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L'exemple d'une plantation de Darjeeling*

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/3400>

DOI: 10.4000/samaj.3400

ISSN: 1960-6060

Publisher

Association pour la recherche sur l'Asie du Sud (ARAS)

Electronic reference

Nicolas Lainé, "Arnaud Kaba, *Les réalités du commerce équitable: L'exemple d'une plantation de Darjeeling*", *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* [Online], Book Reviews, Online since 31 May 2012, connection on 02 October 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/samaj/3400> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.3400>

This text was automatically generated on 2 October 2022.



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Kaba, Arnaud (2011), *Les réalités du commerce équitable: L'exemple d'une plantation de Darjeeling*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 183 p., ISBN 978-2-296-55173-2 [in French]

This book, an anthropology of labour in Indian society, is an outcome of Arnaud Kaba's M.Phil. thesis defended in 2010.¹ It deals with 'fair trade' as a recent model of production often idealized but also criticized as it has been sometimes used as a simple marketing tool by companies. Taking Dharmabari, a tea garden plantation located in Darjeeling as a case study, the objective is to study this specific management instrument and its social consequences. Deployed over 6 km² and employing 1000 workers, Dharmabari is considered a medium size plantation in the area. It has been run as a family business since its creation at the end of the 19th century. Since the 'fair trade' label is supposed to benefit labourers, the author undertakes to examine the correlation between this particular model of production and the improvement of the living conditions of labourers in Dharmabari. Taking his cue from earlier studies of tea garden plantations, Arnaud Kaba starts with the premise that the plantation is a 'closed system of exploitation' (p.20). His research involves studying 'the interactions between different groups with divergent interests (trade unions, workers, management) within the plantation' (p. 19), and situating them in an historical perspective. The case material is based on two fieldwork visits (three months each) conducted in 2009 and 2010, during which the author was a member of a volunteer project in the plantation.

The structure of the book is composed of six chapters. In chapters 1, 2 and 3 the author exposes a detailed monograph, which can be summed up as 'a day at the plantation'.

These provide background on the place and the working areas (from the factory to the garden itself), present the various groups of actors in the plantation, and explain their role in the system of production.

Chapter 1 describes the tasks performed in the production of tea leaves as a final product: picking and ruling of the leaves, weighing, preparation of the leaves and their fermentation. Through participant observation method, the author is implicated in each step of the process. His analysis reveals the hierarchical relations between workers as well as the various strategies used by labourers to manage their time and to create a space of liberty for themselves in a context of monotonous and repetitive work. Though it is not necessarily the author's intention, the strength of this meticulous description is to reveal the complexity of each task. It provides a glimpse of the scope of knowledge and skill possessed by the labourers and mobilized in their work. A typical example is the way the tea leaves should be picked from the bushes, an apparently simple gesture, but that requires considerable skill.

Whereas the first chapter is dedicated to plantation workers situated on the lowest rungs (*i.e.*, the labourers), chapter 2 focuses on higher-ranked workers, such as foremen, supervisors, administrative staff and the inevitable figure of the planter, who occupies a large part of it. The chapter starts with an interesting discussion of 'fair trade' from a philosophical and epistemological point of view and its necessary adaptation for fitting the needs of the plantation. The author's initial training in philosophy is particularly useful for understanding, from Kant to Steiner, the roots of this particular system of management. It allows the author to characterise the Dharmabari plantation as part of a sustainable agriculture program including the idea of a community-based village. The analysis brings out the limitations of this model (p. 48). But the most interesting point of this chapter is the description of the personality of the planter himself, a very complex character according to the author, a direct descendant of the *zamindari system* of management, who evokes '*fear and love*' from his employees (p.51). The chapter concludes by presenting other staff members who assist the owner and by describing the rules and regulations within the plantation. It also provides information about the solidarity that appears to exist between the labourers and their direct hierarchy (the foremen). The author observed a kind of tolerance from the supervisors towards labourers, but this tolerance is nevertheless very flexible and ingeniously exercised according to the different levels of productivity within the factory (p.66).

Continuing with the ethnographical exploration of a day on the plantation, chapter 3 focuses on what happens after work, and makes a turn back towards the labourers. The author invites the readers to learn more about their living conditions by examining their dwellings, located in areas surrounding the plantation. It also provides an opportunity to focus on religious practices (mainly Hindu and Buddhist), and on the domestic and informal economy of the villages.

In chapter 4 the author defines what he considers the two main factors that tie the labourers to the plantation: their attachment to the soil and the 'bonds of domination' that characterise their social condition. The first point is demonstrated with an historical approach examining the settlement of the area by Gorkhas (taken in his broad definition to include not only Gorkhas, but any people of Nepalese origin living in the area) during the colonial period. This allows the author to expose the bonds with the soil as a given (p. 107), reproduced over generations. Indeed, Gorkhas constitute the

main workforce in tea garden plantations in the Darjeeling area. The second point, the most important without a doubt, concerns the phenomena grouped under the general term 'bonds of domination'. They are presented and explained through a critique of the *zamindari system* in India. This system, which vested authority in the *zamindar*, was transposed or reproduced in tea plantations in the second half of the 20th century. It effectively attached the labourers to the *zamindar* on whom they depended for their livelihoods and basic needs. The chapter concludes by questioning to what extent this system of management is still in operation today in the Dharmabari plantation.

The following chapter, entitled 'the governance of the plantation', attempts to answer this question. It focuses, point by point, on the various advantages the 'fair trade' label is supposed to bring to the labourers of the plantation. In the first paragraph the reader is told that through the use of this label, the owner avoids having to depend on the '*tea auction*' to sell his tea, and that Dharmabari's production is sold on an average at thrice the price of that of other conventional tea gardens in the area. However, we also learn that the owner does not ensure the social and working conditions supposedly guaranteed by the label (working of women and children, education, health of the employees, access to water). This does not seem to upset the labourers, most of whom are not aware of their rights or the benefits the label is supposed to procure, nor does it seem to alarm the visitors (foreigners) to the plantation. The chapter concludes by stating that the fair trade label is, in the present case, clearly an instrument whose benefits, channelled toward the planter, contribute to the economic growth of the plantation.

In chapter 6 the author traces the political history of Darjeeling pointing out the current stakes and debates regarding the creation of an autonomous district. The author is trying to establish a link between this political situation and trade union activism in Dharmabari. Within the plantation the trade union members have very little decision-making power and almost no political consciousness. This is seen as a paradox because, on one hand, the union members have a strong will to obtain an autonomous district, but on the other hand, they have a very limited political consciousness regarding their rights on the plantation (p.169).

Arnaud Kaba demonstrates very clearly the ways in which the tea garden owner ingeniously uses to his advantage the fair trade label, this being the main argument of the book. Thus, in the conclusion the author shows that for the case of Dharmabari, labelling the production as 'fair trade' helped the planter to legitimize his discourse and attitudes towards his employees by offering them a minimum guarantee of employment in an otherwise negative economic environment. The author summarizes the current relationship between the planter and the labourers as follows: '*the important thing is that he could pose as their leader and protector*' (p.172). This relationship is analysed as an expression of a new form of domination (symbolic, economic, and hierarchical) exercised by the planter over his employees. The study reveals that it enabled the growth and development of the plantation at a lower cost. Thanks to the 'fair trade' marketing strategy the owner is now able to maintain his current production output (low), and sell at a higher price without investing in new (and expensive) equipment. Dharmabari tea is now available in the US, Japan and Europe.

For its ethnographical value, the well-detailed description of a day at work in the Dharmabari plantation in the first three chapters constitutes the primary asset of the book. Throughout his description the author makes an interesting back-and-forth

between the various actors present in the plantation (*i.e.*, the labourers, the foremen, and the planter). The author also adopts a non-linear narrative (with regard to the process of manufacturing) to expose the various tasks within the factory. Nevertheless this choice of presentation perhaps obscures other relevant data regarding, for instance, the sexual division of labour within the plantation. The place and role of the women in the production process appear indeed very crucial from the very beginning of the production process—picking the leaves—, to the last task in the factory—packaging tea in boxes; likewise, their role in the domestic economy of the labourers after work would also deserve more attention. For example, women are usually in charge of distilling and selling alcohol, which appears to be a crucial element in the social life in the village.

The book is well written in a fine ethnographic style. Nevertheless, there are some small problems; a better and systematic translation of general English terms and expressions used by labourers is missing, and a lexicon of all Hindi and Nepali words would have been appreciated. The text contains some factual errors: Nagaland (p. 50) is not an area but a State (the first to get statehood in Northeast India in 1963), as is Meghalaya (p.145) (not the capital of Assam as stated).

In summary, Arnaud Kaba offers an illuminating analysis of new forms of domination at work today in India. However due to the nature of this work (an M.Phil. thesis) and its built-in constraints, the author was not able to provide a more generalised theorization about the evolution of the relations of domination experienced in the plantation context. The analysis would have gained from a comparison with a plantation that follows a more conventional model of production and/or operating in a non-family-based mode, or in another part of the country. Because of this limitation, Dharmabari plantation appears as a specific case, which is perhaps not very representative of the vast and complex world of labour in India.

NOTES

1. Cf. Arnaud Kaba, *Commerce équitable, mouvements sociaux et pouvoir familial : ethnographie d'une plantation de thé dans le « pays des collines »*, M.Phil. Thesis, EHESS, Toulouse, 2010, 104 p.

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