

'T' (EA) IS FOR *TERROIR*: AN ANALYSIS OF THE BRANDING AND  
VALUATION OF DARJEELING TEA

by

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A THESIS

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: 'T'(ea) is for *Terroir*: An Analysis of the Branding and Valuation of Darjeeling Tea

Darjeeling Tea is one of the most expensive types of tea sold today. It has a Geographical Indication (GI) Status that brings it under the intellectual property regime. The tea is valued for the cultural category it signifies, beyond its utility. This research investigates how recognition as a GI product has helped in fetching these premiums, and what meanings are being produced by analyzing how the tea is represented in images and words by different actors. This research reveals that the value of Darjeeling Tea is inextricably tied to meanings of authenticity and rarity that have existed long before the GI status was introduced, and the contradictions produced in the different ways these meanings are produced and values are created, revealing the complex web of capital, human behavior and power structures that span across space and scale.

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*Dedicated to my ancestors who made the journey...*

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Thousands of miles away from the tea gardens, one of the popular tea bars in Eugene proudly puts up its menu with teas from Sri Lanka, Yunnan (China), Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Darjeeling, as people around are happily sipping away from a \$5 cup that has crossed hands, factories, ships and seas in our globalized world. As the world gets entrenched deeper into an increasingly neoliberal globalization with ever more complex interconnections and interdependence between states and flows of goods and capital, more often than not food and beverages served on the table have been sourced from different parts of the world. From coffee sourced through Guatemala to wine from the vineyards of California, most of the food would have traveled long miles to get to our dining tables. It is a salient trait of the consumption of mass-produced food and beverage that consumers are removed from the place of production, its source, production process, and labor conditions. Food and beverage consumption is enmeshed in a complex web of capital, human behavior and power structures that span across space and scale.

Social movements like the Slow Food Movement, Fair Trade, etc. have encouraged consumers to think about where their food comes from, and under what conditions it was produced, but like most studies on these social movements show, only half of the picture comes into focus. What gets framed, and who does the framing and towards what purpose, is a matter of how power is distributed across space and time. This research explores similar framings of Darjeeling Tea, an expensive tea sold around the world and marketed as a place-based product. I analyze how the tea is represented in images and words by different

actors involved in its promotion before and after it was brought under the folds of the Intellectual Property regime, in order to understand the process of value creation for the tea. While the tea has been able to garner premiums in the market, I question how recognition as a GI product has helped in fetching these premiums. I ask what meanings are being assigned to the tea, how those serve to make it distinct.

## Background

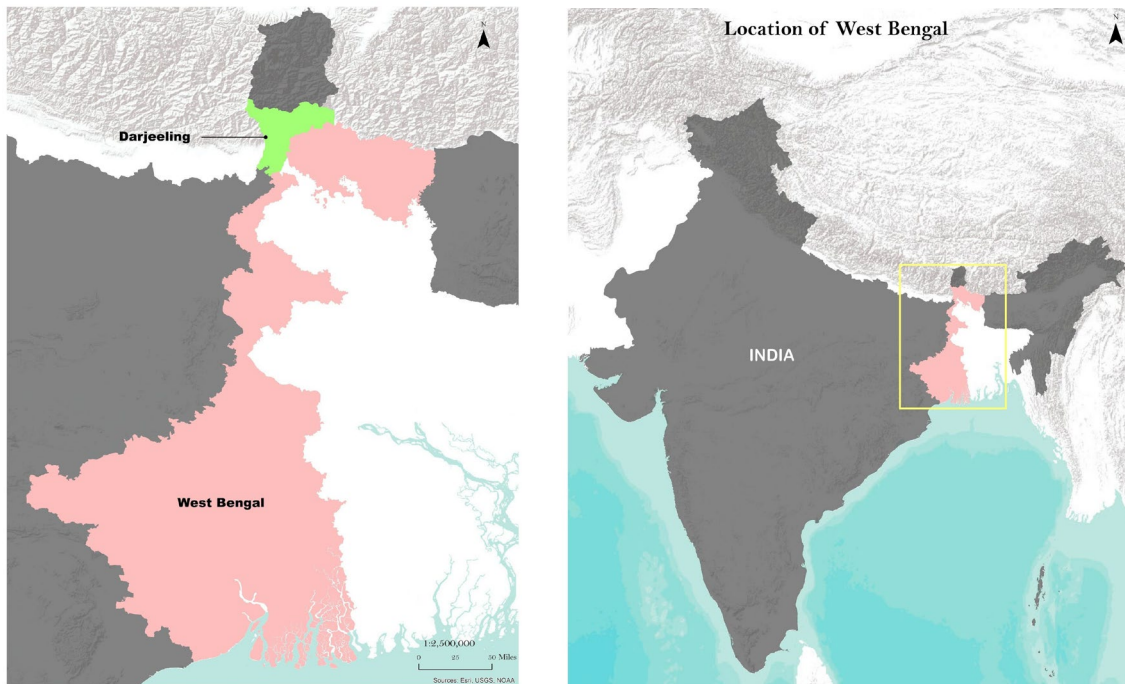


Figure 1: Maps locating West Bengal and Darjeeling

Darjeeling is a district situated in the north-eastern regions of the West Bengal state in India. The hills of Darjeeling, particularly Kalimpong, served as important points through which the trans-Himalayan trade passed with the exchange of goods and people across the region before the colonial British Empire “discovered” Darjeeling (Shneiderman, 2018; Middleton, 2018). The small hill town and the tea that it is famous

for, is steeped in a colonial history that has largely and undoubtedly altered the political, cultural and economic geography of the region. When someone looks up Darjeeling online, the first links that come up are those of tea and tourism, which complements how locals talk about Darjeeling being famous for three T's: Tea, Tourism and Timber. Today, Darjeeling is most commonly known for Darjeeling Tea, its reputation as the 'Queen of the Hills', and its touristic appeal. When the British conducted a survey of Darjeeling in the 1800's, it was categorized as a "wasteland" that could be transformed into a summer sanatorium for British officials. The same wasteland was also seen as a fertile testing ground for growing tea, transforming "wild wastelands" into "gardens" in the wake of the Opium War with China.

Darjeeling Tea is an orthodox black tea that is renowned for its light, 'muscatel' body that is said to engulf one's palate. *Camelia Sinensis*, the tea bush that produces this tea, was originally brought in from China by British botanists during the 1800's and it was successfully experimented with in the hills of Darjeeling. These hills, which were seen as wild and untamable, became a site for reform and "domesticated exoticism" (Besky, 2014, P49), where the unruly wild forests and hills could be transformed into cured and tamed "garden spaces" and also a site for summer relaxation for officials in Calcutta. This transformation required labor, and the Lepcha, Limbu and Bhutia people who inhabited the region were not enough to make that happen (Shneiderman and Middleton, 2018). Hence, people from ethnic groups in the Nepalese territory, who were seen as "loyal, sturdy hillmen" in the deterministic colonial categorization of peoples and bodies, were recruited.

An informal recruitment system known as *Sardari* played an important role for colonial plantations, where local middlemen called *Sardars* organized, supplied and

managed labor for the plantations (Middleton, 2018). “*Chiya ko bot ma paisa falchha*” (Money grows on tea shrubs) was a common saying among people who migrated from the eastern hills of Nepal, including my great-great grandparents who walked eastwards in search of money growing tea shrubs. The imagination and hope that the saying evoked, along with the need to flee from the oppressive autocratic Rana regime back home, pushed many people to make the journey towards tea gardens that budded with money. This wave of migration has shaped the demographic make-up of Darjeeling today, with the largely *Khas-Kura* (Nepali)-speaking population adopting the pan-Nepali-speaking identity of the ‘Gorkha’.

In the summer of 2017, everyday livelihood activities came to a halt for a hundred and three days in the Darjeeling hills, including tea plantations and factories that process the tea. All workers in Darjeeling went on strike. The prolonged demand for the state of Gorkhaland, separate from the state of West Bengal in India, had reached a tipping point again, as the fourth movement for statehood in the last hundred years gained momentum. The crowds of shoppers in the *Bazaar* areas were replaced by large rallies of angry locals demanding a homeland for themselves, and for Indian Gorkhas scattered all over India. Beneath these demands lay deep-seated aspirations of recognition and autonomy of the peoples who deem themselves linguistically, culturally, ethnically and historically distinct from the majority of the people of West Bengal.

After the independence of India, when the British planters sold off their tea estates, it was mostly Indian politicians and businessmen from the plains, and not the Nepali-speaking population, who filled the vacancies left behind by the British, which brought a wave of internal neo-colonialism, with the tea industry dominated by Bengalis and

Marwaris and large corporate companies (Shneiderman and Middleton, 2018). Darjeeling Tea is, today, one of the most expensive teas sold globally for up to hundreds of dollars per pound, while workers on plantations earn around a dollar and a half per day. Because neo-colonialism resulted in Nepali-speaking people being stuck in a cycle of poverty in these plantations, there was a strong catalyst for political mobilization for regional autonomy of Darjeeling from the state of West Bengal. The goal was to form a new state, the state of Gorkhaland (Besky, 2018).

### **Darjeeling Tea and GI: A History**



Figure 2: Buds of the *Camelia Sinensis* Tea Bush in Darjeeling

Darjeeling Tea is produced and sold by *flush* (harvesting season)- fresh shoots (two leaves and a bud) that are plucked every week beginning with first flush in spring and ending with autumn flush in mid-November, with each flush producing distinctive characteristics (Koehler, 2015). Because it is produced only within the stipulated tea-



growing region in Darjeeling, it is protected and distinguished by international laws through its Geographical Indication (GI) Status.

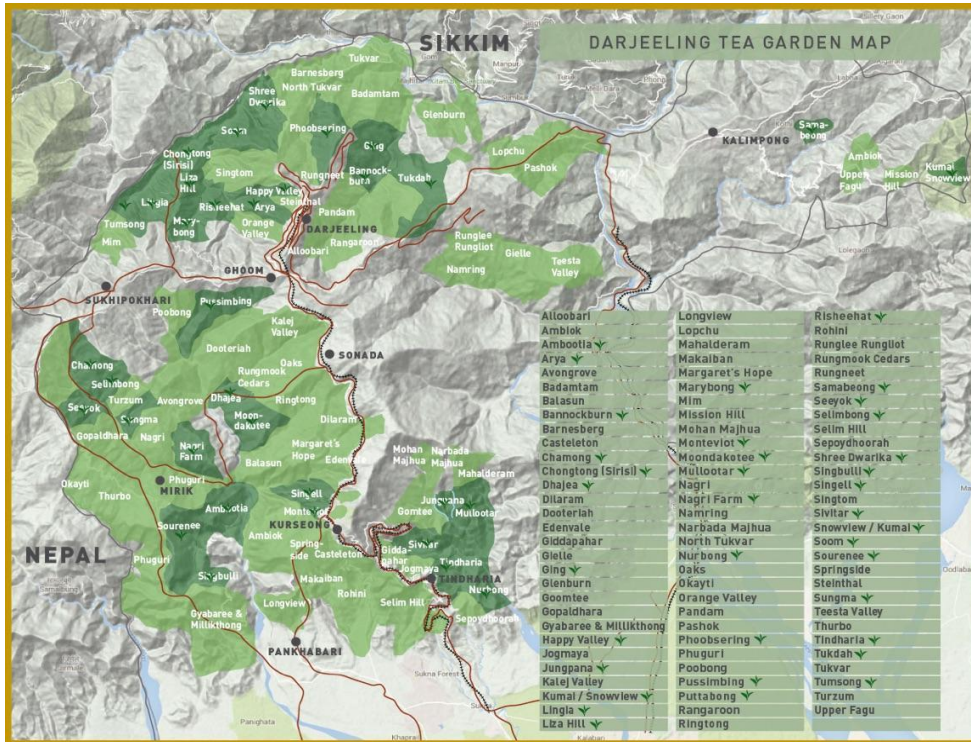


Figure 3: Darjeeling Tea Growing Areas (Source: teacampaign.com)

The GI status was able to mark and create territorial areas within Darjeeling, as “Darjeeling-Tea Growing Areas”, which were said to be designated after years of research by the Tea Board of India. The Darjeeling Tea growing areas today consist of different valleys within the districts of Darjeeling and Kalimpong (even though Kalimpong became a separate district in 2017) within which 87 tea gardens are “certified” Darjeeling Tea growing gardens. Most tea gardens and estates that already existed before, coincide with the tea growing area. The tea estates are spread across 19,500 hectares (48000 acres) of land (Koehler, 2015). According to the Tea Board, all tea gardens that fall within the stipulated area are “authentic” and recognized producers of Darjeeling Tea and anything

that grows beyond these lines does not qualify. The above map illustrates the tea growing areas of Darjeeling with the names of the 87 tea gardens

The industry of Darjeeling Tea had seen a slow decline in production since the 1980's. The political mobilization for statehood in Darjeeling during the late 1980's and the fall of Soviet Union (that bought a large share of the tea) led to the closing of gardens and a general fall in production. The first attempt of the Tea Board to “protect” the tea came during this period of decline. In 1986, the Tea Board registered the Darjeeling Logo and name as registered trademark under the Indian Trade and Certification Marks Act 1958.

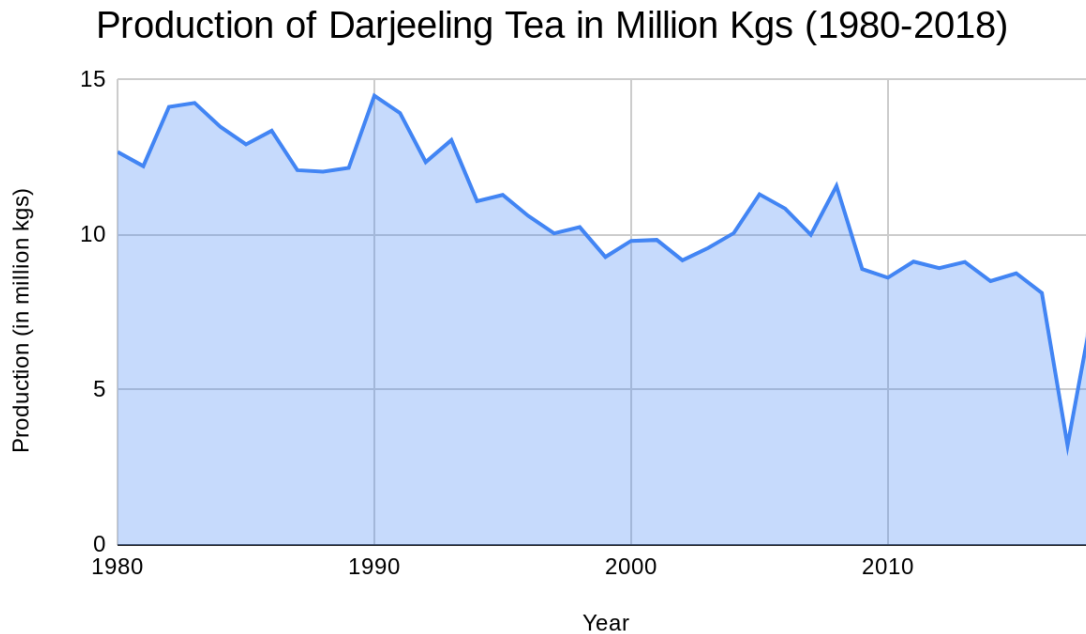


Figure 4: Production of Darjeeling Tea (1980-2018)

Source: Techno-economic Survey of Darjeeling Tea Industry (Tea Board, 2001); Tea Digest (Tea Board)

The late 1980's, after the Uruguay rounds, the General Agreements on Tariff and Trade (GATT) foregrounded corporate freedom and a freer flow of transnational capital (Friedmann, 1995), which made way for what Friedmann (2005) calls a “corporate-environmental food regime”. The world saw a rise in ethical food movements and people actively seeking to consume “organic” and “locally sourced” food. With that came tools of legitimation as manifest in certifications like Fair Trade, Rainforest Alliance, Equal Exchange, etc. While these certifications are a direct result of ethical consumption, intellectual property regimes also became part of the picture as part of a bid to “protect” traditional foods and practices from the free market. India had its economic crisis in 1991 due to a deficit in the balance of payments, leading to the Indian economy adapting to structural adjustment reforms and liberalization. The Techno-economic Survey on Darjeeling Tea Industry conducted by the Tea Board in 2001 revealed that during the period of 1995 - 1998, there was an overall increase in production cost and the sales-cost differential was in negative numbers, meaning the sale price per kg did not cover the cost of production of the tea. The report recommended that there was a need for the tea to be protected by intellectual property rights to “prevent” the reputation of the tea from misuse (Tea Board, 2001). In the early 2000's Darjeeling Tea in India came within the “protection” umbrella the Intellectual Property Regime provided, and the logo and name were registered as GI mark under the GI Act of 1999.



Figure 5: Logos of Darjeeling Tea Under the National Intellectual Property Law in 1986 (left), and Under the GIs of Goods Act 1999 (Right)

Around 70% of the total quantity of Darjeeling Tea produced is exported (Datta, 2010), with half the quantity being sold off in auctions and half through direct garden sales and export. GI protection has helped fetch premiums, open closed gardens and revive a declining industry (Besky, 2014). The graph below shows a sharp rise in the price of Darjeeling Tea after the GI protection was granted to the tea. The tea that sold for around Rs 160 in 2006 sold for a price of Rs. 229 in 2009. In 2018, the tea was sold at the average price of Rs. 434 in the auctions and for Rs. 3500 in boutique shops and retail.

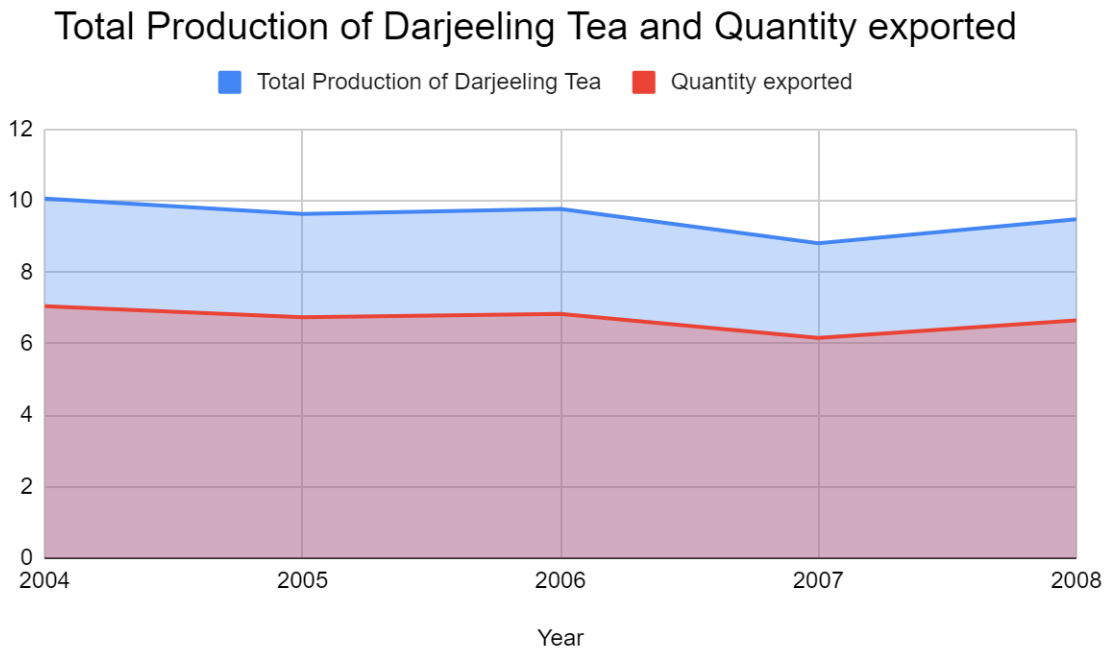


Figure 6: Total Production of Darjeeling Tea and Quantity Exported (2004-2008)

Source: Techno-economic Survey of Darjeeling Tea Industry (Tea Board, 2001); Darjeeling Tea India (Datta, 2010)

The price of Darjeeling Tea is set through a colonially rooted practice of evaluation of prices and labor costs, where an embodied labor of tasting and the price setting of the embodied labor of picking tea is arranged in a labor-cost structure (Besky, 2016). However, the value of Darjeeling Tea is more than its price. Aside from the valuation of Darjeeling

Tea that happens in spaces layered outside the enumerative valuation in auctions and tastings, I analyze the discursive production of meanings that adds to the value to the tea.

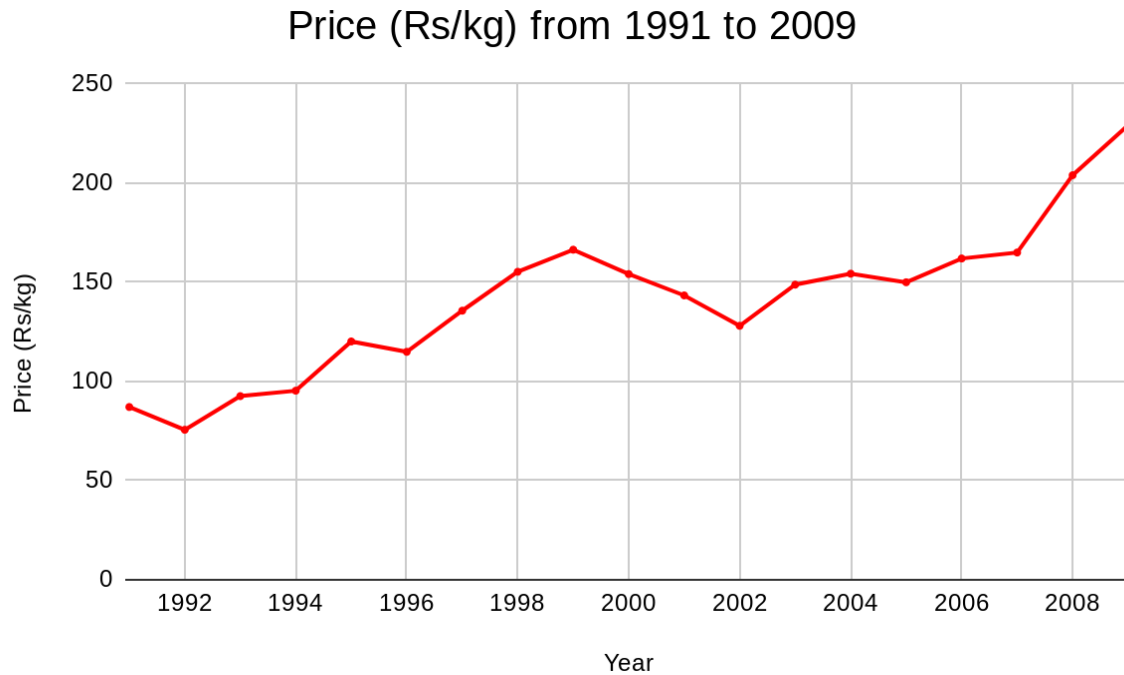


Figure 7: Price of Darjeeling Tea (1991-2009)

Source: Darjeeling Tea India (Datta, 2010)

In that process, I explore how symbolic meanings are produced and ascribed to as Darjeeling Tea was branded with the GI status and how different actors involved in the tea industry make sense of and infer different meanings to Darjeeling Tea—meanings that helps make the tea more desirable, also preventing the tea from being less desirable.

### **Research Problem**

The name ‘Darjeeling’ is a protected name; it has a Geographical Indication (GI) status demarcating its origin. This has also become a way the tea has been branded and promoted by companies producing the tea, and the Tea Board that regulates and controls the production and export of tea throughout India. How does attaching a place name garner

value in a tea to encourage certain consumption practices? There have been clear indications of the commodification of Darjeeling as a place and the image of people in the promotional materials used by tea companies and the Tea Board (Besky, 2014) while marketing their tea, especially in the context of a growing “alternative food network” catering strongly to consumers who want to know how and where their food comes from. The place-based nature of this tea and its protection by GI certification is automatically understood as a marker of quality and authenticity.

This research questions the meanings of authenticity and rarity inscribed through the Geographical Indication status and labels of origins and examines the process of meaning-making to understand the valuation that the GI narrative and branding contributes to. It explores the ways in which symbolic meaning and capital is garnered through the GI language, and the different actors involved in the making and interpretation of these meanings—an important part of the process of valuation of the tea. This research seeks to unravel the unequal power relations that exist across geographies, in the context of which meanings of authenticity and rarity have been produced. These unequal power relations dictate the regimes of value for the tea. I draw from the literature on valuation studies, food studies, anthropology and the emerging literature on the geographies of branding in an effort to contribute to understanding the significance of the branding of place-based food/beverages and their valuation.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **METHODS**

My research draws on one month of field visits I conducted in the month of August in 2018 in the city of Kolkata and in Darjeeling, India, which included interviews and an analysis of archival print materials used for Darjeeling Tea's promotion. My interview questions were guided by the overarching question of what meanings were being produced and how they add to the value of the tea. Fieldwork was carried out by asking my interviewees how they understood Darjeeling tea and what it meant for them personally.

#### **Interviews**

I carried out semi-structured formal and informal interviews with 10 people involved in the Darjeeling Tea Industry (marketing managers, Tea Board officials, tasters, local retailer, and Non-Government Organization officials). I used interviews to gather data to gain insight into how people who are actually involved in the production, distribution and promotion of the tea understand Darjeeling Tea, and what the tea means, in order to understand the meaning-making process and the production and reproduction of these meanings.

#### **Area of Study and Sampling**

The interviews I conducted were built around questions of what Darjeeling Tea means as a brand, what the place of Darjeeling means for the tea, and how certifications like the GI have worked in the promotion of the tea. All the interviews were conducted in the respective offices and work spaces of my interviewees, with their full verbal consent to

use the conversations as my source of data. The following table summarizes the interview recruitment details into numbers and groups:

**Table 1: List of Interview Groups and Methods of Recruitment**

| <b>Group</b>       | <b>Number of Interviewees</b> | <b>Format</b>               | <b>Area</b>                   | <b>Recruitment</b>  |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| Tea Board of India | 2                             | Formal                      | Kolkata (1)<br>Darjeeling (1) | Purposeful Recruitment through website  |
| Company Marketing  | 1                             | Formal                      | Kolkata                       | Purposeful Recruitment through website  |
| Tasting/Auction    | 1                             | Formal                      | Kolkata                       | Snowball Sampling   |
| Tea Garden Manager | 2                             | Formal                      | Darjeeling                    | Purposeful Recruitment through access to familial ties and social network in Darjeeling |
| Local Retail       | 2                             | Formal (1);<br>Informal (1) | Darjeeling                    | Snowball Sampling   |
| NGO                | 1                             | Formal                      | Darjeeling                    | Purposeful Recruitment through website  |
| Expert             | 1                             | Informal                    | Darjeeling                    | Snowball Sampling   |



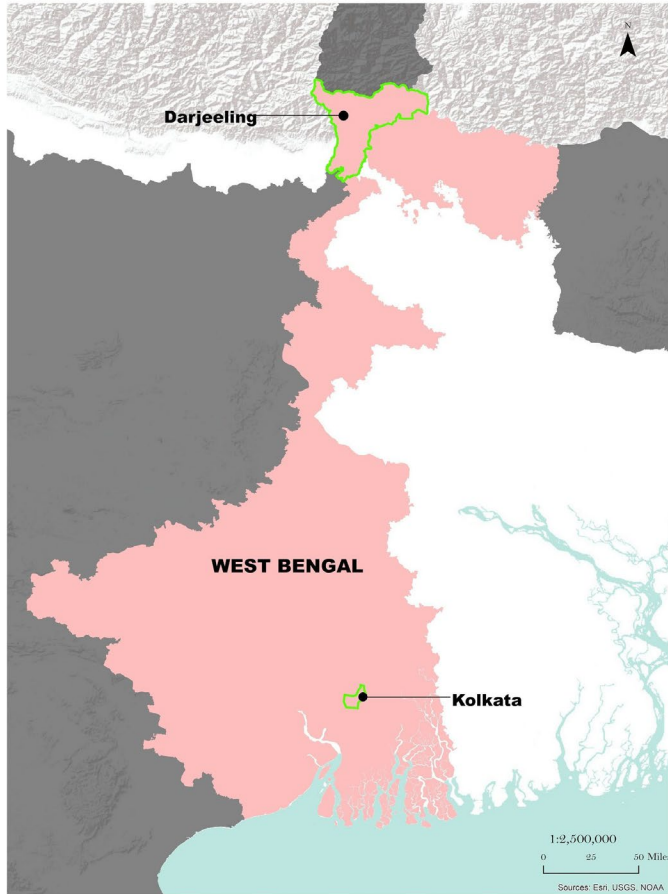


Figure 8: Sites of Fieldwork: Darjeeling and Kolkata (West Bengal)

I focused on the city of Kolkata for field work because it is the capital of the West Bengal state in India, which Darjeeling district is a part of, and the offices of most of the companies that produce Darjeeling Tea, auction-houses, the Tea Board etc. are located in this city. It is easily observable that the important decisions on the production, valuation and promotion of Darjeeling Tea happen here. Darjeeling as my area of primary fieldwork was the most obvious choice, since all the 87 gardens that make up the Darjeeling Tea growing area are located here. I initially did not have access to people whom I interviewed in Kolkata. Hence, I physically went to these offices to set up initial introduction meetings and schedule interview dates.

The Tea Board official and the marketing manager of the company whom I interviewed in Kolkata were purposefully chosen because a large part of the promotional language around Darjeeling Tea comes from these sources. Out of three companies I reached out to, only one could be conducted due to scheduling difficulties. The company I chose to interview is one of the tea companies based in Kolkata that owns a few tea gardens and has sub-brands of Darjeeling Tea. After conducting these interviews, my interviewees were kind enough to put me in touch with people who could be helpful for the research, and whom I ended up interviewing (Tea Tasting/Auction, Tea Board in Darjeeling, Expert). Hence, an unintentional snowball sampling method was used for collecting data. I recorded interviews on my phone with the consent of the interviewees and took notes of important things that were being said. I also took a few photographs of advertisement boards and promotional materials in public spaces and tea gardens as a means of ascertaining how these meanings circulate through mass advertisements.

### **Print and Archival Materials**

I analyzed advertisements printed in the US (LA Times and New York Times) from 1920 to 2010 and Indian Newspapers (Amrita Bazar Patrika) from 1910 to 1920 to understand the meanings being communicated to people in and outside of India. I also gathered print materials published and used by the Tea Board, and by companies to promote Darjeeling Tea, which include fliers, brochures and pamphlets. I also found popular advertisements for tea in India through the Priya Paul Collection of Popular Art in the object and multimedia database of Heidelberg University. These materials are useful

sources for analyzing the language around the promotion of the tea, and the kinds of meanings being produced and communicated by companies and the Tea Board.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

To analyze the data that I collected through interviews, I used thematic content analysis and organized my interview transcripts and notes into different themes related to the quality of the tea, symbols, value and meanings. Then I organized the interview excerpts with different codes, which were mostly phrases and references to the value and meanings of Darjeeling Tea. Terroir and GI were something that kept coming up, and the association of Darjeeling with these themes were common throughout the interviews. I used discourse analysis to analyze the use of language around the GI status of Darjeeling Tea and its terroir as an effective source of meaning-making, circulation and interpretation. I mostly took notes of the inferences made with the tea, and what it is being compared to, why the narratives were being shared, and what those narratives meant. I explored what meanings were being created and circulated in these discourses, and in print materials that were published and mass circulated, in order to promote the tea's desirability. This made it possible to see how these meanings contribute to the process of valuation across time and space, to situate these narratives and meanings within the historical context of India, Darjeeling and Darjeeling Tea.

### **Methodological Limitations**

While I was preparing a list of people whom I could potentially interview before going out on the field, I noticed that those who were in positions of decision making and

power were mostly middle-aged Bengali men, not only in Kolkata but also in Darjeeling. With difficulty, I managed to identify a few women working in the Tea Board and the West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation (WBIDC). I reached out to them for interviews, but to no avail. Hence, my research is representative of only the male voice from the industry, and this gendered character of my interview pool could have affected the nature and content of the conversations that I had.

Furthermore, I conducted my interviews in Nepali with respondents in Darjeeling, whereas in Kolkata, I conducted all my interviews in English, because I do not speak the Bengali language and my spoken Hindi is not at par even though I understand all of it. I noticed how comfort around the language (Nepali or English) added more depth in the conversation. Most of the interviews I conducted in English did not flow as organically as the ones I conducted in Nepali in Darjeeling and had fewer narratives and stories. I also understand and acknowledge that what my interviewees shared with me on the day were not necessarily reflective of who they are, and that the information shared on the day of the interview reflected my interviewees' particular local context, power structures, the events happening around them, their personal state, and other variables that were not within my sight or control. Finally, the research is not devoid of my own biases and where I stand politically on issues pertinent to Darjeeling and the power dynamics prevalent between Darjeeling and Kolkata.

## CHAPTER III

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **The Geographical Imagination of Darjeeling and the Brand of Darjeeling Tea**

Darjeeling is known as the “Queen of Hills” in popular media and discourse. The narrative of the Darjeeling hills being home to lush tea gardens, and the popular imagination of Darjeeling nestled under the massive Kanchenjunga Mountains is ubiquitous and often overused. Benneke (2018) investigates the classed subjection of Darjeeling under the tourist gaze that situates Darjeeling relationally in its distance to Calcutta as “a place reserved for the wealthy visitors from the plains”, rendering the racialized labor of Darjeeling invisible, following a classic colonial trope. Benneke further explains this recurring reproduction of the “quasi-Orientalist” gaze of colonial rulers in Bengali travelogues as a result of the class anxieties of Anglo-vernacular elites of colonial and post-independence Bengal, sustaining the existing class hierarchy.

Darjeeling as a place gets talked about as special and unique, and so does the tea. Townsend Middleton (2018) offers a critique of planter capital, through an against-the-grain reading of the history of the exceptionality of Darjeeling. He takes apart the idea that this exceptionality came from the naturalness that Darjeeling was bestowed with and shows how the exceptionality was instead constructed through special administrative arrangements that “*marked* Darjeeling and made it a place apart”--mostly to cater to the personal gains of British officials and planters. Darjeeling was designated a ‘Non-Regulated Area’ that could be administered in accordance with its special needs and circumstances. This arrangement allowed plenty of space for one man, Dr. A Campbell, to

gain authority and create fertile ground for collusion between the government and private capital, and transfer Darjeeling into the hands of an emergent planter class through privatization of land. He looks at Darjeeling's exceptionality not as a 'natural' outcome, but an outcome of a system of difference that served private capital of the British planters and officials who had ad-hoc control over the region, with minimal regulation from the colonial government.

Middleton's work helps explain the legacy of Darjeeling's exceptionality through its administrative history. He leaves room for further questioning of the forces that have made Darjeeling and directs readers to question who this serves in the long term "through a critical understanding of how the legacy of the exception continues to condition the possibilities and impossibilities of life and politics in the hills." Darjeeling's exceptionality has not been contained only in its administrative policies; its spillover effects, without doubt, have been seen in the language used around the uniqueness of Darjeeling as a place, and of Darjeeling Tea as a product. This research adds another layer to the exceptionality of Darjeeling by exploring it as a meaning that garners value for Darjeeling Tea, again to serve plantation capital in a postcolonial setting.

### ***Terroir, GI and Legibility***

One of the places this exceptionality can be found is in the assertion of how the tea has a *terroir*. Darjeeling Tea is rooted in the idea of *terroir* which, according to Elizabeth Barham (2016), refers to an area or terrain whose soil and microclimate give particular qualities to food products or beverages. Amy Trubek (2009) discusses how the idea of *terroir* is drenched in Frenchness in the context of French wine, where the meaning of a

food or drink tasting a certain way is attributed to its soil and locality. Likewise, Darjeeling Tea's flavor is attributed to Darjeeling's soil and locality, and the 'Darjeelingness' just happens. The tea's 'muscatel' taste is said to exist because it grows within the tea-growing area stipulated by the Tea Board of India. However, Unwin (2012) warns of the conflation of the term *terroir* used by producers of wine in France, to make claims that certain environments are better for making the "best quality" of wines; Unwin asserts that *terroir* has very little to do with wine quality. Just as Barham (2016) argues, *terroir* is used as a means to "shape the meaning" of wine in France and tea in Darjeeling.

This *terroir* is given legibility through intellectual property regimes like the Geographical Indication (GI) Status. The GI is one of the common certifications indicating geographic origin that is common in use today. It was formulated under the intellectual property laws in the Trade Related Intellectual Property Right (TRIPS) agreement at the World Trade Organization (WTO). According to the TRIPS Agreement:

*“Geographical Indications are, for the purposes of this Agreement, indications which identify a good as originating in the territory of a member [of the World Trade Organization], or a region or locality in that territory, where a given quality, reputation, or other characteristic of the good is essentially attributable to its geographical origin.”*

In 2004, Darjeeling Tea was registered as the first GI product in India, which would mean that the words 'Darjeeling Tea' and even the name 'Darjeeling' would be protected as intellectual property. Vatin (2013) emphasizes the role of status in valuation and commensuration, where prestigious and powerful actors are capable of exploiting first-

mover advantages, which are particularly significant in this case since Darjeeling Tea was the first product in India to gain GI status. Harriet Friedmann (2005) sees social certifications and intellectual property regimes as part of what she calls the “corporate environmental food regime”, which emerged as a part of the restructuring of capitalism. This food regime is based on quality audited supply chains, and Friedmann argues that demands of environmental, food safety, animal welfare, fair trade and other social movements have been appropriated by corporations that eventually widen inequalities by deepening commodification.

Geographical Indication was introduced with the objective of protecting “traditions and know-how” (Gervais, 2016. Eds. Gangjee. P 144). However, studies of GI have shown that GI’s serve different goals and are understood in different ways. Coombe and Aylwin (2011), drawing from Harvey (2005)’s work, argue that GI’s are vehicles that are designed to secure monopoly rents. While Bramley argues that GI’s serve as a European mechanism for rural territorial development to maintain European interests in the global trade regime, Coombe and Malik (2018) make notes of how the rhetoric to promote GI’s obscure social relations of production by projecting certain social imaginaries and further entrench local inequalities. Bowen and Zapata (2009)’s study of the potential of GI status in the socioeconomic and environmental sustainability of tequila show how the GI can be co-opted and appropriated by extra-local actors (in this case, the transnational liquor companies), excluding from the supply chain the agave farmers, who the GI was theoretically designed to protect.

Darjeeling Tea’s GI is justified based on the idea that its identity needs “protection” from other entities who are said to misuse and take advantage from its name. In an



extensively detailed ethnographic study of Darjeeling plantations and the contested notions of justice with the rise of neoliberal social movements like Fair Trade, intellectual property regimes like the GI and the political movement for autonomy from the West Bengal state, Besky (2014) is critical of social initiatives that have turned this commodity crop into a “marketable and visible traditional knowledge”, constituting a double alienation (P112). She talks about how the usage of the GI status of Darjeeling Tea has facilitated the reshaping of consumers’ understanding of Darjeeling Tea’s taste that insists it has a *terroir*. This is where the taste of the tea comes from, and hence cannot be replicated. She also discusses the role of the GI as an intellectual property rights regime and a set of performances that govern Darjeeling and the activities of tea laborers (P 91). The GI, in particular, puts in place a romantic vision of postcolonial worker plant management relation as timeless and natural, rather than historical and social, an imaginary that she terms ‘Third World Agrarian Imaginary’. Furthermore, the GI as a legal protection promises eaters and drinkers that their perception of how the drink is made reflects a reality, “bridging the refinement of luxury goods with the concerns of global citizenship.” (P112).

Ferrari (2014) shows how the GI and *terroir* are bounded in a circular relationship through the case studies of Amarone Wine, New England Australia Wine, and Niagara Peninsula Wine. The *terroir* provides the basis for the need of GI protection, and the GI defines the contours of the *terroir*, where discourses make references to GI’s as the pillar supporting the identity of that territory. Here, narratives of the *terroir* and GI are effective tools to communicate meanings and symbols and serve different purposes. The production and communication of these meanings and symbols also serve the purpose of creating value for the tea. In the process of interpretation and valuation, the human ability to assign

symbols and meanings, according to Monnet (2011), can be used to produce symbolic places “to influence the construction of collective identities, and to legitimize the exercise of an authority”, assigning a portion of space with a name, an identity, a permanence, a reason for existing, and a particular relationship with certain values and meanings. Ravasi, Rindova and Dalpiaz (2012) look into the value creation of Starbucks Coffee through the use of concepts and symbols – ranging from the exotic imagery of coffee plantations, to the development of its own language around coffee drinks, as cultural resources. Logos and narratives communicate the desire to own the product and carve out value not only in the minds of consumers, but also in the minds of actors involved in the production and promotion of the tea. Bryant (2012) posits this type of branding as a Foucauldian disciplining process that combines meaning making and value articulation to encourage ‘appropriate conduct’ (i.e., desiring the product).

### **Branding and Symbols**

These meanings can be connected to how commodities are branded with particular names or symbols. Pike (2013) uses the term ‘brand’ to denote a container that carries symbolic value and can be charged with cultural meaning, and ‘branding’ as a process of adding value to goods and services. In a historical study of the branding of luxury timber (teak) in Colonial Burma, Bryant (2013) provides an analysis of branding as a form of government using a Foucauldian framework—a brand that serves as a flexible ordering device and that uses science, violence and marketing as ordering devices. Looking at the valuation of Darjeeling Tea through the lens of the GI branding as a technology helps make visible the network of “different agents of production, circulation, consumption and

regulation” (Pike, 2009), which flow through their own circuits of value and meaning-making, and make visible the full cast of actors who help spin narratives about quality, durability and social meaning (Bryant, 2013). Khaire and Wadhvani (2010) explore how different actors and intermediaries play an important role in the process of creating values and meanings in a case study of Modern Indian Art through its institutionalized categorization and the discursive construction of shared understanding and interpretations of the art and new ways of valuing it.

In a geographic study of branding, Andy Pike (2013) conceptualizes the geographic in brands and branding by introducing the concept of geographical associations that connect the commodity with a particular ‘geographical imaginary’. He introduces the different kinds of geographical associations that can possibly overlap the material, symbolic, discursive, visual and aural. In his theorization of brands and branding, he focuses on the creation, circulation and valorization of meanings and values in branded goods by a network of actors: producers, circulators, consumers and regulators who collectively construct, cohere and stabilize geographical associations in branded goods.

## **Value**

The social construction of value according to Ibert et al (2019) is an independent process that not only involves positive associations, but equally involves deliberate and purposeful acts of creating dissociations to position branded commodities within the multi-dimensional spaces of symbolic value. While associations help create meaningful and valuable relations by promoting positive value (Pike, 2015), dissociations weaken or obscure negative features and links between a brand and other entities; association and

dissociation, thus work towards and have the potential to influence a commodity's desirability (Ibert, et al, 2019). While associations create relationships between the brand and positive and meaningful salient features to evoke certain ideas about the brand and its meaning, dissociations avoid negative associations. Pike (2013) introduced the idea of geographical associations as material, symbolic, discursive and visual elements of a commodity:

“The concept of geographical association is introduced. It is defined as the characteristic elements – material, symbolic, discursive, visual – of the identifiable branded commodity and branding process that connect and/or connote particular ‘geographical imaginaries’ (Jackson 2002: 3” (Pike, 2013)

In the marketing of Burmese teak, marketers removed all bad news related to forest violence (Bryant, 2013)

Darjeeling Tea's economic valuation happens in online auctions that were previously held in Kolkata. But the symbolic and cultural meanings and value are also discursively produced by different actors like tasters and promoters involved in the industry who extensively rely on the GI and terroir rhetoric which will be discussed in the sections that follow. Here, value is a social construction and is subjective. By value, I not only mean the economic value that can be quantified, but value that is symbolic and political—value that is understood as a consequence of meaning-making as David Graeber (2001) posits. Valuation is “tied to conditions of desire and desirability, to the entanglements that are created between people and things, and between people themselves to “values” too” (Helgesson and Muniesa, 2013). Valuation studies scholars render valuation as the process of world making and sense-making where things, people and idea (l) s are ordered and classified in relation to one another.

In the anthropological theorization of value, Appadurai (1986) situates value and the valuation process within the framework of exchange, in a complex articulation of how value is created by economic exchange, drawing from Simmel (1987)'s work on money as an instrument of commensuration and economic exchange. Drawing from Simmel, he furthers the idea that objects have a life, and their history passes through what he calls 'regimes of value': the sets of structural arrangements that govern how value is produced and distributed. He posits how value coherence can be highly variable from situation to situation, affected by the level of shared standards of value. What Appadurai described as 'politics of value' can be understood as the social struggle and inequality of power in terms of who decides to control exchange and consumptions while others try to expand it, and the outcome of these struggles is the regime of value that elites control (Graeber, 2001).

Graeber has a different way of viewing value outside of the exchange framework. For Graeber, meanings arise from making conceptual distinctions, and these distinctions contain an element of value since they are ranked. Value is only produced and understood in a social and cultural context that surrounds what is being valued. He sees the creation of value as a dynamic process, following Nancy Munn's work that looks at value not as an intrinsic property of things, but as something that has to be produced through action.

“Eyes take in only the surfaces of things. To tell if a coin is gold or merely gilded, you don't stare at it: you bite at it, weigh it on your palm or rap it to hear a sound. Looking at a thing is always looking at a mere fraction of a thing, and the viewer is always at least vaguely aware that there is something further underneath”.

He is talking about the object that we can see and the value that lies beneath it that is usually invisible. Graeber's theory of value insists that whenever we examine the processes by which the value of an object is established, visibility and invisibility of its value is something that often comes up. Here, action is important to Graeber's idea of value where he draws from Munn's idea of value as a result of action, in "a process by which a person's capacity to act is transformed into concrete, perceptible forms". Employing Marxist views of alienation, the desirability of objects requires the investment of human time and energy, intelligence, concern. That makes value for Munn, the act of "making visible" and the creation of social relations that take on value in the process of being recognized by someone else (Graeber, 2001), and for Graeber, the way people represent the importance of their own actions to themselves, and the power to create social relations.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This research explores the process of meaning making and how it has contributed to the valuation of Darjeeling Tea. Through the understanding of Darjeeling Tea from people who work in the industry, the way Darjeeling tea is understood and talked about, and the ways the tea is represented in advertisements in and outside of India in the last 100 years, we can infer a specific pattern of meanings that were being made. We can also see the ways these meanings get made and communicated, and the processes that allowed meaning to shape conceptions of value. In this section, I explore the valuation of Darjeeling Tea. Drawing from Graeber (2001)'s notion of value that emphasizes the importance of deliberate actions in meaning-making, I argue that practices of association and dissociation by actors involved in the production of symbolic meanings play a significant role in the valuation of the tea, and they render the visibility and invisibility of the spaces and concrete phenomena that make the commodity more desirable. I draw from the interviews I conducted with officials from companies and the Tea Board, tasters and retailers involved in the promotion and distribution of Darjeeling Tea in Kolkata and Darjeeling to show how GI status legitimizes the meanings derived through associative and dissociative practices that are intentionally employed by promoters of Darjeeling Tea to garner symbolic value.

#### **The Act of Associations in Meaning-Making and Valuation**

Pike (2013) renders brands as containers that carry symbolic value and can be charged with cultural meaning, and branding as the process of adding value to goods and

services. Sense-making and inferring different cultural meanings then become a crucial part of the process of symbolic valuation that ultimately aims at making the product more desirable through the agency of different actors communicating these meanings in their own ways. Symbolic value in Darjeeling Tea is constructed through forging associations with products that represent the same kind of non-monetary, symbolic worth, and also by associating them with certain product qualities that are desirable (Pike, 2013). In Darjeeling Tea, rarity, quality and authenticity are the most common descriptors used by people working in the industry, and the reproduction of these qualities have existed in the marketing discourse in the domestic and the international market throughout the last century.

### **Exceptionality**

The advertisements for local brands selling Darjeeling Tea during the 1920's marketed Darjeeling Tea's exceptionality with its exceptional taste. I came across a few advertisements for Bhattacharya's Tea that sold Darjeeling Tea as the only local brand of tea in the market, published in *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, an Indian owned English newspaper in Kolkata, known for its contribution to the Freedom Struggle of India. The advertisement below provides a "money-back" guarantee on the "quality" of Darjeeling Tea. The advertisements during the era were heavy with anti-British and anti-colonial Indian nationalism that encouraged the use of domestic (*Swadeshi*) products for self-governance (*Swaraj*).



**SWARAJ**

**CANNOT BE OBTAINED BY MERE SPEECH OR OATH.**

THE SUCCESS OF THE MOVEMENT MAINLY DEPENDS ON THE USE OF SWADESHI GOODS.

IF THE MOVEMENT BE UNSUCCESSFUL YOU WILL DAMAGE YOUR OWN PROSPECTS AND BRING ABOUT RUIN UPON YOUR COUNTRY AND NATION.

JUST THINK OVER THIS

**BEFORE YOU BUY YOUR TEA ELSEWHERE**

WE GUARANTEE THAT WE CAN SATISFY YOUR TASTE.

Prices to suit all purses from Annas 8 to Rs. 2-8 per pound (loose)

**PACKED IN TINS**

SPECIAL DARJEELING TEA AT Rs. 1-10 per lb.

No. 1 Tea at Rs. 1-3-8 per lb.                      No. 2 Tea at Rs. 1-1-6 per lb.

No. 3 Tea at Rs. 0-14-8 per lb.

**Bhattacharya & Co., Ltd.**

**TEA MERCHANTS.**

N.B.:—Samples of our tea can be had at our store:—

**64-1, CORNWALLIS STREET, CALCUTTA.**

Figure 9: Advertisement for Darjeeling Tea in Amrita Bazar Patrika, 1922

The language of distinction and rarity that I found in the interviews is not a new phenomenon. The framing of this tea as exceptional is handed down from years of similar portrayal of the place and the tea in marketing discourse. In the later years, post-independence, local advertisements made Darjeeling as a place and the tea that comes from this distant land desirable with its inference of the town's naturalness and distinction. This also involves an 'othering' of the place, through the use of images like the one below, that depicts a Bollywood-styled "mainland" Indian couple enjoying the tea with a backdrop of

the Kanchenjunga mountain range. This representation of Darjeeling is also reflective of the neocolonial relationship and the unequal power structures that exist between Darjeeling and Kolkata.



Figure 10: Local Advertisement for Darjeeling Tea

Source: Priya Paul Collection of Popular Art (Heidelberg Archives)

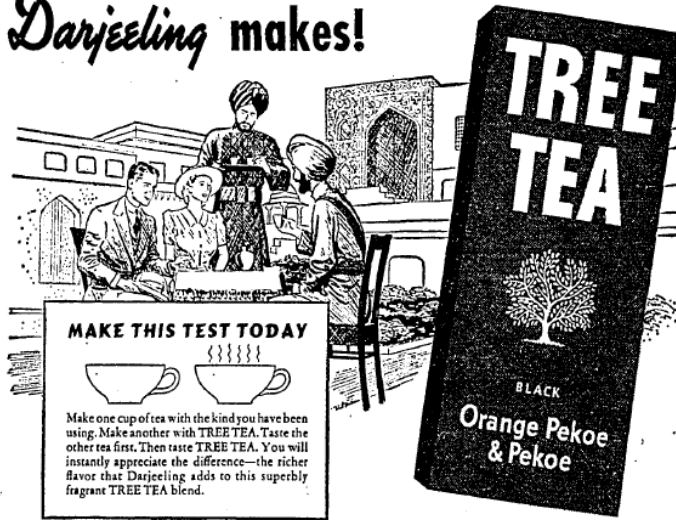
This othering is also apparent in advertisements published in American Newspapers during the 1930's, 40's and 50's. Most advertisements I came across show Darjeeling Tea being marketed as a "Treasure of India" alongside pictures of stone sculptures, images of turban-wearing men and saree-wearing women people and images of bearded men holding 'Oriental Rugs' that have a less-significant relation to Darjeeling as a region. The images used in these mediums have taken forms of inaccurate and Orientalist

representations of Darjeeling as a place and region and embraced the heavy racialization of people who “serve” the tea and (those) who consume the tea.

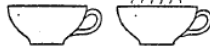
**SERVE TREE TEA TONIGHT...**

**Taste the delightful difference**

*Darjeeling* makes!



**MAKE THIS TEST TODAY**



Make one cup of tea with the kind you have been using. Make another with TREE TEA. Taste the other tea first. Then taste TREE TEA. You will instantly appreciate the difference—the richer flavor that Darjeeling adds to this superbly fragrant TREE TEA blend.

Enjoy the rare, satisfying flavor of Northern India's richest tea—Darjeeling. It is the Darjeeling, expertly blended with finest Ceylons, that gives the extra flavor to Tree Tea, Orange Pekoe, so much more delicious that you cannot fail to notice the difference.

And, best of all you will find Tree Tea most reasonably priced.

If you prefer Green tea, use Tree Tea, Green, to secure the full, delicate flavor of the finest first crop leaves.

**IMPORTANT TO KNOW ABOUT TEA**

The finest *Green* teas must be picked in Spring. First crop, young *Green* tea leaves are ideal for flavor. Tree Tea contains only the finest of these leaves. *Black* (Orange Pekoe) teas, on the other hand, should be picked in each one's prime; some in Spring, some in Summer, others in the Fall. The leaves selected for Tree Tea are picked at *each tea's* flavor peak, neither after nor before. No finer leaves can be bought than those in Tree Tea.

**YOU'LL SAY IT'S THE BEST CUP OF TEA  
YOU EVER TASTED—OR YOUR MONEY BACK**

Figure 11: Advertisement for Darjeeling Tea on Los Angeles Times, 1940

**Treasure from India.**

Darjeeling... India's most treasured tea

Slow-grown on the high slopes of the Himalayas

Blended with choice garden Ceylons and Indias.

Picked at their mellow, ripened best

To bring you the most distinctive tea flavor

When "Under Pressure" relax with Tree Tea.

**TREE TEA** *Rich in Darjeeling*  
*... India's most treasured tea*

Siva, Lord of the Dance, 16th century India bronze. Courtesy William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art, Kansas City.

**TREE TEA**  
 BAGS  
 BLACK  
 Orange Pekoe & Pekoe

Figure 12: Advertisement for Darjeeling Tea on Los Angeles Times, 1951

### The Appeal of Authenticity

One of the most striking observations that came out of my conversations with respondents is the comparison of Darjeeling Tea with other commodities or qualities of things that they wanted the tea to be associated with—and most references pointed to Europe or the Americas. Two of my interviewees brought in references like ‘Ambrosia’ or ‘food of the Greek Gods’ or ‘Nectar of the Gods’ to describe the taste of Darjeeling Tea, invoking a sense of specialty and rarity, and associating it with exotic properties. This description of Darjeeling Tea was driven by the notion that it was defined by how rare (and

therefore special) it was. The association of the product with meanings of immortality and timelessness through the inference to Ambrosia and food for the Gods, and the association of the GI label that gives the tea that is labeled as such an aura of authenticity show how commodities can be made desirable by making them seem distinct and exceptional.

The comparisons usually ended with references to the protection of Champagne and Scotch with GI status. Once again, the commodities of comparison were mostly European or American. Even promotional materials published by the Tea Board advertise Darjeeling Tea as the “Champagne of Teas”. The recurring comparison of Darjeeling and Darjeeling Tea to Europe and Euro-American beverages and products signals an internalization of the linearity of European modernity. Putting the tea on the same level as “Western” beverages, being ‘recognized’ with the GI logo in countries like the UK, USA and Germany, is like setting a standard for the tea in terms of Euro-American standards, where GI as a technology disciplines the production and understanding of the tea.



Figure 13: A promotion of Darjeeling Tea Outside a Local-product Store in the Main Darjeeling Bazaar

In order to understand what my respondents thought of certifications and how they have helped the tea, I asked about their experiences. One of the managers of a Darjeeling Tea producing company confided that their experience with GI certification and other social certifications like Fair Trade and Rainforest Alliance had been great so far, and that certifications have helped generate an interest among buyers to buy “certified, authentic tea that has been ethically produced”. He jokingly mentioned that he would show potential buyers their array of certificates first, and then show them the samples of tea. This draws us into the meaning inscribed by, and the value that certifications add into, products. In this case, the condition of origin is a carrier of value, denoting authenticity—a certification that draws consumers into buying the tea. Certification of the tea with GI status communicates the qualities and meanings that the producers want it to be associated with. It enables the desirability for clients and consumers to be associated with the name, prestige and symbolic meaning of the tea through the imagined association of the product with a place through certificates of origin, as well as an image of perceived fairness that is frequently advanced by producers. Producers also want this mark of distinction and specialty, taking us back again to Middleton (2018)’s criticism of Darjeeling’s history of exceptionality. This legacy of exceptionality has continued to be used in the discursive production of Darjeeling region and Darjeeling Tea, playing off the symbolic meaning that the tea evokes.

I also asked my respondents what they thought of the brand of Darjeeling Tea and its value. Most of the answers I received were similar or close to the following answers, showing concern over the need for more promotion, and the “misuse” of Darjeeling Tea’s name that has prevented the tea from staying “pure”.

Interviewee 1 (Tea Board Personnel): *“Promotion is required. Darjeeling Tea is an intellectual property. Over a period of time, the name and brand of Darjeeling Tea has been misused by other origins and other players. The laws are in place.”*

Interviewee 2 (Marketing Manager): *“We are losing our value; we produce 10 million kg, but 40 million kg is actually sold outside. So, 30 mil kg of tea produced in higher elevations of Sri Lanka, South India and Kenya or wherever these teas are riding on Darjeeling’s name and benefitting of this because Darjeeling Tea is expensive. So, to stop that, GI status procedures were put in place.”*

GI laws are in place to maintain and protect the value that derives from the “authentic” heritage of Darjeeling Tea. Conversations and promotional materials stress the authenticity of the tea through the use of the GI mark, giving the tea the ability to generate premiums that are required to consume these qualities. This authenticity has been understood by Spooner (1986) also as a marker of exclusivity, especially in the export market, due to the long distance that the commodities move, which makes the tea no longer just a product or commodity, but also a sign in a system of signs of status, like Spooner argues in the case of ‘Oriental Rugs’. He further mentions how authenticity allows people to express themselves and fix points of security in an amorphous modern society.

In the case of food production in Northern Italy, as an example, constructing authenticity became a project that brought together the alignment of material and linguistic labor, where products came to be associated with authenticity by tying them to certain

times and places (Cavanaugh and Shankar, 2014). In order to “protect” Darjeeling Tea from the ‘mimicking others’ that ride on the name of Darjeeling Tea, GI laws are in place to maintain and protect the value that derives from the “authentic” heritage of Darjeeling Tea. Conversations and promotional materials stress the authenticity of the tea through the use of the GI mark and signal the presence of material and linguistic labor as Cavanaugh and Shankar (2014) explain, giving the tea the ability to generate premiums that are required to consume these qualities. These descriptions and documentation in the form of labels or certificates have the power to transform food (and beverages) into “high quality modern authentic commodities” (Cavanaugh and Shankar, 2014).

According to Datta (2010)’s report, one of the objectives of introducing the GI protection to Darjeeling Tea was also to prevent the blending of other tea with Darjeeling Tea and selling it as Darjeeling Tea because 40 million kg of Darjeeling Tea was being sold in the market when only 10 million was being produced. The GI status that the Darjeeling Logo certification signifies would mean that the tea that held the logo is 100% unblended Darjeeling Tea. Advertisements published in the New York Times and LA Times from 1920s-1990’s were mostly for blend varieties of Darjeeling and Ceylon Tea, which portrayed Darjeeling Tea as the special tea that makes the blend taste better. This has also brought a shift in the way Darjeeling Tea has been marketed today. Most promotional materials push for 100% pure Darjeeling Tea.





Figure 14: Contemporary Local Advertisement for Darjeeling Tea

Hence, after the introduction of the GI status, value resides in the ability to keep Darjeeling Tea “pure” and untouched by mixing with other types of tea to make sure that authenticity is served in the cup of tea that consumers pay for, and drink. The branding of Darjeeling Tea with GI status not only becomes a technology of governance of Darjeeling, the plantation and the labor (Besky, 2014), but also becomes a way of disciplining the actors involved in the production and consumption of the tea—enhancing its desirability. In Darjeeling, tea gardens then become “the legal spaces for tea production” (Sen, 2017. P61), and any tea garden outside of the boundaries producing “Darjeeling Tea” (Fig 1) is deemed illegal, as the conversations with my interviewees imply. However, Sen (2017) also talks about the clandestine supply of hand rolled or *Haatey* tea produced by small farmers in non-plantation settings, supplied to bigger companies producing Darjeeling Tea; an informal exchange that exists, that is not recognized by IP or social and environmental

certifications. This construction of authenticity, hence, is significant of the regime of value pertinent to Darjeeling Tea's production that arises out of the social struggle between those in power and those not: the producers and promoters of Darjeeling Tea who control the exchange and meanings of Darjeeling Tea's authenticity, and producers outside the Darjeeling tea growing area and local small farmers selling "illegal" *Haatey* tea who sell their tea as Darjeeling, unsuccessfully trying to expand the consumption of the tea. This unequal distribution of power in terms of who gets to decide and control this exchange is apparent in the production of Darjeeling Tea.

### **More than Utility**

In the US, where coffee has a larger market than tea does, Darjeeling Tea was marketed more as a gift than as an everyday drink in the 1950's. One particular article published in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1982 (Castle, 1982) made the claim that appreciating tea was more than just simple consumption; the tea was an experience that demanded a proper setting like a tea ceremony, and that "to be aware of tea is to be aware". This suggests that Darjeeling Tea is valued not just for its material or practical functions but also for the cultural category and social identity it signifies (Ravasi and Rindova, 2004). It does so through its brand that has been developed over a long period of time and is currently maintained and held together by its Geographical Indication (GI) status. The creation of value has also been advanced through narratives generated and disseminated by a network of actors involved in the production and promotion of the tea. Those involved in these networks manage to construct meanings along the way, which encourage others to feel and think a certain way. The following excerpt provides an example of how a taster constructs

meanings and value through the deployment of language, which renders the value of the tea visible:

*“Darjeeling Tea is not disconnected with emotions. Darjeeling Tea holds a lot of emotions and is a lot of things for different people. It was autumn tea tasting in Darjeeling. As a tea taster myself, I asked the producer in the factory to make the tea in a different way this time just as an experiment. When that batch of tea was ready and I tasted it, it stopped me in my tracks. It was an amazing Muscatel flavor in autumn, which is very unusual, and it was unlike anything I have tasted. So, I made four small sample batches out of the lot and sent them to four different clients I had. With the samples, I put four different notes for four different people:*

- 1. “It is a different flavor, what do you think?”*
- 2. “What do you think of this?”*
- 3. “This is amazing”*
- 4. “I thought of you when I had this tea”*

*When the samples were delivered and my clients tasted the tea, I started getting a flurry of phone calls saying they wanted to buy the tea at any price. But the tea was not mine to sell. I had no intention of selling that tea when I sent the samples out, and I purely did it out of instinct, nothing more. One of the clients told one of our dealers that the tea was hers now and that she wanted it all for how much ever price it would take. I could not do that for her because again, this was not my tea to sell. But the tea sold in the auction for 1600rs/kg that time, which was double the regular price. This is not normal for a regular market. A hard object does not generate this value.”*

This small piece of what he chose to share with me that day was a story of how meanings can be embedded in a product—shaping interpretations by actors on the receiving end, and not just another story of a tasting experiment that went right at first. This example draws attention to how the knowledge of taste that my interviewee was equipped with enabled him to produce his own meaning of the tea, which was wrapped in the language of distinction. The flavor of the tea was, according to his expertise, something that no one could make at this time of the year. He further said that he saw the tea, recognized it for what it was, acknowledged it, and placed value into it. These were a set of self-created constructs that helped the tea generate symbolic value. That symbolic value translated into the doubling of its economic value (as mentioned in the conversation). This change in economic value and symbolic value mirrors the change in how the tea was seen as a very rare commodity that the client had to acquire no matter how much they had to pay for it.

The taster here defined the ways in which the tea ought to be interpreted and valued. Furthermore, the relationship he had established with his clients can be seen as a form of institutional capital, and the samples that he sent out helped him gather symbolic capital' - - establishing one's honor or generosity by putting a rival to shame (Graeber, 2001). However, value making here is not just a one-sided process. It involves the agency of other actors (the client in this case), as an equal contributor to meaning making. Grant Mc. Cracken (1986) posits that consumers use meaning to express cultural categories and principles in the form of class, status, gender, age and occupation. This can also be seen as the taster holding the power to create social relations and render meaning visible to his

clients—his capacity to transform the tea into a concrete, perceptible form (Graeber, 2001). These narratives also enable a person to imagine what the place and the taste are like, and what the person consuming the tea is like, allowing the person to unconsciously fit into a certain category, in this case, a consumer who is “aware” of where the product comes from, who is “aware” of tea as Castle (2018) puts it.

The promotional language around Darjeeling Tea has constructed symbolic meanings and value from being marketed as a “special” tea throughout history, and also before it was labeled as a GI product. However, the point here is that the association of the brand with the authenticity of “true Darjeeling” and with its rarity is made legitimate by the use of the Darjeeling Logo and the GI status. This is possible through the network of actors who work together to make meanings about the product, informed and legitimized by the GI status, all in a bid to make the tea more desirable and valuable.

### **Invisibility and Dissociations**

Ibert et al (2019) suggest that understanding the social construction of value also needs to include dissociation practices as a lens, since dissociating from negative qualities helps maintain the value of the product gathered from other associative practices, even if it does not directly contribute to value creation. The GI and *terroir* narratives employed by different actors are careful in not trying to associate the tea with its darker spaces and history. A striking observation that was too apparent to not miss was the erasure of Darjeeling and Darjeeling Tea’s colonial history. The conversations I had with my respondents, were very far off from the contextualization of the place and tea with the coloniality that they rested upon:

*“Darjeeling Tea is from the 1800’s, it is not something that started a few years (ago); it has been going on from a hundred years, and over a period of time people have recognized (it). People have access to all kinds of tea now, so when people have access and they have realized Darjeeling Tea is among the best then it makes sense that it’s the ultimate.”*

When referring to the history of Darjeeling Tea, it is usually said that because Darjeeling Tea is an old entity existing from the 1800’s, the duration of its long existence contributes to its quality. The tea only had a long history, and that was a marker of quality, leaving behind a dark space upon which the plantations were built. However, it also rides on the assumption that this tea is timeless, and that the quality and the way it has been produced have been the same throughout these centuries, rendering the place timeless and ignoring, its colonial legacy. Sarah Besky (2014) has taken note of how fair trade and GI are strategies for making the plantation life “better” and an effort to undo the injustices of the colonial past, only partially addressing the concerns of plantation workers themselves. The GI discourse uses what she calls the “Third World Agrarian Imaginary”, where Darjeeling Tea is seen as naturally occurring, and not as a product of colonial exploitation and post-colonial industrial agriculture, where these plantations are “farms”, plantation owners are “farmers” and workers are “caring environmental stewards” (P 31).

Branding is a process that makes meanings and values that are inherently shaped by their historical contexts that mark their roots (Pike, 2013). However, the historical contextualization of Darjeeling tea is different in the sense that the branding process is completely devoid of historical associations. Besky (2014) talks about the significance of

material symbols of British colonial development and domination to the high market of Darjeeling Tea and the tourist experience, and how the terroir is used to turn a problematic colonial relic into a palatable imaginative destination. While the different actors involved in the tea industry had their own ways of situating Darjeeling Tea's histories, the legacy of Darjeeling Tea's colonial heritage is something that interviewees usually chose to avoid talking about. The GI status is used by producers of the tea to inculcate the "coherent image of a palatable place and product", and the idea that holders of the property rights are all equals (Besky, 2014). However, the actors involved in the process of meaning making have obscured the historical context of the tea plantations by rendering invisible the colonial space that these plantations rest upon.

*"When the country became independent in 1947, the government was not in a situation to provide for all far-flung areas. So, tea estates became an island of its own and the population became the responsibility of the tea estate. The law was designed in a manner to protect their rights and take care of these issues. These laws are drafted in the 1950s. These are all still valid. The certification bodies are similar to those."*

Ibert et al (2019) take the example of fashion labels and how they dissociate themselves from their domestic manufacturing plants, because these are "dark places" that one would find unethical. These gardens are the very spaces where tea pickers get paid less than a dollar a day. These are facts that get denied or most often do not get talked about or are framed in a different way that helps sanitize the darkness of these spaces. The treatment and labor fixity of tea garden workers is not a novel issue (Besky, 2012). The ancestry of this phenomenon can be traced back to the colonial construction and recruitment of the

“sturdy, able bodied and tough” hill people of Nepal. Tea gardens are still mostly seen in advertisements and conversations as spaces nurtured by racialized and ethnicized Gorkha women, framed as indigenous/traditional knowledge that the GI language employs, and the Darjeeling Tea industry thrives upon.

Going back to Graeber (2001)’s theory of value drawn from Munn’s, the process of assigning value involves the act of making value visible and the power of forming social relations that take on the value that is made visible. In the geographic associations made with Darjeeling Tea’s branding, the discourse communicates meanings of authenticity and rarity, which can be understood as meanings created from conceptual distinctions making the value of the tea visible. In this act of making this value visible, a certain intellectual labor is employed to produce these meanings, which is transformed into a perceptible form (Munn, 1986). It is important to note here that imaginations are used to make the invisible value visible, and at the same time, darker realities on the ground are made to be invisible in this process. Different actors are capable of manipulating the meanings to be ascribed to the product. In the process, narratives can be used, interpreted and appropriated in different ways to serve different agendas, and legal tools like the GI complement the social construction of these meanings (Ferrari, 2014). The promotional language around Darjeeling Tea can be understood as a frame that helps people picture only what is within the frame. The decision of what fits inside the frame reflects how power is distributed among actors across time and space, who gets to make meanings legitimate and who benefits from them.

While associating the product with high quality, rarity and authenticity helps to valorize the tea, avoiding the potential imagination of tea plantations as spaces of



exploitation embedded in a colonial legacy becomes a way of maintaining the high value that Darjeeling Tea garners from its associations. The denial of exploitative conditions of these very workers in the tea gardens is an attempt to obscure negative associations, and to dissociate the product from these realities through the deliberate amnesia of the narratives used by actors involved in the tea industry. These are efforts to keep the product away from the imagination of the garden as a plantation where (un)fair wages are protected by an age-old plantation labor law, in a bid to influence its desirability. These practices of dissociation detach the product with on-the-ground realities that, if publicized, would put the tea in a bad light, and bring down its value, which rests on the imagined associations with quality, terroir and authenticity.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION



Figure 15: Advertisement Board for Darjeeling Tea on the Way to Darjeeling

As one makes their way into Darjeeling, through the winding roads that pass through plantations, huge billboards extolling the tea are hard to ignore. These advertisements repeat the essence of the conversations I analyze here and communicate meanings that are congruent with what my interviews highlighted. Promotional materials, tourism language, and even normal conversations with people direct attention to how the tea has been made to be perceived. The tea that is said to “overwhelm” one’s senses is an expensive type of tea that is more often tied to its *terroir* and to its nature; so much so that an inch outside the tea-growing area produces a different tea- in name, in taste and in value.

While advertisements, promotional materials and spoken language around tea push for an attribution of this value to nature, an investigation of the process of valuation of the tea tells a different story. It is neither because the tea grows in the highest of altitudes, nor

because the mist has made the tea unique and given it value; it has value because there is a network of actors and regimes that control not only the exchange and consumption of the tea, but also what the tea should mean and evoke. This insight takes us back to Middleton (2018)'s call for the need to critically examine the explanations of what makes Darjeeling so unique, and above all, *who* makes Darjeeling different. Here, the legacy of Darjeeling's exception continues and is prevalent in the discourses that deem Darjeeling tea as a rare commodity.

Darjeeling Tea is rare because there are systems in place that limit the production of the tea to the 87 tea gardens through the GI status, and that these discourses have existed. This very exceptionality of Darjeeling and Darjeeling Tea is a source of value and monopoly rents (Harvey, 2002) for its producers. And in order to maintain the value that comes from the perceived exceptionality and rarity of this tea, practices of association and dissociation are adopted by people who wield the power to dictate what the meaning of the tea should be, and these practices can be seen as actions that transform meanings into concrete perceptible forms (Munn, 1986). This research reveals that the value of Darjeeling Tea is inextricably tied to meanings of authenticity and rarity, which have existed long before the GI status was introduced to the tea, and a careful analysis shows the contradictions produced in the different ways these meanings are produced and values are created. The construction and contradiction of these meanings has always been enmeshed in unequal power relations distributed across space and time that have dictated the regimes of value for the tea.

This research contributes to the literature on Darjeeling Studies to the crucial work (Besky, 2017, Sen, 2018, Chatterjee, 2001) on Darjeeling Tea. This research could be

replicated to study valuation and meaning making of other place-based products. One of the ways that this research could be built on, is by studying how informal tea producers of Darjeeling garner value for their tea and how they are being brought into the folds of the intellectual property regime, or how they operate outside it, how valuation is done and what meanings are being constructed by its producers. This would enable us to understand Darjeeling Tea's valuation in spaces that are not legible, and a more nuanced understanding of the contradictions that may or may not exist in that process.

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