

Acknowledgments



Or Another Kind of Introduction

The paradoxes and realpolitik of patronage, power, and labor build the bedrock upon which the stories of plantation women are told. *A Time for Tea* inhabits many spaces and undulates through and beyond the borders of a seemingly distant landscape. It is an ethnography about postcolonial diaspora as much as it is about some dot on the map that I script into terms of familiarity. These oscillations have charted the contours of its production, its telling times. Such authorial movements suggest a highly individualized cartography of the imagination. This is, indeed, the peril of authorship as singularity. Yet this individuation is illusory because these are narratives thickly peopled with the energy, kindness, and forbearance of many who have sustained me in the years since I began my journey into the story of tea. All have been my teachers. In ineffable ways, they too script this tale, even when they have resisted its intrusions, its naivete, its grandiosities, and its positions.

My teachers inhabit the world. They live in Calcutta, Chicago, Jos, Jalpaiguri, Siliguri, Sarah's Hope Tea Estate, Debpara Tea Estate, Riverside, Los Angeles, New Delhi, Amherst, New York, Washington, D.C., Pittsburgh, Wellesley, Greenwich. They map a terrain of connection and loss: a kinship intended to assist me in telling a story that is fragmented, celebratory, and sad; to weave a cosmology both paradoxical and possible. Their pedagogy of compassion and kindness marks this text in indelible ways. To say I am "indebted" might reduce their acts of generosity to tactile measures of value and in so doing, take away the important ways in which they inhabit this text. It is ironic then — as I beg your indulgence in ploughing through the many words to follow — that I begin by registering the inadequacy of these very words.

In India, kinship and patronage made it possible for me to embark on my various journeys into North Bengal plantations. Many planters, and their

kinswomen, have given their valuable time. For offering me their hospitality in Calcutta, I thank Bimal and Monica Guha-Sircar, Renu and Pronoy Saharia, Monoj and Sheila Banerjee, the late S. K. Banerjee and Deepu Banerjee, Mahavir Kanoi, Padma Kanoria, Ronnie Babaycon, the late David Smith, Gulshan Bagai, and Bhaskar Gupta. Lata Bajoria's friendship enabled me to meet many Marwari *maliks* (owners) in Calcutta, and for her generous networking I give my thanks. She and her daughters, Nidhi, Puja, and Babli have provided a cool space of ribald welcome during many hot Calcutta summers when I wrote and rewrote these stories of tea. Shanti Bannerjee—grandmother, teacher, and friend—introduced me to some of her tea kin, though her influence on my work extends well into the territories of my childhood, a time when her example of pragmatic grace and wisdom made an indelible impact on my nascent understanding of privilege and its many effects.

In North Bengal, I was hosted by many families, particularly on initial nomadic visits in 1991, and then again in 1998 and 1999. I extend my appreciation to Leonard and Sonali Smith, Mr. and Mrs. Bose, Samar Chatterjee and Diyu Chakrabarty of the Dooars Branch of the Indian Tea Association (who readily made available some rare colonial planter journals), Dr. D. N. Chatterjee of the UNDP family planning project in the Dooars, Mr. L. P. Rai of Mim Tea Estate in Darjeeling, Mr. Teddy Young of Tumsung Tea Estate, Darjeeling, Mr. Pran Choudhury, Mr. Ravi Singh, Joydip Bose, and Pranjali Neog of DBITA who gathered information for me with efficient generosity.

However, it is the kindness and hospitality of two planting families who, despite knowing the objectives of this study, made it possible for me to stay in the Dooars for extended periods of time. Ashok, Bonny, Mimi, and Madhu Sen bailed me out on numerous occasions and for their energetic kindness, I will be always grateful. Kanwarjit and Guddi Singh embraced me as another daughter and friend. Mr. Singh enabled me to do this work by offering me his patronage and protection while Mrs. Singh opened up her treasure trove of material on tea histories. Her own scholarly interest in plantation women's issues prompted fruitful dialogues. Without the Singhs' support and generosity, the fieldwork on two separate occasions (1991–1992, 1999) could not have happened.

It is, however, a few women and men from the “other side of the lines,” to whom I owe my deepest gratitude. They negotiated my intrusions with unease, even anger, but more often than not, with a remarkable generosity of spirit. To “thank” them for making possible a text that rests on the backbone of their lives might appear a facile gesture. It is a gesture, however, not made simply. (Imagine, for a moment, an intricate movement of hand

and eye. Imagine the suggestion of patterns traced in the air.) For their resilient laughter and embrace of my uninvited presence, I wish to name their central place in the stories which follow: Julekha Sheikh and her *dol* (gang) at Moraghat Tea Estate, Munnu Kujoor and Bikha Kujoor, Bhagirathi Mahato, Baldo Mahato, Anjali Mirdha and Arun Mirdha, Agapit, Christopher Pracher, B. Gop, Rita Chhetri and her friends at Debpara, Kaki of Katalguri (who took me to meet her legendary mother, Lachmi Maya Chhetri), Madan Shaikh, Dilip Tamang, Uma Gop, Durga Mata of Chamurchi (who shared her sacred gifts and with a flourish of hands waved away some winds of misfortune), Sannicharwa Lohra, Moniki Mosi, Menu Mosi, and all the other women leaders of the Cha Bagan Mahila Seva Samity (Tea Garden Women's Service Society) who honor me with their trust.

Elsewhere in North Bengal, I was welcomed as kin by others who taught me equally important lessons about the remarkable political theater of North Bengal. Vasanthi Raman, Vaskar Nandy, Dr. M. N. Nandy, Dida, and Mini of Kadamtala More in Jalpaiguri opened their home in ways that made such a political theater immediate, actual, and urgent. (Oh, for those cups of hot sweet tea on the verandah, upstairs, by the roof with its potted plants.) Rupak Mukherjee, Bithi Chakravarty, and Shukra Rautiya (who took me to the remarkable Lal Shukra Oraon) welcomed me on various travels in the region. Nirmala Pandey also assisted me with translations and transcriptions of songs and oral histories. Father Sebastian Martis, whom I met in 1999, is a partner with whom some grassroots dreams are being sown. Thank you, Sebastian, for your charity.

The staff of many libraries in North Bengal, Calcutta, and New Delhi have assisted with this research, and I extend my appreciation to the following: Mrs. Meera Chatterjee of the National Library, Calcutta, who has walked the bureaucratic labyrinth for many years and always found books for her anxious niece; the Jalpaiguri District Library; the North Bengal University Library, Bagdogra; the superb Himalayan Studies Documentation Center at the North Bengal University; the District Commissioner's Library, Jalpaiguri; the Central Secretariat Library, New Delhi; and the Ministry of Labour Documentation Centre, New Delhi.

In Calcutta, many members of the Hooghly Mills staff have let me take their time, space, and energy when they had better things to do: they have photocopied material; driven me to travel agencies when I had to ship pounds of that same material to the United States; served me tea and food at *Moran Shahib er bagan bari* (Moran Sahib's garden house) when I wrote theater and sat by the Ganges with an old oil lantern; and made things immeasurably easier during my Calcutta sojourns. I am aware that my father's

wish and order (*hukum*) made their “giving” imperative, not a choice. Such are the ways of feudal patronage. Yet they have done so with an affection and respect for my father and family that contains and exceeds the terms of such neofeudal power. I extend, then, my deepest gratitude to Sri Nimai Mondal and his family; Sri Raj Narain; Mr. Samanta; Sri Bhim; Sri Bhagirath; Rabi; the staff of the Hooghly Mills computer room; Mr. Mukherjee who tends the fax machine; and Sri Romesh.

Back in the United States, other kin networks spun their webs of support and encouragement. Barbara Lazarus (who always urged me to let the songs sing) and Marvin Sirbu have helped me navigate the shoals of immigration. Barbara, simply, has made it possible for me to complete my studies in the United States; Barbara, Led, and Kristen Day have been family in absentia; Martha Loiter has believed in similar passions; Anissa and Yasmina Bouziane have probed with me the creative vicissitudes of chosen exile; Karima Saleh’s dogged commitment to grassroots practice and her compassion in a time of great terror, has defined the meaning of true friendship; Omar Qureshi’s gentle perseverance has remained, also, a benediction. One friend has stepped, literally, on this path to and from the plantations. She has not only met some of the remarkable women and men in the plantation I have called Sarah’s Hope, she has on one memorable afternoon danced with them. Cathy O’Leary’s faith and connection to these other worlds of the actual imagination has nurtured this tea time over its long gestation.

For introducing to me the notion that writing and telling women’s stories within the academy is an act of power, against power, I wish to thank my first professors in the United States: Amrita Basu, Barbara Lazarus, and Sally Merry. Their lessons helped me immeasurably in graduate school when I often felt that “women’s politics,” particularly if passionately wrought, was not welcome in the detached disembodied towers of scholarly enterprise. I was lucky, however, to find teachers who understood my unease, and anger, with such forms of epistemic violence. For their acts of compassion during moments when I thought I was not going to “make it,” I offer my deepest gratitude and respect to Bernard S. Cohn, Jean Comaroff, Raymond T. Smith, John Comaroff, Susanne Rudolph, and Lloyd Rudolph. Since 1999, Chandra Mohanty has honored me with her kindness and support. Because her writing on Third World feminisms was a pivotal part of my subterranean training in feminist theory, her mentorship during these years has been both poignant and invaluable. Such are the blessings of a wonderful pedagogy.

At Riverside, colleagues and friends have given their labor of time and patience, which I hope has been deserved. In 1998, Erla Maria Marteinsdottir created the first data base for the bibliography and offered her energies

when her own commitments were burdensome. Her labor as my research assistant, and its value, are beyond price. Likewise, Gina Crivello, Larisa Broyles, Pam Cantine, Susan Mazur, Konane Martinez, and Janni Aragon cleared the decks during heavy teaching quarters and plumbed the library for additional sources. Most importantly, they have offered me wine, bread, and solace when things seemed unbearable. Darlene Suarez, Narges Erami, Raj Balasubramanian, and Ramona Pérez also offered their friendship with large doses of toughness, wisdom, and compassion. For that common and wrenching experience of immigrant displacement, such acts of kindness constitute the life blood of possibility and place.

Other colleagues have erased the scrolls of abjection with ready encouragement and have offered their own intellectual practice as models of a brilliant and powerful pedagogy. Parama Roy's keen and ironic wit, her humility, and her scrupulous and ethical attention to the scholarly endeavor has offered a tender example; Kathleen McHugh has urged me, with passionate faith, to find my writing soul; Devra Weber has offered her solidarity and wisdom; Ethan Nasreddin-Longo's brotherly patience and his compositions of mind and music have been a gift; Jennifer Brady laid out tea and served me many moments of kindness. Michelle Bloom has shared Proust and *tisane*; Christine Gailey remains an inspiration in the way she brings a certain joy into her ambit of leadership. She, Marguerite Waller, Amalia Cabezas, Irma Kemp, and Roxene Davis make Women's Studies a unique place in which laughter is combined with innovative pedagogy and its writing work.

Funding for this research, conducted between 1991 and 1993, 1998, 1999, and 2000 has come from various sources. They include the American Institute of Indian Studies Junior Fellowship, Regents Faculty Fellowship, University of California Riverside, Faculty Research Incentive Grant, (UCR), and several Academic Senate Grants for extramural research from the University of California–Riverside awarded between 1997 and 2000.

Ken Wissoker's interest in tea has sparked a happy association with Duke University Press. My debt to him, for his patient encouragement, and his remarkable editorial team is a large one. I would like to thank Katie Courtland, Leigh Anne Couch, and Justin Faerber, as well as all the unnamed folks who have cooked this leaf into a product. Maura High's copyediting has taught me again how much collective labor goes into the crafting of a book. Her editorial eye has pruned astonishing snarls of syntax and metaphor to strengthen the book immeasurably. Cherie Westmoreland's visual imagination of the design has captured the leaves of text beautifully. Nancy Zibman provided the index. Two anonymous reviewers of the raw manuscript made this journey possible. Their substantial commentaries, their close reading of

the earlier versions, and their encouragement was deeply appreciated, and I hope has made what now stands more worthy. Ellen Gentry took the photographs for the illustrations that are included in the book. Anik Dhonobad, thank you, to all.

My family in Calcutta has made everything possible. My siblings—Dada (Chayan), Bappa (Mayukh), and Priya—have wondered at the fuss, shrugged, and laughed uproariously. I trace my impulse to follow the plantation story to my father, Rama Prasad Chatterjee, who—transgressing all the codes of patriarchal propriety—would take his six-year-old daughter through the floors of the jute factory under his managerial purview. By encouraging me always to push past the borders of my own upbringing, even allowing me to fly away, Baba will always remain my first teacher. Kaki, Jharna Chatterjee, has walked many routes of transgression with me and for me: allowing me to run like a *jungli* (uncivilized) child through the good neighborhoods of the city. For her many invocations of the divine arsenal, for our raucous ritual laughter, and mostly for her maternal love, I have been immensely blessed. To her, Kaku, Mriganka Shekhar Chatterjee, and Baba, I dedicate this bit of tea. And also to the memory of my mother, Dipti Chatterjee, who left us too early, whose ghost may have sat on my right shoulder, and who wished it.