility is collapsed into individual characteristics … Such normative understandings of the public domain, where only the personal and the individual are recognizable and the political is no longer a contested domain.

In Darjeeling we witness the effects of solidarity-based neoliberal governmentalities enabling union busting while promoting social justice for poor workers. Fair
trade-enabled voluntourism also helps us understand how neoliberal governmentalities are furthered not only by formalised biopolitics but by ‘cultivating emotional and communicative competencies required from adaptable workers and transgressive entrepreneurs’ (Vrasti 2013: 118).

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Notes

1. The Joint Body is a new kind of worker-management collective body required for fair trade certification. Its key charge is to disburse fair trade premium money that plantations receive for operating capacity-building projects. The Joint Body is supposed to have union representatives, but during my research I found Joint Bodies are largely under management control. A key difference between Joint Bodies and traditional labour unions is that members to the Joint Body were handpicked by plantation managers, whereas unions consist of elected representatives, and every worker is a union-member.

2. Darjeeling’s plantation workers are descendants of Nepali plantation workers who were brought to India in the mid-1800s when the British established tea plantations in this region. Nepali people are a minority within the Indian nation-state, and since the 1980s Nepalis living in Darjeeling have mobilised to seek their own state within the Indian nation. I refer to these movements as Nepali subnationalism. Plantation labour unions have always been part of the citizenship struggles waged by Indian Nepalis, who are ostracised and seen as outsiders. The subnationalist movement’s key goals have been advocating for acceptance of Nepalis as rightful citizens of India through territorial demands. More recently the movement advocated for reform of plantation labourers’ wages, forcing the Indian Tea Board to agree to a wage rate increase.

3. To protect the identity of my informants, I have abstained from citing the websites where they wrote their accounts using their real names. For informants who have made their comments or activities available to the general public, I have used their real names instead of pseudonyms to document their acts of participating in and ‘witnessing fair trade’ – a central theoretical and empirical claim of this article.

References


