



Contributing Writer

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TRANSFORMING THE TEA INDUSTRY: From Plantations to a Small-Farmer Model

“The predominant ownership and management model for tea gardens in Darjeeling is rooted in colonial history. In view of the changing cultural, political and economic climate, a new framework that revolves around worker involvement, participation and ownership was conceived. This revolutionary concept is not only critical to the success [of Potong], but it is important for the development of the larger Darjeeling tea community.”

*- Prem Tamang,
Tea Promoters of India*

Fairly Traded Coffee, 1986

When Equal Exchange pioneered fair trade coffee in 1986, the founders were told they were crazy: how could they create a viable business model while simultaneously helping small farmers gain access to the market, pay them an above-market price, educate consumers about the source of their coffee, and connect producers and consumers in relationships based on respect and integrity?

Close to three decades later, there is no question that the founders’ idealistic vision has radically transformed the coffee industry. While “fair trade” may not yet be a household term, the concept has entered the mainstream coffee market. Over 400 new fair trade coffee roasters have sprung up across the country, and a number of larger companies are dedicating a portion of their coffee purchases to fair trade. Consumers are increasingly choosing to buy coffee sourced from fair trade cooperatives, and the producer members of those cooperatives are, in general, doing far better than their non-fair trade counterparts.

Fairly Traded Tea, 2013

Skip ahead twenty-seven years now, and let’s take a look at the tea industry. By far, the vast majority of tea found on grocery store shelves comes from large-scale plantations. Even 95% of tea that is labeled “fair trade” is sourced from

plantations, one of the last vestiges of the colonial system. The basic structure of the plantations has not changed since colonial times, consisting of absentee owners and very low wages for workers.

The certifiers claim that there is not enough small-farmer tea to create a viable supply chain, that plantation tea is the only way to offer consumers a fair trade tea. However, while it is true that in some cases workers have more participation in certain decisions than do those working on non-fair trade plantations, by only working with large-estate tea, the current fair trade model focuses far too much on supply and not nearly enough on structural, systemic change.

Transformation of the tea industry is both possible and long overdue. Due to the feudal nature of plantations, workers are often trapped in a system of dependency. In many cases, workers receive their housing, schooling and medical care from the estate. This means that if the plantation is abandoned, thousands of workers and their families are left without any form of income or services. In fact, in many regions economic, political and cultural realities are causing this system, frozen in a bygone era, to crumble on its own. Tea workers, however, can’t afford to wait for slow change, and committed fair traders and activists need to take action now to create a new model based on hu-

FAIR WORLD PROJECT

AFTER WATER, **TEA** IS THE MOST POPULAR DRINK IN THE WORLD WITH **70,000** CUPS DRUNK PER SECOND.

GLOBALLY, PERHAPS AS MANY AS **50 MILLION** PEOPLE ARE INVOLVED IN THE TEA TRADE, IN MANY OF THE WORLD’S LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRIES.

The vast majority of the world’s tea comes from plantations in India, Sri Lanka, and East Africa, established during the British Empire.

CONDITIONS ON MANY OF THESE PLANTATIONS HAVE REMAINED VIRTUALLY THE SAME SINCE THAT TIME.