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Fair Trade As A Framework For Ethical Globalization: Evidence From Darjeeling Tea Plantations

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Abstract: This paper critically examines fair trade policies in the context of Darjeeling tea plantations, highlighting their disjunction from the lived realities of vulnerable plantation workers. Although initiated with the intent of advancing justice and improving livelihoods, fair trade often reproduces the same exploitative patterns embedded in mainstream global trade, wherein structural inequalities persist and wealth remains unevenly distributed. Workers continue to experience conditions shaped by colonial hierarchies of authority, oppression and dependency, with limited empowerment. Instead of fostering collective strength, fair trade has in some instances deepened divisions between members and non-members of the Joint Body. While marketed globally as a mechanism of ethical consumption—appealing to consumer conscience—its benefits rarely reach the intended beneficiaries. The study argues that without addressing entrenched forms of exploitation and powerlessness, fair trade risks becoming a symbolic gesture rather than a transformative tool of ethical globalization.

Index Terms - fairtrade, ethical globalisation, Darjeeling tea plantations, plantation workers.

I. INTRODUCTION

Tea is one of the most important beverages in the world consumed by almost all sections of the population stratum. The story of tea is also the story of power, as colonialism made tea the epitomising drink of the British (White, 2010). Historically, the plantation economies in general and the tea sector in particular have been associated with bondage and indenture labour systems, implying varying degrees of un-freedom for the labourers (Deepak K. Mishra et al., 2012). This system of indentured labour amounted to 'semi-slavery' and that the system of control over labour was highly authoritarian and oppressive (Ranajit Das Gupta, 1986). Coercion, low wages and immigrant labour were initially the three important or rather inseparable components of the plantation system. The Plantation-Raj was also a mini British-Raj (Sarkar and Rai, 1986). Fear and lack of job security was the driving force and still is that forms a major hindrance in the contradicting scenario of the rapidly growing and 'globalising' Indian economy on one hand and the socially as well as economically enslaved plantation economy on the other hand. The plantations, as Jan Breman (1989) says are enclaves of capitalist production. Thus defining the plantation system, and dividing it into "plantation economy", "plantation sub-economy," "enclave plantation economy," Beckford (1973) argues that regardless of whether proprietorship is held by the state, subsidiaries of large international concerns, tenants, or families, the system fosters dependency and underdevelopment. Beckford goes on to identify seven pernicious social effects of the plantation structure: (1) the rigid stratification of class, race, and colour which inhibits social mobility and eventually underutilizes human resources; (2) the inherency of conflict and social instability; (3) the monopoly of the "means of production, especially land"; (4) the severe constriction of investment goals; (5) the undermining of co-operative enterprises; 6) the retardation of the development of local government and administration; and (T) the permanent debilitation and impoverishment of the peasant sector.

According to Edgar T. Thompson (1935), plantation is a form of political organization for the purpose of producing an agricultural staple which usually is sold upon a world-market. He states that plantation ends where the planter's authority ends. The modern plantation has arisen as an incident in what Reich has called "the Europeanization of humanity: it has arisen in modern times to meet the requirements of an expanding European culture, but not ordinarily where this expanding culture has been unaccompanied by population expansion as well as by trade expansion. The early use of the term corresponded to the Dutch word Volk-planting; a population of a certain sort was regarded as being transported and planted, like trees, where they might be profitable (Thompson, 1935). Plantation is hence, first of all a unit of authority over people which comes to be defined and expressed in terms of territory (Thompson, 1941).

Despite the colonial aspect of the plantation system, many scholars have affirmed its international character. The plantation has been associated with most political and international developments of modern time: mercantilism and free trade, slavery and independence, capitalism and imperialism (Greaves, 1958). The plantation is oriented toward metropolitan centres where staple prices are set, where credit is extended and capital is available, and where supplies are purchased (Tomich, 2011). Thus as Thompson emphasizes, "the internal organization of the plantation is a function of the external situation which includes not only its major market centres, but also its competitors in other parts of the world". Thus, the plantation system is broadly defined as that which is foreign-owned and export-oriented (Girvan, 2009).

1.1Plantation and the Labour System:

Work-force constitutes the most important aspect of the plantation system. Focusing on the tea plantations, labourers form not only the vital instruments of tea production but also the moving force in the tea economy as a whole (Sarkar and lama, 1986). Tea plantations in West Bengal are not mere economic production units but are social institutions and to a large extent, control the lives of their resident workforce (Khawas, 2006). The tea plantations have an explicit characteristic of hierarchical management pattern. The workers or the labourers occupy the lowest level in the hierarchy. Such levels of hierarchy in the plantations led to the emergence of a distinct class structure as put forward by Xaxa in his paper 'Colonial Capitalism and Underdevelopment in North Bengal' (1998). According to him, this class structure comprised of small group of managers and their assistants at the top who were generally Europeans or Anglo-Indians, the skilled workers comprised largely Bengalis and the unskilled workers were invariably tribals comprising different ethnic groups with their own language, culture and custom. This class segregation along such ethnic lines was a product of colonial capitalism which on one hand created ethnic frictions among the mass of plantation labourers while on the other hand brought about ethnic and class solidarity among the managerial and intermediary class. (ibid.). Post independence, the high-class elite Indians occupied the management but they retained the tools and techniques of the British colonial model and continue to oppress their rural workers (LaFavre, 2013). The plantation thus necessitated a labour force that was "at once both mobile and locally concentrated, such as could be obtained either from coerced natives or by the importation of indentured, contract, or slave labour..." (Thompson, 1975).

In order to break free from the ills of such colonial legacy, a major development that took place in labour reforms post-independence was the enactment of the Plantation Labour Act of 1951. It was implemented to regulate the working conditions of the workers and also mandate the availability of basic provisions like housing, health and welfare facilities to promote social development. Since then, several amendments to the same Act have taken place. In the 1990s, another development called 'fair trade' took place with the notions of social justice and fairness to protect the rights of the workers by helping them gain access to the world market. The most widely accepted definition of fair trade is: "A trading partnership based on dialogue, transparency and respect that seek greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to and securing the rights of disadvantaged producers and workers- especially in the South. Fair trade organisations (backed by consumers) are engaged actively in supporting producers, awareness raising and in campaigning for changes in the rules and practice of conventional international trade" (the International Fair Trade Association (IFAT), the European Fair Trade Association (EFTA) the Network of European World Shops (NEWS!) and the Fair Trade Labelling Organisations International (commonly known as FLO). Thus, the fair trade movement stresses on a socially viable working and living conditions of the workers and environmentally sound agricultural practices.

II. OBJECTIVES:

With this background, the paper aims to seek the following objectives:

1) To analyse the concept of fair trade in Darjeeling tea plantations and examine it within the ambit of the lives and work of the tea plantation workers and their understanding of the idea of [un]fairness.

2) To explore the nature of spatial variations (social, economic and physical) in the quality of life of the plantation labour force in the conventional and fair trade tea gardens of Darjeeling Hills.

III. DATABASE AND METHODOLOGY:

Relevant data and information was collected through both primary and secondary data sources. In view of the contextual background and the concerned objectives, worker level survey was conducted in one of the tea estates of Darjeeling Hills which was a pioneer in certifying its tea under Fair Trade. Focus group discussions, participatory observations and oral narratives were methods used to achieve the objectives of the study.

IV. FAIR TRADE AND THE DARJEELING TEA PLANTATION WORKERS:

The hills of Darjeeling sitting calmly in the midst of the mighty Himalayan range is a paradox in itself. The region since its very transformation from a dense and inaccessible forested terrain to a zone of habitation has been confronted and contested with a complex set of events right from a strong colonial history to the setting up of tea plantations to the Gorkha agitation for separate statehood. All these factors have shaped and reshaped the entire region. Thus, in the myriad of complexities that the region possesses as a whole, it becomes pertinent to not only understand but probe into the matter of development/under-development of the tea plantations that form one of the most important revenue earning sector for the region, state and the country as a whole and also the lives of the thousands of labourers whose lives intrinsically depend on it.

Fair trade has taken a centre-stage since the early 1990s leading to the rapid increase in the number of fair trade certified tea plantations in Darjeeling hills. Certifications such as fair trade are granted by international non-state agencies who comply with a set of prescribed standards and pay administrative fees to cover the overhead of certification (Besky, 2014). Based on the perceived notions of what is fair and what is unfair along with the endeavour to promote social and economic development particularly of the disadvantaged workers, the fair trade institutions tend to define and also make it universally acceptable their understanding of the 'idea of fairness'. Fair trade was seen as an alternative discourse within conventional markets (Moore, 2010). Fair trade certifiers came to Darjeeling in the 1990s and it was seen as an optimal way to solve the ills of post-colonial tea production (Besky, 2010). There are four fair trade certified producers in Darjeeling- Chamong, Ambootia, Makaibari and the Tea Promoters of India. The tea plantations in Darjeeling hills are thus quickly catching up with the concept of fair trade. Today, almost one-third of the 87 tea plantations in Darjeeling are under fair trade certification.

However, it can be seen in the Darjeeling tea plantations that the elements of fair trade were imposed disregarding the ground realities faced by the region. The umbrella implementation of fair trade principles in an extremely hierarchical set-up plagued by an authoritative system seems to be highly problematic. Moreover, the purpose of fair trade which aims at social justice, fairness and sustainable development is being squeezed with the increasing efforts of mainstreaming the movement. The logic of allowing plantation production seems to be more closely tied to encouraging greater corporate participation in fair trade (Reed, 2009).

Thus, in order to understand the dynamics of fair trade in relation to the workers, a tea plantation was selected and the selection was based on the plantations' length of experience with fair trade. The Greenfield tea plantation (real name not used) was selected which perfectly fit into the criteria as it was the first to acquire both organic and fair trade certification in the early 1990s. The Greenfield tea plantation is regarded as a successful model of fair trade in tea plantations. This plantation comprises of seven villages and is the only plantation where the owner resides within the premises. The workers residing in these seven villages are already fourth generation migrants and consider Greenfield tea plantation as their homeland.

Since the field work was conducted in December 2023 to January 2024, more than three decades after the plantation received fair trade certification, the expected notion was that the workers would be having a fair idea about fair trade and its workings. However, what was discovered in the field was not only the lack of knowledge regarding fair trade but also a clear division among the management and a handful of workers (members of the Joint Body) who had an understanding of fair trade on one hand and the majority of plantation

workers on the other hand who did not even have the slightest understanding of the policy which was all in all shaping their lives. Some of the workers though had a fair idea of the Joint Body, they did not know much about its functioning. Joint Body was often used as a synonym for fair trade by the workers. The workers were not aware of the facilities if any) that was provided through the fair trade premium. *"Fair trade haru hami kehi jandainow, hamiley janeyko eti matra ho- sickle, namlo ra doko"* (We do not know anything about fair trade, the only things we know about are a sickle, namlo-headstrap and doko- basket made of bamboo).

However, on the other hand, interaction with the worker representatives of fair trade revealed the use of fair trade premium for various purposes like construction of library, scholarships to students passing the secondary and higher secondary examinations and financial assistance to workers for opening home-stays for tourists. While all of this does offer a satisfactory picture to the fair trade certifying organisations who make a visit to the field for yearly assessment, the reality seems starkly different. For instance the library which was constructed through the fair trade premium money seemed to be hardly in use. The computers in the library remained untouched most of the time. Thus it can be clearly seen that facilities such as the library and the computers were made available according to what was thought proper by the management and the fair trade bodies and were far from what the workers actually and desperately required. The absence of any kind of motivation, incentive and lack of time made these facilities remain underutilised. Apart from the seldomly organised drawing and poetry competitions for the worker's children (the pictures of which were all over the notice board in the plantation's office); going to the library by the workers and their children did not fit into their priority list.

In addition to this, distance was another constraining factor for the six villages because the library was located in the village which housed the factory, the management office and the owner's residence. When asked whether there was any effort from the workers themselves to raise these grievances, they bluntly replied,
"hamiley ta uhiley dekhin bhandai aayeko kuro ho...power ley nai sabai kura hunchha" (We have been telling them about our difficulties and problems for a long time now but only power makes everything possible).
Another notable aspect is that it was only after almost two decades of implementation of the fair trade policy that the use of premium was being known. The workers had very little knowledge about the source of scholarship money that was awarded to meritorious students. Some thought that it was the owner who was distributing scholarship money to their children while some had no clue about it. Such a situation clearly indicates the lack of effort from the management and the Joint body members to make the majority of the workers understand the concept and functioning of fair trade. The workers mourning their plight complained about the management and the fair trade members saying,
"Hami ta lata manchhey ho, hamilai jey bhanda pani hunchha. Hamilai ta uhiley dekhin nai latyako chha, joteko chha" (We are very simple people, they can tell us anything. They have been lying to us since the very beginning, it's like we have been hypnotised)
At Greenfield- the plantation which proudly associated it with fair trade and the fair trade organisations that in-turn saw it as a glorious example, the workers' side of the story showed a contradictory picture. The workers were unaware of fair trade.
"Aabo hamiley facilities haru payeko bhayein ta thhaha hunthyo hola ni fair trade k ho bhanera, hamilai kehi ramro bhayeko pani chhaina tesai karan thaha pani na bhayeko hola" (If we had received the benefits of fair trade then maybe we would have known about it but since there is no good happening to us- that might be the very reason of us being unaware of it).
The workers further asserted that the Joint Body consisted of only those members close to the management and that elections were seldom held. The workers also complained that only the Joint Body members gained from the fair trade premium.
"Fair trade ko paisa ta aowdai hola ni... tara bhitra bhitrai harowdai pani hola- hamiley ta kehi thhaha powdaina" (The money through fair trade may be flowing into the plantation but it may also be getting lost within the system that we do not have any clue about).
There was a common notion in the plantation that the members of the Joint Body (interchangeably used for fair trade by the workers) sided with the management and therefore the decisions taken were not targeted towards the community development of the workers.
"Malik ko pyaro ho Joint Body ta ani sir haru sanga nai chucho milayera hidchhan iniharu" The workers complained about the preferential treatment of the Joint Body members and ridiculed how these body members were always found around the management).

Also, the ground reality of the safety measures prescribed by the fair trade standards such as fair working conditions for the workers were negligible and almost absent. For instance the workers working in the field in the peak afternoon hours and most of them suffering from high pressure were not even provided with mere hats to protect them from the harsh sunrays which are enough to cause multiple skin diseases and headaches. There were no provisions in-case of accidents in the field and the burden fell on the victim himself/herself. Upward mobility was almost absent in the tea plantations. Women, who joined the plantations as field workers, even after working for more than thirty five years in the plantations, remained as a field worker. Hence there was no vertical movement (another fundamental aspect of fair trade) in the employment hierarchy in the tea plantations. Thus the reality showed a picture that was completely different from the advertisements found in the websites of the fair trade organisations and companies which portrayed fair trade as a life-changer and how the movement helped bring a positive change in the lives of the thousands of workers toiling in the fair trade tea plantations. By contrast, the field visit revealed that the workers continued to live in a plight of misery with deteriorating facilities and that democratic participation was next to impossible in such a hierarchical structure that was colonially induced.

Contradicting the objective of fair trade, Besky (2008) states that a new kind of symbiosis is created between production and consumption in which the owners are happy because fair trade tea fetches more on the international market than non-fair trade tea and consumers are happy because they are empowering "small farmers" through their consumption practices. The universalism of fair trade system resonates with neoliberalisation and the construction of a single global free market (ibid.). Fair trade has created spaces in which a complex array of power relations interact creating outcomes which are not necessarily intended by any one actor. Such interactions can partly explain the very different reality found in Indian tea fields as compared to that which is portrayed to consumers purchasing fair trade tea in supermarket aisles (Moore, 2010).

V. CONCLUSION:

This paper thus attempts to critically analyse the policies of fair trade and how such contemporary policies fail to take into account the realities of the vulnerable plantation workers whose lives seem to be intrinsically intertwined with it. Therefore, fair trade as a global policy for workers tend to remain disjointed as it falls again in the same loop as the mainstream economics of trade and commerce resulting in the rich becoming richer and the poor remaining poor.

It can thus be seen how the tea plantation workers still live in a colonially induced pattern with fear and hopelessness. Though fair trade began with a noble motive of helping these workers, it is yet to achieve its goals. The fair trade policy has further weakened the solidarity amongst the workers creating friction between the members and non-members of the Joint Body. Thus the 'global' notions of justice and fairness seem to be superimposed in a structure where streaks of colonialism in the forms of authority, oppression and extreme hierarchy still persist. The fair trade by attacking the consumers' conscience of how a'cup of fair trade tea' would promote development of the disadvantaged workers has gained popularity but on the other hand, the sad truth of how these benefits hardly reach its beneficiaries, in this case the tea plantation workers still needs to be brought to the forefront in order to etch out a long term solution. In all, the fair trade movement in its bid to expand to the tea plantations has failed to understand the nature of exploitation and the sense of powerlessness that the workers themselves perceive.

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