

Intervention Symposium—“Plantation Methodologies: Questioning Scale, Space, and Subjecthood”

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Finding Deities in Monoculture Rows: Everyday Affects of Green Growth

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During my fieldwork in India’s tea-growing district of Darjeeling, worker Deepa told me about a surprising experience that occasionally interrupts the exhaustion and boredom of her tea plucking shifts. Normally, fulfilling a quota of 24kg of tea leaves per day is a painstaking and repetitive task. But every so often, as she routinely makes her way through row after row of identical bushes, she would reach out for a leaf that would suddenly start to move on its own and walk away from her hands. What had at first appeared to be a tea leaf was in fact an insect of the *Phylliidae* family (variety of *Phyllium bioculatum*), which are known to mimic the shape of tea leaves, and which are referred to locally as tea devas, or tea deities. Dispersed over Southeast Asia, these insects have evolved morphological and behavioral adaptations to conceal themselves as plant parts. This cunning deception filled Deepa with curiosity and brought her to pause her repetitive labor to marvel at the insect’s uncanny likeness to its leafy habitat. For Deepa and her colleagues, these infrequent encounters are still a novelty. According to them, tea devas have appeared on the plantation only in the last decade, since their company has ceased to use pesticides. Set against the decay and decline of plantation productivity following two centuries of intensive cultivation, tea devas have become emblems of ecological renewal. They are particularly striking examples of the new kinds of subjecthood that emerge as plantations across Darjeeling transition from chemically-sustained monocultures to organic, polycultural cultivation.



Image 1: Female workers picking leaves in the tea fields (photo by author)

As a plantation methodology, multispecies ethnography charts how “growing green” is currently seen as a potential remedy for ecological problems such as depleted soils, erosion, and heavy and irregular monsoons due to climate change, among others. As a growing number of India’s tea companies experiment with organic cultivation, a variety of lifeforms have started to settle in and around plantations and enliven the “zones of sensory alienation” ([Chao in this collection](#)). Bugs and fungi feed on the monocrop bushes, bacteria nourish the soil, owls nest in the shade trees, and sometimes elusive great pied hornbills and even tigers are seen roaming in the surrounding woodlands. Species previously excluded from plantation grounds now animate tea fields brimming with movements and sounds, textures and smells. The people who traverse these places are no longer encountering motionless silence, but they hear birdsong, smell fresh compost, and, on rare and special occasions, they glimpse the swaying motion of a tea deva simulating the movements of tea leaves in light wind. The promise of green growth frequently manifests in everyday, affective encounters with these and other species.



Image 2: Owls nest in bird boxes above the tea fields and act as natural pest control (photo by author)

Ethnographically documenting these encounters foregrounds how green transitions unevenly reconfigure plantation subjectivities. Of particular significance to many planters and workers is the tea deva, a critter that I was never myself lucky enough to spot, but that provoked a particular sense of wonder among the people whom I spoke to—and with wonder comes transformative potential (Srinivas 2018). However, the nature of this potential differs greatly according to people’s engagement on the plantation. For workers like Deepa, the tea devas first and foremost made daily labor more interesting by filling their mechanical routines with small surprises. Deepa’s boss Swaroop offered money to any worker who, upon encountering a tea deva, picked it up and handed it over to the management so that it could be photographed and showcased on the company’s website. The workers were so smitten with the insects that they often kept these photographs or videos on their phones for personal documentation. For them, the charismatic insect was a particular source of affective response

because unlike many of the other critters that they encountered during their shifts, the tea devas were not part of the new tasks that organic transition demanded, such as preparing manure or interplanting sterile monocrop rows. Instead, tea devas came along more as a curious distraction from these labors.



Image 3: Interplanted with other plants, some sections of organic tea plantations invite leisurely strolls (photo by author)



Image 4: Workers forage ferns that are allowed to grow in-between tea bushes (photo by author)

To plantation workers, who are mostly practicing Hindus, the notion of insects as “devas” conveyed a sense of endearment rather than an expression of an actual spiritual sentiment. In planters’ discourse, however, the fascination with the insects came much closer to veneration. Pointing to an enlarged version of these photographs that occupied a prominent place in his office, Swaroop called the tea deva a “divine manifestation”. Whereas he himself did not work in the tea fields, encounters with tea devas accompanied his sensuous engagement with the plantation’s other-than-human dimensions, as he ritually tasted freshly produced tea, went birdwatching between tea bushes, or bent down to touch and smell the soil. For him, each tea deva sighting was an auspicious sign that organic plantations could indeed become, in his words, “creative rather than destructive”. More than the other critters that have started to settle on his plantation, the tea deva seemed to reward his efforts at agroecological transition. This special role can be attributed to the fact that the tea deva’s charismatic mimicry makes it a marketable mascot of the tea plant. But for Swaroop, and like most other plantation-

dwelling species, tea devas also perform a particular type of work in the cultivation scheme (Besky and Blanchette 2019). They serve to spiritually enhance the labor of other plantation critters such as the birds that feed on pest organisms, and the cows and compost worms that nourish the soil.



Image 5: Cows roaming between tea bushes (photo by author)

Swaroop's notion of a nonhuman deity gracing and sustaining the monocrop rows conjures tea plantations not only as more-than-human, but also as more-than-secular (Bubandt 2018; Paredes 2023). Practices like producing compost according to specific rituals and applying it according to the lunar calendar are supposed to bring together these powers in a way that is both biologically and spiritually effective. When, for instance, cows provide manure to feed soil microorganisms, these two lifeforms do not only boost vegetal productivity, but, according to biodynamic philosophy, also harmonize plantation cultivations with cosmic rhythms and imbue the crop with spiritual powers. Swaroop considers the tea devas'

apparition as proof that his workers are correctly navigating cosmic rhythms in their daily labors.

And yet, the tea devas' sacral potential remains tied in profane ways to the labor of tea plantation workers, revealing how underlying regimes of economic precarity continue to characterize plantation life even in its most wondrous aspects. The additional tasks that workers have to perform in order to sustain both lively ecologies and cosmic forces around tea monocrops blend into the traditional labor of plucking, maintenance, and factory production, and often make their work more tedious. While these additional strains are also mixed up with pleasurable moments (like photographing tea deva sightings), the sensation of enlivenment generated by organic plantation infrastructures is also inextricably tied to the boredom, exhaustion, and frustration that accompany workers' daily routines (Besky 2013; Sen 2017). Monotonous labors produce an environment in which fascination for other species and even veneration for tea devas becomes possible within large-scale monocultures and their entrenched architectures of precarious living.

These conflicting kinds of subjecthood accrue heightened significance in light of their imperial genealogies. With companies increasingly trying to “grow green”, the successors of British planters are refashioned as environmentalist entrepreneurs (Agrawal 2005)—and the descendants of their colonial workforce, the so-called coolies, that were once ordered to deforest the land are now instructed to harmonize plantation production with ecological processes. Whereas the particular kinds of labor they undertake, and their relation to the other-than-human environment of the plantation, are transforming, their living and working conditions have not improved significantly since colonial times (Besky 2013). Thus, these emerging green economies are not only in tension with their agroindustrial basis (Galvin 2021), but their profitability also relies on the exploitation of an ongoingly marginalized workforce (Sen 2017).

Thus, multispecies methodology underlines how the uneven figurations produced in organic tea fields perpetuate pre-existing associations between plantation workers and other-than-human life forms owed to histories of colonization and slavery. In the 19th century, British imperial discourses on race associated the “unacceptably savage” Assamese variety of the tea plant (*Camellia sinensis var. assamica*) with the “rude tribes” of the Assam-Burma frontier (Sharma 2006: 438). This relates to the fraught proximities of enslaved Black persons

and animals (rather than plants) which is prolific in other regional and historical contexts (Bennett 2020; Boisseron 2018). Such entangled relations are exacerbated on organic tea plantations, as an other-than-human species is elevated to an extrahuman position at the expense of human workers, who remain on the lowest level in the plantation hierarchy.

The kinds of subjecthood that populate organic tea plantations demonstrate how green growth is both transforming in terms of their material form and enduring in terms of their exploitative logic. Multispecies methodologies allowed me to show that, while tea devas manifest the possibility to create livelier monocrop landscapes, affective encounters with these critters are a delightful but fleeting façade over an unchanging infrastructure of exploitative work—one that, in some ways, uncannily mirrors the deceptive appearance of the tea deva itself. The transformation to which Swaroop aspires when he wishes for his plantation to become “creative rather than destructive” also alludes to the resourcefulness with which plantation projects have to continuously reinvent themselves over time. But since the creative potential represented by the wondrous tea devas is also highly conflictual, organic plantations turn out to be both creative and destructive in conjoined ways.

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