Fixity: 

On the inheritance and maintenance of tea plantation houses in Darjeeling, India

ABSTRACT

On tea plantations in Darjeeling, India, a house comes with every job. These domestic spaces constitute a significant portion of workers’ compensation. Jobs—and the houses that come with them—are inherited by successive generations of workers, but houses remain the property of plantations. Archival and ethnographic stories about the provision, inheritance, and upkeep of houses bring attention to the continued importance of “fixity” to capitalist regimes of accumulation. Fixity has three dimensions: a persistent association between ethnicity, place, and work; the fostering of senses of belonging through systems of inheritance; and the routine maintenance of infrastructures, including housing. As a theoretical and descriptive tool, fixity highlights a tension in late capitalism between work and life, and between freedom and bondage.

On a sunny October day, I sat with Lal Kumari outside her house, deep in a valley on Dokebari Tea Estate, in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal. I watched as she potted small ornamental plants in plastic bags (see Figure 1). Her husband, Girish, had just returned from the bazaar in town with a bucket of paint to touch up their house for the upcoming Hindu festivals. We continued to chat as Lal Kumari moved on to hanging laundry and I picked rocks out of a pile of uncooked rice spread out on a circular bamboo tray. Girish’s rhythmic up-and-down brushing motions kept me mesmerized. I watched as the bright green paint seeped into the crags in the wide wooden planks. With one watery coat, the dark rings of mold, accrued during the five-month monsoon, faded away.

Each year during the festival season, Lal Kumari and Girish bought new clothes, painted their house, and awaited visits from children and grandchildren scattered across Darjeeling and beyond. They had the money to do these things thanks to a bonus that the plantation provided to Lal Kumari each year during the fall Hindu festival season. In the layers of paint and wood, one could detect a sedimentation of kin and labor relations over time.

Harvesting tea is not an annual or even seasonal activity, as with coffee or wine. Rather, it is plucked nearly continuously, 10 to 11 months per year. During the plucking season, women like Lal Kumari pass through the fields, coming back to the same bushes over and over again to find the freshest sprigs of tea. In the short dormant season, these women prune those same bushes to incite more sprigs to grow next season. Darjeeling tea workers describe bushes as having about the same productive life as human beings. A bush can produce tea for decades, but after 50 or 60 years, its output slows and eventually stops. Like a human body, a tea bush needs continuous maintenance.

The question of how to ensure such maintenance has preoccupied colonial and capitalist interests for nearly two centuries. When colonial tea production began in India in the early 19th century, it mimicked a Chinese model of “family garden farming.”
distinguished by small production plots where farmers grew green leaf and sold it to intermediaries, who then took it to a processing location (Chamney 1930, 43–45; ITA 1915, 297; Ukers 1892, 57–58; Walsh 1892, 57–58; see also Ball 1848). Soon after they established tea plantations in India, British planters set out to intensify this model. Mobilizing “scientific methods,” they sought to make tea production more “efficient” (ITA 1915; see also Arnold 2006; Chatterjee 2001; Daniel, Bernstein, and Brass 1992; Drayton 2000; Sharma 2011). British planters held that the relative dispersal of production, manufacture, transport, and sale in the Chinese system put tea at risk of adulteration. The vertically integrated plantation, with a centralized processing factory, enabled the quick conversion of highly perishable green leaf into a drinkable and transportable form (Baildon 1882, 30–34; McGowan 1860).

But factories were not enough. To meet the demands of continuous production, planters needed workers with the skill to properly maintain tea bushes to live on plantations year-round, season after season. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, plantation owners in other parts of India forcibly conscripted laborers (Chatterjee 2001; Griffiths 1967; Sharma 2011). In Darjeeling, by contrast, workers were not forcibly conscripted. Instead, owners recruited them, mostly from Nepal, with some monetary compensation, but the bulk of their incentive was non-monetary and included housing in what were called “labor lines.” From the plantation system’s inception here, laborers regularly maintained and invested cash in their houses, and this was central to the continued viability of tea and to the survival of thousands of marginalized people. Today, people like Lal Kumari describe themselves, and are formally categorized within the industry, as “permanent workers,” distinguishable from the temporary laborers hired to pluck tea during the rainy season’s spike in production. Small two- to three-room houses, just like the yearly cash bonuses, are now mandated for all permanent workers by Indian plantation labor law. And Nepali-speaking plantation workers have now lived in Darjeeling for generations. They did not move back to Nepal. In Darjeeling today, Indian Nepalis, or Gorkhas, are citizens of India, and Nepali is the lingua franca.

While Darjeeling plantation workers have thus always been technically free to abandon their jobs, generations of workers have continued to remain and to pass down their jobs and attached houses to their kin. Lal Kumari, for example, inherited her job and house from Girish’s mother. Despite all the visible work she did to maintain the house, Lal Kumari did not have legal title. Plantation houses are sites that laborers inherit but can never own.

This practice, which ties jobs to houses across generations, extends colonially rooted forms of ethnic marginalization into the present. On and off Darjeeling plantations, Indian Nepalis have long struggled for citizenship rights, even though they compose the region’s demographic majority (Besky 2014; Middleton 2015). The history of plantation housing, as told in the annual bulletins of the Indian Tea Association (ITA), the country’s main tea planters’ guild, founded in 1881 and still in operation, is one of meticulous legal and bureaucratic maneuvering. Colonial-era planters worked to ensure that tea workers’ inheritance of jobs (and attached houses) did not mean the accrual of property. Houses were intended to provide workers with minimally adequate shelter, which would entice them to continue working.
Across South and Southeast Asia, the maintenance of a viable labor force has historically been entangled with household and identity formation (Bass 2012; Brenman 1989; Daniel 2008; Stoler 1986; see also Meillassoux 1981). Mid-20th-century anthropologists of the plantation saw workers’ dependence on owners for housing and other facilities as a form of bondage. Such bondage was the hallmark of an “old style” plantation system that these anthropologists saw as being supplanted by a modern, fully capitalist form. The “new style” of plantation was marked by a flexible, mobile wage labor force that had no such dependency (Wolf 2001).

While flexibility and mobility are central to late-capitalist agriculture, the 21st-century plantation in India maintains many “old style” attributes. Alongside the historical record, ethnographic stories I collected during fieldwork from 2006 to 2015 about the provision, inheritance, and upkeep of plantation houses call attention to the centrality of domestic maintenance to the accumulation of capital (Bear 2007, 2014; Collier, Rosaldo, and Yanagisako 1982; Federici 2004; Lamphere 1985; Roelf 1999; Zavella 1987). In Darjeeling, the passing down of jobs and their attached houses maintains, or fixes, affective relations and senses of belonging across generations. Houses have been made into an element of fixed capital, not unlike roads, outbuildings, or factories. The concept of fixity thus brings a discussion of inheritance together with a discussion of capitalist infrastructure. While housing might seem like an odd form of infrastructure, plantation housing “facilitates flows, standardizes distributions, and extends political projects” (Fennell 2016; see also Anand 2017; Barnes 2014; Carse 2014; Larkin 2013; von Schnitzler 2016). The house is therefore both a grounding entity and an essential piece of connective tissue.

The work of “fixing” plantation houses in Darjeeling speaks to a more general tension between “work” and “life” in late capitalism (Gibson-Graham 1996; Weeks 2007). While much has been made of deterritorialization in late capitalism, life on plantations in Darjeeling reminds us that fixity is a key form of both participation in global capitalist projects and of sustaining systematic exploitation and exclusion (Brenner 1998; Collins 2002; Harvey 2001). Fixity is less a negative correlate to freedom than a multidimensional condition that calls into question the sharp divide between freedom and bondage.

**Fixity**

Fixity indexes three things. The first is a persistent association between ethnicity, place, and work. Early British planters in Darjeeling saw Nepalis as ideal tea plantation workers, partly because colonial ethnologists described them as practicing settled agriculture, as opposed to the shifting agriculture of the Lepcha who lived in the region when the British annexed it (Besky 2014). As the tea industry expanded between the first recruiting of laborers in the 1830s and the turn of the 20th century, planters made arrangements with sardārs (contractors) to recruit laborers from Nepal. Sardārs often recruited men, women, and children from their own natal villages and ethnic groups. The settlement of workers required the construction of labor lines. In addition to housing in labor lines and a small daily wage, tea plantations provided workers with plots of land, or khet, for cultivating subsistence food crops. Planters believed that, if allotted houses and garden space, Nepalis would be more inclined to stay in place. An ethnicized and geographic notion of fixity was thus key to the production of Darjeeling tea from the beginning.

As Karl Marx (1976) noted in his discussion of the relationship between “fixed” and “circulating” capital, capital needs to both dominate specific locations and populations and maintain a capacity for relocation, divestment, and abandonment. Much recent discussion of contemporary global labor regimes is thus understandably concerned with how increased mobility exacerbates exploitation through informalization, casualization, debt bondage, and human trafficking. These regimes entail the disassociation of people with place, even as they reinforce associations between racial or ethnic identity and particular laboring capacities (Brenman, Guérin, and Prakash 2009; Calvão 2016).

For example, headhunting agencies now routinely recruit Nepali women from Darjeeling and Nepal into the low-paid hospitality and childcare sectors in Southeast Asia and the United States, and draw young Nepali men into construction and food-service jobs in the Persian Gulf and on military bases around the world (Bruslé 2010; Seddon, Adhikari, and Gurung 2002; Yamanaka 2000). Such agencies take advantage both of mounting debt and poverty and of a colonially rooted association of Nepali people with a special capacity for domestic and military service. Although deterritorialization is certainly a key form of exploitation among Nepalis today, even amid “capital’s necessity for motion” (Hébert 2015, 36), a fixity of labor in place remains a key mechanism of accumulation (see also Collins 2002; Li 2014). In Darjeeling a tight connection between workers and place remains written into both law and custom.

Second, fixity indexes the intergenerational stability formed in inheritance: a sense of belonging and rootedness, in place and to other people, that gives meaning to life beyond work. On tea plantations, houses are decorated, food is prepared, and kin come to visit. Fixity indexes how such activities—what Kathi Weeks (2007) might call “signs of life”—disrupt or are implicated in the process of capital accumulation. The tension between the fixity of inherited ties and that of capitalist work regimes becomes evident in houses, where plantation laborers struggle to maintain nonwork temporalities and nonwork relationships.
Yet inheritance is not the same as ownership.

To be sure, the observation that the physical construction of houses parallels the social generation and regeneration of people is nothing new (Bourdieu 1979; Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; Cieraad 1999; Fehérváry 2013; Shyrock 2004). The subject of inheritance has garnered renewed attention in political economy, perhaps most prominently in the work of economist Thomas Piketty (2014), who articulates the links between family-based inheritance and growing wealth inequality in Europe and the United States (see also Beckert 2008; Marcus 1992). Piketty’s emphasis on inherited wealth provides a counterweight to the notion that “modern” capitalist production decreases the significance of family and kinship (Franklin and McKinnon 2001; McKinnon and Cannell 2013; Yanagisako 2002, 2015). Specifically, Piketty’s assumption that the house is a form of private wealth or that, in his words, “housing services” measure “well-being” does not stand up to ethnographic scrutiny (Guyer 2015, 496; Piketty 2014, 213).

The concept of fixity builds on this critique by bringing attention to how the inheritance of things that are not wealth (i.e., plantation jobs and access to plantation housing) can foreclose rather than foster the sense of ownership or possession. For example, over the course of the rise and fall of the 20th-century US welfare state, the provision of public housing, combined with redlining and mortgage discrimination, fixed racial segregation in public infrastructure, with its effects inherited intergenerationally (Fennell 2015, 2016).2 Racial, ethnic, and gendered inequality have long been regenerated through housing in company towns and labor camps (Appel 2012; Crawford 1995; Dinious and Verega 2011; White 2012). Whether in migrant worker barracks or company towns, housing is frequently also a site where senses of belonging and intergenerational connection emerge alongside exploitative and dehumanizing labor regimes (Calvão 2016).

The tension between feelings of affective connection produced by inheritance and those of marginality produced by racial or gendered immobility is often most empirically evident when housing begins to deteriorate: when its fixity in place, underwritten by the state, capital, or both, breaks down (Fennell 2015; Simone 2004). This is no less the case on plantations, as Andrew Willford (2014) shows in his account of how feelings of nostalgia and dislocation were engendered among Tamil workers who relocated to urban settlements after the breakup of Malaysian rubber plantations.

Plantations in Darjeeling, however, are not being broken up, and workers there are not being threatened with eviction like those in other parts of South and Southeast Asia. While we might think of inequality in causal terms (i.e., houses store wealth, wealth is inherited, inequality persists), the enduring expectation among Darjeeling plantation workers that they might inherit both jobs and housing prompts us to think of inequality differently. Inheritance is perhaps best seen not as a transference of wealth but as a combination of two distinct forms of work (Derrida 1994, 54). In one sense, as Donna Haraway (2010) explains, to work means “to get on”—to get along in a relationship and to move forward, together, in time. To work also means to labor; in Darjeeling, this means both cultivating tea and maintaining houses. The house, as a nonwage mode of payment, has become a site for mutual investment by landowner and worker alike. It is a concretization of their overlapping commitments. It can play this role because it is not fungible and hence draws people into enduring intergenerational relationships.

This leads to the third and final dimension of fixity: maintenance. The routine maintenance of houses and other elements of infrastructure is what feminist economic anthropologists have called “generative” work (Bear et al. 2015). In maintenance, “idioms that are not themselves determined by capital prove consequential for actors’ experiences of economic transformation and, in turn, influence the continuity of capitalist cycles” (Hébert 2015, 35; see also Tsing 2015). In the case of houses in Darjeeling, such idioms include painting walls, cultivating plants, and decorating verandas. None of these forms of maintenance depends on the plantation, yet each helps regenerate it. Maintenance is a paradoxical task. It regenerates both colonial forms of exploitation and shared senses of attachment and belonging. The work of maintenance reaffirms and reinstatates connections: between people and place, between labor and capital, and between work and plantation.

It is in maintenance that “the complicated work of fitting to the varied circumstances of organizations, systems, and lives is accomplished” (Jackson 2014, 222; see also Graham and Thrift 2007). As forms of capital that are relatively fixed in place, infrastructures “create the grounds on which other objects operate” (Larkin 2013, 329). Plantation labor is grounded by systems of compensation, the house being most significant. But when workers like Lal Kumari used annual cash bonuses to complete domestic upkeep tasks, they were not simply maintaining the original labor lines. Instead, they were remaking them for themselves and subsequent generations. A closer attention to how maintenance mediates between inheritance and immobility, then, can open a space for understanding what kinds of people might emerge within long-standing systems of exploitation and ethnic marginalization.

Both during the colonial period, when plantations were owned by British companies, and after Indian independence in 1947, when ownership began to gradually shift to Indian companies, planters have consistently made licit and illicit efforts to reduce the plantation house to “mere” infrastructure, a basic shelter for labor and nothing more.
Such attempts to “disentangle” capital from other forms of life such as kinship, care, and inheritance—to minimize capital's need for fixity—are common, but they are complicated by what Hannah Appel calls “environmental flows and community overflows” (2012, 693). The upkeep of labor housing generates such overflows. This is no less the case “when the right to live and reside is often contingent on a legally recognizable relation of production” (Calvão 2016, 457). Across South Asia, plantation workers insist that their company-supplied houses are “worthy of investing in,” even in the absence of ownership (Jegathesan 2015, 270). Such investments highlight the interdependence between inheritance and work.

To ensure that her plantation job will be inheritable, Lal Kumari must pluck tea and maintain the soils, machinery, and roads that move it to market. She must also make her house a suitable site for yearly festival reunions. In this, she does not appear unique. As feminist anthropologists have long noted, the maintenance of relations of inheritance, like the maintenance of physical infrastructure, is often about fixing or repairing connections. It is what Micaela di Leonardo (1987) calls “kin-work,” from marriage to funerary exchanges to routine household chores to the manipulation of reproductive technologies (Carsten 1997; Roberts 2012; Schneider 1968; Strathern 1992). Feminist accounts of household life have framed unwaged domestic work as central to capitalism insofar as such work reproduces labor power. The modern form of the nuclear family (and of housing) can be said to have emerged alongside industrial capitalism (Collins and Gimenez 1990; Engels 2009; Harris 2000; Moore 1986).

Yet, as Kathi Weeks (2007) has noted, this line of argument presumes that the house and the kin work that goes on inside it must exist to some extent outside capitalism, and that the political subjectivities that form in domestic spaces are somehow insulated from those that form in the public or market spheres (see also Bourdieu 1979; Gibson-Graham 1996). Moreover, in theories of both domestic economies and affective work, the unit of analysis remains individual labor power rather than the relations that people maintain, both to other people and to material things (Strathern 1988; Weiner 1988; Yanagisako 2012). In place of a sharp distinction between spheres of production and reproduction, Weeks (2007) favors a more fluid spectrum from “life” to “work.” Whereas Weeks and others have noted a “colonization of life by work” in the era of flexible, post-Fordist production, the historical and ethnographic material I present below points to a much deeper (and more literally colonial) relation between the two (Weeks 2007, 243; cf. Allison 2013; Fraser 2009; Hardt and Negri 2000; Muehlebach 2012; Ong 1999). My focus on fixity turns attention to how an entangled system of accumulation and relatedness has been regenerated over nearly 200 years.

Generating fixity, 1830–1920

In the correspondences and short reports that appear in ITA annual bulletins published during the industry’s colonial peak in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, talk of labor lines and khet land appears alongside discussions of more familiar forms of infrastructure, including roads, railways, water pipes, and machinery. Since tea production is a year-round process, planters considered a year-round labor force necessary, but if workers were to remain on plantations year after year, they might be able to claim permanent occupancy rights to labor line houses, khet land, or both. Resolving this conundrum, commonly called the Labour Question, took up much of the ITA’s time and resources.

Shortly after the ITA was founded in 1881, Darjeeling tea planters came together to fight the extension onto plantations of the Bengal presidency’s Village Chowkidar Act of 1870 (ITA 1890, 1895, 1897). The Chowkidar Act mandated that every village in Bengal must have a government-appointed chowkidar (guard) to report vital statistics such as births and deaths, as well as criminal activity, to the government. Application of the act to Darjeeling would have forced planters to classify labor lines as “villages.” But as tea planter G. C. Paul wrote to the ITA on July 16, 1888,

Tea Estates do not come within the scope of the Act. . . . Coolie lines . . . are in no sense villages; they are part of the Tea Gardens or plantations. The coolies who occupy these barracks . . . have no property therein of any description, they are merely temporary occupants. (ITA 1890, 28)

There would be “considerable trouble and annoyance,” Paul wrote, if plantations were forced to allow “outside” chowkidars onto tea gardens. After all, he explained, management already appointed its own chowkidars (ITA 1890, 29). Outside overseers would be more prone to bribery and extortion (ITA 1890, 30). In the end, the Village Chowkidar Act was not extended to the plantations. Organizing resistance to the act required planters to more clearly define laborers’ relationships to the plantation and to the domestic space contained therein.

Efforts to do this reached peak intensity in discussions about the extension of the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885. The Tenancy Act granted “occupancy rights” to any individual who had continuously lived on a piece of land for 12 years. A letter from a Darjeeling planter in the 1900 ITA bulletin explained the problem:

There are now undoubtedly numerous natives residing upon tea estate lands, who, if they knew the law, could successfully claim the land they have resided upon for a number of years, and if the new Act without modifications as proposed be introduced [could they] claim for undisputed residence? This point is of great
The use of house and land so enjoyed constitutes in fact part of the wages of the labourers. . . . Such an occupation is, in fact, analogous to . . . that of a garden servant or other workman in England, and the cottage or piece of land assigned for his uses whilst in the employ of his owner; and creates no rights of ownership or tenancy. (ITA 1901, 394; emphasis added)

By pointing out that neither Gielle nor Gybeer received rent, Woodroffe clarifies that while the “coolies” might have made homes in the labor lines, their houses were a form of compensation, not property.

Woodroffe explained that Gybeer and some of “his gang” had continuously cultivated land allotted to them for more than 12 years. He was quick to clarify that Gybeer did not take rent from “his coolies.” Therefore,

it appears to me to be a misapprehension to speak of Gybeer or any other sirdar [sardār] coolie being in possession of land through or by his coolies. Their possession is not his possession, their possession and his possession alike are the possession of the Company. (ITA 1901, 394)

Woodroffe then turns to the question of how to hedge against any possibility that workers or sardārs might at any time claim the land that they had occupied or cultivated for an extended period.

Again, he seems at pains to emphasize that the physical houses should be legally distinguished from the social spaces of home.

For the future I advise not the granting of any form of lease, but the taking from each man, woman, and child, if possible, a written acknowledgement that he or she holds the house and the land now in his or her occupation or any other house or land to which he or she may from time to time be transferred by the sufferance of the Company, and has no sort of right or title thereto and will quit possession whenever required to do. . . . It seems to me that by dealing with individual coolies the danger to the garden from a strike will be lessened . . . while at the same time the power of the sirdars will proportionately be diminished. (ITA 1901, 394; emphasis added)

Woodroffe’s opinion and the collection of correspondences regarding the extension of the Tenancy Act were reprinted in full in the 1913 ITA bulletin (ITA 1914, 234–42) and referenced continuously in subsequent bulletins and annual meetings until the 1920s. Here, the relationships between sardārs, their “gangs,” and planters are explicitly reduced to ones of individual economic exchange rather than collective sociality. In reducing access to housing to mere compensation owed to individuals, owners worked to curb the modes of fixity established in collective occupation of housing and land.

In 1913 the president of the Darjeeling Planters Association, Claud Bald, noted in a circular to all ITA members with interests in Darjeeling that the Bengal Tenancy Act included exemptions for what were called “service tenures.” The act stated, “No occupancy rights can be acquired by any one rendering personal service to a landholder and holding land on his own account because of that service” (ITA 1914, 36). Such arrangements pertained to lands held by virtue of military, police, or chowkidar service. Bald proposed that the ITA petition the government of Bengal to have the act modified to include plantation labor as a similar kind of “service tenure.”

At the 1913 Annual General Meeting of the Darjeeling Planters Association, one planter told the audience that it had a choice: “whether to allow the coolies to cultivate the lands free as a perquisite attached to the work as a cooly, or to take rents and allow the people to acquire tenancy rights” (ITA 1914, 249). He suggests the former, which would make it possible for the owners of tea estates to give freely to their workers the use of all lands which can be spared for their cultivation in their spare time, without the very serious bogey of occupancy rights coming between them. Government cannot be indifferent to the necessity for kindly relations for suppressing a root of bitterness, which is otherwise bound to cause havoc to the peace of this district. (ITA 1914, 249)

By this point, the district was dominated by tea plantations. This speaker and other planters made both a legal and a
moral case for normalizing “service tenure.” “Kindly relations” between labor and management required a limited dispensation for cultivation and social reproduction.

Once again, the answer to the Labour Question was to provide houses while prohibiting formal title to them. As a form of both compensation and family occupation, the house was an apparatus of fixity in a double sense: it facilitated social reproduction among Nepali laborers, but it also reinforced the legal power that rested with plantation owners and the ITA. The “kindly” move to prohibit the rental of plantation houses ended up disempowering Nepali laborers and their families. The structure of compensation became a means of dispossession. Or, perhaps more to the point, the structure of compensation prevented any possession in the first place.

Welfare industry vs. welfare state, 1945–73

I often wonder how many people in high circles appreciate that the Tea Industry is, to all intents and purposes, a “Welfare State” within a State, offering cradle-to-the-grave security to virtually all of its workers. . . . As an Industry we are the largest employers in India, and in this Association alone, our workers and their dependents amount to almost 9 lakh [900,000] persons. All these have to be housed and fed, and the actual workers provided with protective clothing against the vagaries of the weather. Amongst many amenities, they receive free fuel, and the use of khet for cultivation purposes, as well as land on which to graze their cattle. The workers’ children enjoy the facilities of nurseries and crèches, and I can claim with the utmost confidence that our medical series rank second to none in Indian Industry.

A planter addressing members at the 1967 ITA annual meeting (ITA 1968, xxxii)

During the early 20th century, British planters continued to promote the idea that relations between plantation laborers and management were, as the planter in 1913 described, “kindly” and caring (ITA 1914, 249). After World War II, when Indian independence from Britain seemed all but assured, planters continued to claim that the tea industry’s concern for what the 1945 ITA bulletin calls “the mental and moral advancement of our labour forces” exceeded that of other industries in India (ITA 1946, xi). By Indian independence in 1947, ITA members began to acknowledge that the role of the planter with respect to laborers was changing:

The labor world to-day is everywhere in a ferment, and nowhere is this state more noticeable than in India. The war has stimulated new demands, and has given rise to a new conception of the responsibility of the employer, and the rights of his employees. (ITA 1948, ix–x)

In the years leading up to independence, what planters called a “new standard of living” (ITA 1948, xii) began to be codified in legislation. The preindependence government formed a Standing Labour Committee in 1942. The early meetings of the committee, led by Dalit activist B. R. Ambedkar, most directly affected the tea plantations. In a meeting in New Delhi on August 28, 1945, the committee concluded that housing for laborers “should be the joint responsibility of the employer and Government on tea plantations” (ITA 1946, 21–22).

Despite this call for joint responsibility, the ITA (which was still run by Europeans at this time) mounted a concerted effort to keep the new government out of plantations. For the next decade, tea plantation owners set out to avoid oversight and to distinguish their operations from those of other industries. They succeeded in establishing a separate labor code for the tea industry that enshrined colonial labor regulations within the postindependence Indian constitution. In particular, the code established once and for all that plantation houses were a form of infrastructure, or capital expenditure, extending and expanding the compensation system to foreclose the possibility of possession.

As these laws were being written, the sardār system that tied labor recruitment to Nepali family and village groups began to break down. Over the same period, men were recruited off the plantations into special Gurkha regiments of the British and Indian armies. This had long been a practice on tea plantations. The Gurkha regiments of the British army date back to 1815. This period, however, presented an acute need for military labor, which rendered women the majority of the field labor force by 1945. Under postindependence law, compensation was given directly to individual workers, mostly women, with no sardār as intermediary. Women had come to expect support from owners in the form of food rations and childcare during the wartime years (Besky 2014, 78–79).

Among the first major pieces of legislation that pertained to labor under the government of independent India were the Factories and Minimum Wage Acts of 1948. Though these acts were intended to set uniform minimum standards for time off, work hours, and general health and safety in all industries in the country, the ITA quickly moved to exclude tea plantations. One planter explained:

The Factories Act was designed for employees in factories who worked fixed hours in crowded conditions amidst noise and bustle, and for whom a period of recuperation was necessary. The conditions under which plantation labour work permit them to recuperate to their heart’s content without the assistance of legislation. (ITA 1950, 32)
In essence, the ITA argued not only that plantation work was less strenuous than factory work but also that provisions for the reproduction of labor power were built into the existing (colonial) plantation system. Addressing the membership of the ITA in Calcutta in 1950, the association's secretary explained,

The industrial worker in the town may receive a higher cash payment than the tea garden worker but he is in many cases much worse off. He seldom has land near his place of employment. . . . He is infrequently provided with a house and often cannot live with his family. (ITA 1951, xii)

Fixity here became an argument for exempting plantations from general labor law. Around this time, the ITA's Industrial Committee began to discuss the idea that there should be a “separate Plantations Code . . . to regulate conditions of work on plantations in India” (ITA 1950, 30). In April 1948 the committee laid out a general outline for this code, which would distinguish the tea industry from what the ITA called the “sweated industries” (ITA 1950, 30).

The ITA's proposals eventually became the Plantations Labour Act of 1951 (PLA). In addition to firewood, food rations, and creches for childcare, the PLA mandated that "it shall be the duty of every employer to provide and maintain for every worker and his family residing in the plantation necessary housing accommodation" (ITA 1952, 226). In both the ITA's rhetoric and in the act itself, “workers” are consistently placed inside houses with “family,” including spouses, children, and other kin not employed by the plantation. Since enforcement of the PLA began in 1954, plantation owners have been legally responsible not just for maintaining minimally safe spaces of labor but for providing livable spaces for labor.

The PLA also stipulates that each Indian state can devise its own rules regarding the construction and maintenance of plantation housing. The 1954 ITA annual bulletin included an elaboration of these minimum housing standards:

A house to accommodate a plantation worker and his family in the district of Darjeeling should comprise at least:—

2 rooms.
Storage space for food and fuel.
Adequate Washing Facilities, within a reasonable distance.
A family lavatory or latrine.
Adequate verandah space.
A compound for the growing of vegetables and the housing of cattle. (ITA 1955, 253)

The design and dimensions of Darjeeling houses were distinct from those of houses built on plantations in the plains. Ceilings were lower, and rooms and windows were smaller, partly because of worries about exposure to cold mountain air and partly because of beliefs that Nepalis tended to be smaller in stature than adivasis (tribal groups), who worked in the plains. The minimum standards outlined room-by-room measurements and rules governing construction materials, as well as specifications for “ventilation,” “lighting,” “sanitation and drainage,” and “planning” (ITA 1955, 253–57). On “planning,” it was noted that “it is most desirable that blocks of houses be limited in size and wherever possible laid out on the lines of a garden city” and that “houses shall be allocated on the basis of one family to one house” (ITA 1955, 254; emphasis added).

Despite the details included in the PLA, which was an India-wide law, it was ultimately the responsibility of state governments to set housing codes. Under Rule 47 of the state of West Bengal's plantation labor rules (known as the West Bengal Rules), companies are required to rebuild housing stock by 8 percent each year. The 8 percent figure was derived, according to planters' correspondences, from self-reporting by the ITA's membership. Beginning in 1949, members were regularly surveyed about the number of new houses constructed on their plantations. These surveys asked planters to enumerate the construction of two kinds of houses: houses that were kucha, or “raw,” made of degradable material such as bamboo and mud, and those that were pucca, or “proper,” made of more durable materials and meeting the specifications laid out in the PLA.

ITA planters immediately found fault with the West Bengal Rules. As one planter argued in 1958,

The only basis for the figure of 8% is that in one year (1949) in one part of India kutch houses were built to accommodate 8% of the gardens’ workers. These kutch houses did not correspond even in dimensions with the standards since laid down, and being kutch they cost only a fraction of the money which is required to build pucca houses to the designs which have since been specified. What is more, being kutch, they constituted a revenue, not a capital, charge upon the estate and thus the full depreciation was allowed in the year in which the houses were built. (ITA 1959, 166; emphasis added)

The difference between “revenue” and “capital” charges is the difference between investment in temporary repair and upkeep and investment in permanent productive infrastructure, or fixed capital. As capital charges, pucca houses—the kinds of houses whose construction was intended by both the PLA and the West Bengal Rules—were, by legal and economic definition, permanent parts of industrial infrastructure (see Figure 2).

When it became clear that it would be financially difficult to construct the number of pucca houses required, planters began to suggest that the West Bengal government...
offer them financial help. Since plantations were excluded from the Indian government’s nationwide industrial housing schemes, planters by 1960 were lobbying to reclassify tea plantation workers as “factory workers” (ITA 1961, 59). The government never agreed to this change. It is ironic that in the span of less than 20 years, the ITA went from lobbying to exempt itself from industrial regulations to petitioning for inclusion in government-subsidized factory housing schemes. The consequences of the government’s exemption of plantations from both oversight and subsidies, however, were borne less by planters than by workers themselves. The PLA and the West Bengal Rules imported both the economic conventions and “kindly” rhetoric of colonial plantation management into the constitution of the postcolonial state. These laws were designed to ensure fixity, both in families and of capital, but planters continued to delay and defer implementation. New houses consistently failed to meet the standards of pucca architecture. In contemporary Darjeeling, it is tea workers themselves—not plantation owners or the ITA—who must work to bring houses up to this standard, or any standard, of livability and inheritability. *Pucca* and *kutcha* are not only legal or architectural categories but also social ones.

**Between pucca and kutcha**

One spring morning in 2008, I joined a group of women workers plucking tea in a section of Dokebari Tea Estate. Rena, an older tea plucker with whom I was staying, had sent me to pluck with Sita and Poonam, two younger women. On that day, Sita and Poonam were assigned a section of tea located deep in a valley, where the beating sun was strongest. As the group swung close to the backs of the houses in Khasbari village—the village deepest in the valley and farthest away from the road, factory, and town—Sita and Poonam asked me to sneak away with them for a cup of tea. Normally, the women would have taken their tea break squatting down between the bushes underneath the umbrellas they carried in their *taukori* (large conical head baskets). Today, both women wanted a cup of hot tea, and Sita wanted to check on her new baby and show me her new house (see Figure 3).

At the stoop of Sita’s house, I started to take off my shoes, as is customary in Darjeeling, but Sita stopped me. She untethered the floppy piece of corrugated aluminum that served as a door. After being hit with a blast of hot, thick air, I quickly realized why Sita wanted me to keep my feet protected. The floor of the house was not made of mud, wood, or concrete but of broken rock.

“See?” Sita said. “Tok-cha” [It (the floor) bites]. We sat on a bed whose feet had been mounted on four flat stones to compensate for the unevenness of the floor. In each of the house’s exterior walls, the exposed timber frame was wrapped in shiny sheet metal.

We were soon joined by Sita’s retired mother, who lived in the house next door. As we sipped our tea, I asked the group of women about Sita’s new house. Sita’s mother’s house was made mostly of bamboo, and though it seemed less sturdy from the outside than Sita’s new house, it was home to their extended family. Looking again at the broken rocks on the floor beneath us, I presumed aloud that construction on Sita’s house must not be finished. I had never seen a house without a smooth floor, even if it was made of dirt. And sheet metal, I reasoned, seemed ill suited for a hot village located in the sunny seat of the valley.

I was wrong. Sita and her mother insisted that the house was finished. Embarrassed at my misstep, I asked when Sita’s family had built it.
“Oh no, we didn’t build it,” Sita, said. “The company did.”

Looking out from the metal door of Sita’s house, the original “labor line” had swollen into a cluster of houses linked together by narrow footpaths and interspersed with goat sheds. A few of the houses fit the specifications I outlined above: wooden structures with verandas and uniformly sized windows and doors. Others, like Sita’s mother’s, were built of bamboo and scrap materials. Still others were made of concrete. Concrete houses, I was told, were built by families whose sons or fathers had served in the Gurkha regiments of the Indian or British armies (see Figure 4). Army retirees invested their cash wages and pensions in improving or replacing the houses their wives or mothers had been provided as compensation. While plantation companies were legally obligated to rebuild housing stock by 8 percent each year, they rarely if ever met this obligation. Failure to construct new housing was punishable by a fine that was, according to the West Bengal Labor Department representatives I interviewed, a small fraction of the cost of construction materials for a single house.

Even though ITA members had long ago envisioned the construction of planned “garden cities” for their workers, the landscape of this and other tea plantation villages was far from standardized. This was only partly because owners were chronically delinquent in meeting their obligations. The mélange of domestic structures, all of varying vintage and provenance, contained within it a history not only of managerial austerity but also of intergenerational familial investments. It was the curtains, the decorations, the potted plants, and the paint—as much as the floor—that distinguished Sita’s mother’s house from Sita’s, and from those of the neighbors. Thanks mostly to yearly cash bonuses mandated by the PLA, Sita’s mother could make her house into a suitable space for welcoming extended family during festivals, raising children, and, ultimately, retiring.

Turning a house into such a fixed space of intergenerational belonging requires investments of both cash and time that generate “environmental and community overflows”: the signs of life that exceed mere work and the aesthetic flourishes that exceed mere infrastructure (Appel 2012, 693). To purchase curtains, paint, and decorations, Sita’s cash wages, roughly US$1 a day when I visited her house in 2008, would not be much help. She might save, little by little, but most likely she would depend on those annual cash bonuses, given every October. In any event, she would soon be investing her cash compensation back into her in-kind compensation.

In Darjeeling, each plantation house is associated with a plantation job, and each job is associated with a particular kin group. Plantation labor is rigidly divided by gender: men work with machines in tea-processing factories or with fertilizing equipment; women, with their hands either plucking or sorting leaves. A son or son-in-law can inherit a plantation job—usually in the factory or as a field supervisor or member of a spray crew—from a male ancestor. Most women inherit plucking and sorting jobs from retiring mothers. This scenario favors those women who are the younger daughters in their families, since older daughters tend to marry men who live in villages on other plantations well before their mothers retire. Still, it is possible for two sisters to both inherit plucking jobs. For example, if an aunt has no daughters, she might choose to pass her job on to a niece. Women who marry into families on plantations frequently inherit jobs from their mothers-in-law, especially when those mothers-in-law have no daughters, or when their daughters have married out and left the village.
This system of inheritance does not fully explain the distribution and structure of houses in villages like Sita’s. While workers historically had relatively little power to enforce the 8 percent rule, there were circumstances in which they could persuade plantation companies to fund the construction of new houses. As the ITA records show, planters had committed themselves to allocating houses “on the basis of one family to one house” (ITA 1955, 254). “Family” in this case meant a nuclear unit, residing neolocally. A mother and daughter who were both concurrently employed could expect to each have their own house, while a married couple who were both employed on a plantation could expect to share a single house. In Sita’s case, her mother had upon retiring given her job to another daughter, and Sita had inherited her job from an aunt, who resided in her own house after retiring because Sita’s uncle had a job as a field supervisor and had passed his job to Sita’s male cousin, his son. Sita’s aunt, uncle, and male cousin had a house, but Sita was living in her mother’s house while both her sister and she were working.

It was Sita’s hope that her husband would soon find a job in town. The number of men that most plantations employ, even in the best of times, was always considerably smaller than the number of women. It remains typical (and financially advantageous) for a family to include someone who works on the plantation and others who earn wages elsewhere, or who try. This extra cash not only provides supplementary food and clothing but also supplements annual cash bonuses when applied to the construction and maintenance of houses. But contemporary Darjeeling offers men few employment opportunities. Army jobs have dried up, and wage work in the nearby town is scarce. This gendered economic precarity, which has increased since Indian independence, exemplifies how the progressive deterioration of colonial infrastructures parallels the deterioration of domestic stability (Jegathesan 2015; Willford 2014).

After we finished our tea and completed the day’s plucking, I walked back home with Rena, who was hosting me in a village located a short distance up the ridge. As we hiked up, I asked if she had seen Sita’s house.

“Oh yes,” Rena said, shaking her head disapprovingly. She confirmed that the company had built it, but she lamented that Sita’s was not a pucca house.

Like planters, workers distinguished pucca houses from kutcha ones. But pucca has two meanings. In a legal sense, a pucca house is one that meets formal standards for design and materials. In a social sense—the one more familiar to workers like Sita and Rena—a pucca house is a space that is livable. Socially, pucca houses are defined less by dimensions and materials than by a perceived capacity to support family gatherings and to attract visits from daughters and sons and nieces and nephews. As structures that simultaneously draw kin groups together and attest to the security of work, houses are integrated with other “capital investments” mandated by the PLA, such as food rations, crèches, infirmaries, and schools. Together, these investments have created a system of social reproduction and a means of aspiration: schooling might lead to college or even university, and a chance for at least some members of subsequent generations to return to plantation villages wealthier and healthier than their parents. In practice, however, social mobility for Indian Nepalis remains severely limited.

One reason for this is that design and reality rarely intersect. Sita’s house could not be described as kutcha either, since it contained durable materials such as wood and
metal. Still, Rena talked about how it seemed incomplete, looked inhospitable, and, despite being remarkably hot, felt “cold.” In hot weather, eating raw (or kutch) foods is dangerous precisely because it causes cold. Like a fully composed (or pucca) meal, a well-constructed house is essential to well-being. With the monsoon coming up, Rena said, the pounding rains would make a deafening noise. And, Rena added, “the house is sharp.” It certainly did “bite.” Taken separately, the wood, stone, and aluminum that composed Sita’s house were durable, pucca materials, but in this particular configuration, they repelled rather than invited investment, affective or otherwise. Sita’s house would be difficult to care for, and difficult to improve through small cash inputs.

In Sita’s house the company’s need for a fixity in labor ran headlong into workers’ desires to fix kin networks across time, and the need of workers and company alike to maintain infrastructure—to literally fix houses. But it was ultimately workers who had to invest plantation wages into home improvements. They had to invest cash back into the very in-kind benefits they received. This produced deep social anxieties. If Rena and other workers who did live in pucca houses faced a crisis—say, an injury, death, or disability—then their ability to invest in home improvement and effectively care for kin and guests would also be limited. Because Nepalis could never own them, houses did not “store wealth” so much as they consumed savings (Guyer 2015). To Rena, Sita’s house signaled a breakdown in an already-delicate system of affective and economic bondage.

The multiple fixes of capital

The tea industry, Darjeeling’s signature capitalist project, has depended on the continued, permanent settlement of generations of Nepali workers, yet it has not yielded them the settlers’ rights afforded by such sustained occupancy according to Indian regulations such as the Bengal Tenancy Act or postindependence land reforms. Fixity is a way of theoretically “[linking] property relations of domination and production to the qualitative experience of exploitative work” (Calvão 2016, 452). Just as the condition of machinery, roads, and fields shapes the quality of work, the condition of houses shapes the success of the “divergent life projects” that constitute workers’ social worlds (Bear et al. 2015). The entangled efforts of tea pluckers, plantation owners, and lawmakers to ensure the fixity of houses and people indicates that simple divisions between free and bonded labor need to be reconsidered. Over time in Darjeeling, houses became sites where “expectations of permanence” emerged among workers, even as such expectations were systematically undermined by plantation owners (Ferguson 1999; see also Daniel, Bernstein, and Brass 1992; Mintz 1960, 1985).

Fixity is an analytic approach to inheritance that looks through the lens of work, not through that of wealth. Every October at festival time, Darjeeling workers hang new curtains, paint houses, and pot decorative plants. They patch soggy bamboo walls and wash out buckets that collect rainwater. Although workers like Sita, Rena, Lal Kumari, and Poonam hold what they call “permanent jobs,” that permanence has to be cultivated. Both agricultural labor and domestic labor involve work “back and forth” between “what counts as natural/given, and cultural/created” (Franklin and McKinnon 2001, 16). While others have located such cultivation in human relations with animals, fungi, and microbes (Haraway 2010; Paxson 2011; Tsing 2015), on Darjeeling tea plantations, such cultivation animates the walls, windows, corrugated metal, and flower-lined village footpaths that surround families and link them to neighbors. Maintenance tasks allow both labor and capital to endure, but they do not do so in a closed circuit. In maintenance, life, in all its complexity, pushes back against a colonization by work (Weeks 2007).

Understanding the multiple dimensions of fixity is important for a final reason. Moves are afoot by policy makers, agribusinesses, and consumer groups to make plantation workers less dependent on companies for housing and other facilities: to make them into putatively free laborers (Besky 2017). Some see efforts to eliminate such nonmonetary forms of compensation as a welcome decolonization of agriculture, but such efforts also have consequences, not the least of which is the breakup of both families and social and ethical lifeworlds (Hetherington 2013; Willford 2014). At the same time, tensions over fixity persist. In Darjeeling, planters are fighting efforts by plantation villagers to claim “homestead rights” to their land and houses. Owners are asking them to be “free laborers,” compensated only by wages and not in-kind benefits, but at the same time the owners are denying their rights to freely hold the houses and gardens they have occupied for decades. Darjeeling tea workers can never forget that their jobs and houses are linked. Their ability to perform the labor of care for family and houses depends on their ability to earn cash through wage labor. Maintaining the house is maintaining the plantation itself and its defining feature: an immobile, precarious, fixed labor force. Although capitalism appears to be reaching its limits in Darjeeling and domestic space appears to be decaying, attempts to maintain such space manifest the creative tensions of fixity. To understand those creative tensions and what they might signify for the future of work, it is essential to interrogate the lived space between bondage and freedom.

Notes

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1. All personal names in the ethnographic sections in this article are pseudonyms. Names and places in the historical material remain unchanged.

2. It is significant that the 2008 US financial crisis began as a crisis of the postwar social promise embedded in the house itself. This was the promise that the majority of workers could be homeowners (Graeber 2011). Growing income inequality and predatory lending in the United States ruptured this postwar promise (Fennell 2015, 2016).

3. Ownership of plantations slowly shifted after 1947. Plantations, and with them the Indian Tea Association, remained dominated by British capital until 1973 and the enactment of the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act (FERA), which prohibited money made in India to be taken out of the country. Only after the rollout of FERA did all plantations shift to Indian ownership.


5. This rule was designed to ensure that within 12 years after the rollout of the PLA, each plantation would have pucca housing. I spell *pucca* as it appears in the ITA archives, even though contemporary anglicized Nepali and Hindi render the term as *pukka* or *pucca*.

6. By the late 1960s, tea workers could apply for housing support when companies had failed to build, but these applications were rarely successful. The 1971 ITA bulletin includes a copy of the official application and accounts of repeated denials of support (ITA 1972, 159–71).

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