

JUSTICE WORKS!

I entered the green wooden front door to Anjali's brick house.¹ Anjali lived with her in-laws in one of the lower labor lines of Dolani Tea Estate.² A few chickens ran across the front garden, which was fenced off from the street with bamboo. Directly behind her house, the garden section of the plantation began. Anjali's father-in-law was sitting in the living room. He told me that he came to Assam from Jharkhand in 1972, when there was a severe drought in Central India and farmers were hardly getting any crops. In the beginning he had been very scared to move to the unknown state of Assam. Initially, his family members thought they would only come for a few years to earn some money before returning to Jharkhand. But in the end, they stayed. Meanwhile, he emphasized, Assam has become their home (*ghar*). They still travel to Jharkhand once a year to visit their relatives there, but they would not consider returning permanently anymore. Anjali came out of the kitchen with three fragrant cups of tea and sat down with us. Anjali was twenty-six years old when I met her in 2015. She had two daughters, who then were seven and four years old. Her husband worked in the tea factory. She went to first grade but quickly dropped out of school because she was afraid of the teacher. At the age of fourteen, she had started working as a temporary laborer on the plantation. After her marriage, she "inherited" her mother-in-law's permanent position on the plantation.³ As we sipped our hot tea, Anjali became troubled. She had heard rumors that the food rations, which laborers got as part of their salary as weekly nonmonetary benefits, would be repealed. "That's about the worst thing I can imagine," she commented anxiously.

Some four hundred kilometers east of Dolani Tea Estate, the head office of the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS) was located. On its website, the single most important trade union working on behalf of tea plantation workers in Assam describes its main objectives as “eliminating social, political and economic exploitation and inequality.” In 2015, I visited the ACMS head office in Dibrugarh. When I moved into the building, it looked surprisingly small and dilapidated to me. There were two offices on the left side hosting the president in the back and the general secretary in the front as well as two administrative offices on the right side. An administrative staff welcomed me and asked me to wait for the general secretary in one of the administrative offices. After an hour or so, another staff member sneaked into the office saying that Dileswar Tanti, the general secretary, had arrived. They led me into his office. Tanti sat behind his desk. He was busy signing documents while I entered his office and did not make an effort to greet me. I asked him nonetheless about the trade union’s agenda. He told me: “We deal with the workers’ problems mainly . . . we look after the implementation of labor laws, such as the Minimum Wages Act or the Plantations Labour Act.” The then-last wage agreement for tea plantation laborers in Assam had been settled on February 26, 2015.⁴ I asked Tanti why the ACMS did not support the introduction of the statutory minimum wage even after the Assamese government had supported it (see *Times of India* 2015). He replied that the minimum wage was the government’s responsibility, not the responsibility of the trade union. He stated, “I voted for Rs. 115. Rs. 169 has no basis because the industries are so different and in the tea industry, there are many other obligations that are not there in other industries. Rs.115 is according to the economic capacity of the industry.”

Activists working on behalf of Assam tea plantation workers had organized several protests against the “illegal” wage agreement below the statutory minimum wage and the trade union’s agreement to it. When the ACMS president was visiting a branch office in a district capital in Assam, activists organized a protest in front of the branch office. They wanted to lock the trade union office with a huge lock from the outside to pass the message that that trade union is useless. When the trade union president realized the activists’ plan, he escaped the branch office before they were able to lock it. The activists got so angry when they saw the president escaping that they broke everything down in the office. One of the activists who was imprisoned after the protest went violent later commented, “We’re not actually thugs (*ham log to yahan marne-pitne ke lie nahin hain*), are we? Our aim is to defend ourselves against the conspiracy between trade union and management. The president represents the union. We thought how he can just run away. I got over-sentimental. Our motto is that 115 is illegal and we demand 169.”

Not far from the district office, where the protest had taken place, Mr. Puzaris and his wife lived in a manager bungalow on a privately owned tea estate. Mr. Puzaris had studied law before becoming a tea plantation manager thirty-eight years earlier. His father had been working for the Indian government as a tax officer. I asked Mr. Puzaris how he got involved in the tea business. He said that he grew up in the area around Jorhat where many tea gardens were located. Since childhood he had been attracted to the “tea garden life,” which he found so different because along with the establishment of the tea industry the British had brought their “lordly lifestyle to the tea gardens.” While we were sitting on the veranda drinking tea, Mr. Puzaris handed me a copy of the Plantations Labour Act and commented, “This is a given fact for us.” Mr. Puzaris argued that the laborers got the minimum wage already when all provisions they received were included in the calculation. He saw it as his “duty to protect” the tea industry by keeping the wages affordable.

Academics and activists alike have criticized the conditions on postindependence tea plantations in Assam as “modern-day slavery” (e.g., Ray 2016). However, when I conducted ethnographic fieldwork on Assam’s tea plantations between 2014 and 2017, I found that tea plantation laborers and trade unionists formed surprising alliances with tea planters around their everyday conceptions of justice, as the ethnographic snippets above, which introduce differently positioned actors on Assam tea plantations, illustrate.⁵ When fundamental changes were appearing in the political economy of tea production in India (see below), laborers, trade unionists, and managers, in one way or another, remained in favor of an “old-style” plantation economy based on paternalist dual wage structures that have been criticized as a form of bondage by academics and activists. Why did tea laborers and trade unionists support the maintenance of an exploitive labor regime, one that had been created initially to develop a totalitarian work environment during the colonial establishment of industrial tea production in Assam?

To answer this puzzling question that haunted me while I conducted fieldwork in India, I develop the concept *justice at work* over the course of the book. *Justice at work* has two layers of meaning. First, it analyzes how justice is conceptualized, negotiated, and transformed in the everyday lives of differently positioned actors—including tea laborers, trade unionists, activists, and tea planters—“at work” on Assam’s tea plantations. Second, *justice at work* is based on the premise that everyday conceptualizations of justice maintain, enhance, limit, or “work at” differently positioned actors’ odds to act, and vice versa.⁶ Before elaborating the concept *justice at work* in detail, I illustrate in the next section how matters of justice have been addressed in research on industrial tea production on planta-

tions and beyond to specify in the sections afterward how *justice at work* builds on these previous studies.

Matters of Justice in Tea Ethnographies

There are a couple of studies on plantation economies that have addressed matters of justice implicitly or explicitly (Banerjee 2017; Bass 2013; Besky 2014; Bourgois 1989; Bhowmik 2011; Chatterjee 2001; Chaudhuri 2013; Ives 2017; Jegathesan 2019; Raj 2022; Sen 2017; Stoler 1985; Willford 2014). I discuss three paradigmatic concepts (tripartite moral economy, *swaccha vyāpār*, and *poiēsis* of desire) developed in tea ethnographies to illustrate how matters of justice have been studied in tea ethnographies to then show how *justice at work* builds on these previous studies.

Justifiably the most widely received empirical study dealing with matters of justice on tea plantations is the ethnography *The Darjeeling Distinction* by Sarah Besky (2014). Besky introduces fair trade (“justice as fairness”), geographical indication (“justice as property”), and the Gorkhaland movement (“justice as sovereignty”) as three visions for a more just plantation life.⁷ The author criticizes all three visions of justice because they rely on what she calls a “Third World agrarian imaginary” (29). In this imaginary, the plantations in the postcolonial world are stripped of their colonial heritage of global capitalist labor exploitation and are whitewashed as “tea gardens” or “farms,” where people supposedly live and work traditionally and happily in harmony with nature. Besky’s main argument is that none of the three visions of justice critically questions the plantation economy “despite their appeals to justice” (29). Instead, the three visions reinterpret the plantation economy in a new light—obscuring its exploitative history and present and making it more profitable for new markets by “imagining injustice as something that can be overcome *within the context of the plantation itself*” (20; emphasis in original). None of the visions for justice, according to Besky, considers the tea plantation workers’ perspectives.

Besky uses the concept of a “tripartite moral economy” to capture laborers’ idea(l)s of just labor conditions and relations as a reciprocity between management, labor, and the agro-environment—three unequal partners that cohabit the same space (32).⁸ The tripartite moral economy is a multispecies relationship between humans and nonhumans on plantations or a system of mutual obligations between laborers, planters, and the environment. For Besky, laborers’ nostalgia of a bygone tripartite moral economy, which laborers locate historically before the 1990s, when most tea plantations in Darjeeling turned toward Fair Trade, organic, or other certifications, is an expression of laborers’ critique of the status quo of plantation economies as well as a vision of a better future.

While scholars of moral economy such as E. P. Thompson and James C. Scott have focused on resistance in form of organized revolts or everyday forms of resistance, Besky sees a more complicated articulation of resistance in laborers' concept of a tripartite moral economy: When wallowing in memories of past stability, plantation women were *actually* criticizing the plantation economy and "envisioning a more stable future for their children" (85).

Similarly, the ethnography *Everyday Sustainability* by Debarati Sen (2017) looks at "justice imaginaries" of Nepali tea workers in relation to and in conflict with Fair Trade initiatives in Darjeeling.⁹ Unlike Besky, Sen includes smallholder women tea farmers who grow tea autonomically on a small plot of land outside the plantations in relation to women tea plantation workers. On the background of Fair Trade's declared aim to empower marginalized producers, Sen asks "how intended beneficiaries of the global Fair Trade movement understood the value of Fair Trade in the context of their situated identity struggles and their everyday entrepreneurialism to gain social and economic justice" (127–128). Instead of portraying women tea workers as passive recipients of global sustainability initiatives, Sen argues that women tea farmers showed both skepticism and creativity in engagement with Fair Trade (4). Women tea farmers, on the one hand, criticized Fair Trade for entrenching the "power of patriarchal production systems through deceptive language of women's empowerment and inclusion" (22). On the other hand, women tea farmers appropriated Fair Trade to their own justice imaginaries in "gendered projects of value" (12). By gendered project of value, Sen describes, for instance, informal networks and collectives (*ghumāuri*), new categories of collective identification such as "housewife-entrepreneurs," and women's local concepts of fair trading such as *swaccha vyāpār*, which subvert local patriarchal hegemonies and logics of capital accumulation.

Swaccha vyāpār is a "distinct Nepali iteration of Fair Trade that incorporates awareness of gender hierarchies" (128). Sen observed that women tea farmers use the notion of *swaccha vyāpār* to rhetorically juxtapose it with Fair Trade. According to Sen, saying that Fair Trade was not *swaccha vyāpār* was a way to criticize that those who profited from the Fair Trade label were male middlemen and not woman tea workers and a way to criticize the economic reductionism of Fair Trade. While the Fair Trade certifiers came with ideas of liberal gender equality in the form of representation that ignores local realities, the women found ways to "substantiate and advance their own projects of justice" (141) simultaneously through and against Fair Trade. Sen illustrates how *swaccha vyāpār* and other gendered projects of value became a powerful tool for Nepali women tea farmers' justice imaginaries in Darjeeling.¹⁰

Taking a slightly different conceptual emphasis, Mythri Jegathesan (2019, 10–11), in her ethnography *Tea & Solidarity*, examines Hill Country Tamil tea

plantation workers' desires for dignity in the context of "Sri Lanka's postwar calls for political reform and economic development." Jegathesan chose a feminist, humanistic, and decolonial approach that she considers more commensurable and in solidarity with the way in which workers themselves want to be studied in comparison to "primarily male-focused, structural, economic, and rights-based lenses" on Hill Country Tamil plantation workers (201).¹¹ She argues "that women workers' desire for dignity and better futures have the potential to productively disrupt and positively transform the story of Ceylon tea and the industry's ethical future" (11–12). To explain how desires operate as "active sites of social change and disruption" (23), Jegathesan develops the concept "*poiēsis* of desire." The author borrows the term *poiēsis* from Martin Heidegger who, according to Jegathesan, understands it as "bringing forth" or shifting the structures that enclose desire (38). By "desire" Jegathesan describes moving "past what we want and in relation to what we have" (39). At the core of the *poiēsis* of desire is what Jegathesan calls "unbecoming labor" (21). Hill Country Tamils in Sri Lanka can fulfill their desire for dignified recognition by unbecoming labor according to Jegathesan. Unbecoming labor is a polyvalent "process of becoming a collective something not yet known . . . and not yet complete" (39) but implies "desiring to delink from their heritage of coolie labor" and aspiring "to work anywhere but on the tea plantations" (201).

The concepts of the tripartite moral economy, *swaccha vyāpār*, and *poiēsis* of desire are attempts to represent tea laborers' perspectives, interpret them as forms of critique of hegemonic systems, and contrast them with other imaginaries of justice. The tripartite moral economy and the *poiēsis* of desire constitute a critique of neocolonial exploitative plantation economies. Justice for laborers is imagined to be gained exclusively outside plantation economies. Desires are seen to be fulfilled by unbecoming plantation labor. The tripartite moral economy and *swaccha vyāpār* constitute critical evaluations of global sustainability initiatives such as Fair Trade. In the laborers' tripartite moral economy, Fair Trade is seen as an amoral *bisnis* model of plantation economy, in which *bisnis*-men do not care about laborers but are only interested in extracting from land and labor (Besky 2014, 62). Contrasting *swaccha vyāpār* with Fair Trade is a means to criticize Fair Trade for not advancing gender justice for women in their local contexts. All three concepts portray tea laborers' perspectives as rebellions against hegemonic structures of capitalism, patriarchy, and neocolonialism. The laborers' perspective is contrasted with other concepts of justice such as Fair Trade. For Besky, Fair Trade creates a self-image of providing fairer trading conditions on a global market while *actually* undermining state welfare initiatives by the Indian state. In contrast, the laborers' tripartite moral economy is a "complicated articulation of resistance" in which "workers are keenly aware that in the market for justice, the

plantation is not going anywhere” (85). In the following section, I will outline on how my understanding of justice is related to concepts such as tripartite moral economy, gendered projects of value like *swaccha vyāpār*, or *poiēsis* of desire.

Justice as What People Consider to Be Due to Someone

During my fieldwork, I encountered laborers with various perspectives and desires, but I was struck by the prevalence of laborers’ “declarations of dependence” (Ferguson 2013) and the alliances they had built with trade unionists and tea managers (sometimes against activists) in maintaining the industrial tea production on Assam’s plantations rather than questioning it. To make sense of these unanticipated alliances between laborers, trade unionists, and tea managers, I develop the concept *justice at work*. It builds on an analytical justice category I developed elsewhere together with Olaf Zenker in order to pluralize notions of justice. We suggest defining justice as “matters of concern about what is due to different (kinds of) subjects according to relatively stable and impartial values and norms to be enacted by specifiable and thus responsible agents” (Zenker and Wolf 2024, 8). *Subjects of justice* are those to whom justice is due. What is due is called *objects of justice*. *Responsible agents of justice* are those who are imagined to be responsible to implement objects of justice (Zenker and Wolf 2024, 6–9).¹²

My ambition to pluralize notions of justice by suggesting an analytical definition of justice applicable to different situations and people started during my research on Assam tea plantations. I became interested in studying matters of justice on Assam tea plantations when I was working with a human rights organization in Delhi in 2014. Some of the international activists were founding an organization dedicated to bringing justice to marginalized people in India, including Assam tea plantation laborers.¹³ The activists put me in touch with activists in Assam who allowed me to stay for some time in a training center on a plantation. Initially, my research project resembled the activists’ presuppositions, their perception of tea laborers, and their objectives. In an unpublished fieldwork summary on September 19, 2015, I wrote that my research project was about “how the exclusion of tea plantation workers in Assam is administered” and “how the administration of exclusion is subverted” by activist groups. This description mirrored the activists’ two related main objectives: first, to display the tea plantation laborers as one of the most discriminated-against subaltern groups, and second, to show how their activism successfully helped to overcome tea workers’ marginalization. After spending some time with both activists and laborers, I increasingly felt that there was a discrepancy between the “justice”

that activists wanted to bring close to laborers and laborers' different perspectives on justice in relation to trade unionists and tea planters. I started to see the activists' perspective as one among other perspectives that was driven by their own conceptions of justice, which overlapped with the multiplicity of workers' perspectives on matters of justice only to a certain extent.

Since I felt that laborers had everyday conceptions of justice even though they were not using the term *justice* or a local translation of it most of the time, it became obvious to me that I must have had an implicit concept of justice in mind to feel that way. How could I have otherwise felt that they had conceptions of justice when they did not use the word *justice* literally to express them? Reflecting on my own implicit notions of justice "at work" within myself, I realized that justice for me was in a nutshell about what people considered to be due to them and others.¹⁴ This definition of justice can be useful to look at multiple ideas of justice because it does not normatively predetermine "objects of justice" or *what* people consider to be due to them and others.

My understanding of justice is related to but not identical to previous concepts such as tripartite moral economy, gendered projects of value like *swaccha vyāpār*, or *poiēsis* of desire. Besky uses the concept "tripartite moral economy" to analyze marginalized tea laborers' alternative views about what constitutes a "moral" or "fair" economy in contrast to other justice imaginaries such as Fair Trade.¹⁵ I use the concept of justice to explore, compare, and relate differently positioned actors' perspectives on what people consider to be due to them and others. Therefore, I use justice as an analytical concept to describe both "subaltern" and elitist perspectives alike. Furthermore, ideas about what is due to whom are related to but not limited to economic questions. For instance, Sen's gendered projects of value are directed toward the empowerment of women. Thereby, the subjects of justice concerned in gendered projects of value are women, and the object of justice is predefined: Gender justice is what is due to women. In the suggested analytical definition of justice, the scope of who is considered a subject of justice is broader. Subjects of justice include tea laborers, trade unionists, activists, and tea planters. Similarly, the object of justice is less targeted. I introduce different objects of justice such as maintaining the tea industry, affirmative action, and minimum wages that change over time. Dignity was not only a desire for tea laborers in Assam but also something they considered to be due to them. However, Jegathesan's understanding of desire as moving "past what we want and in relation to what we have" (Jegathesan 2019, 39) is different from considerations about what is due to someone. On the one hand, the idea of what is due to someone implies an obligation—one is entitled to claim what is due to oneself or others. Desire as wanting something does not necessarily imply obliging somebody. A person can want something without feeling entitled to it.¹⁶ On the other hand, the idea

of “moving past” as central to desire does not necessarily apply to concepts of justice. What is due to somebody can already be in place and does not necessarily need to go beyond the status quo.

To sum up, justice as what people consider to be due to them and others involves different subjects of justice to whom a multiplicity of objects of justice are considered to be due by different responsible agents of justice. Therefore, justice is a suitable analytical lens to understand differently positioned actors and how their various conceptualizations of justice are related to one another. However, justice imaginaries are not immutable, clear-cut, and unambiguous in the social context in which they appear; they should be understood as heuristic devices developed for the purpose of analysis to better understand what people consider to be due to them and others.

Justice at Work

Building on the suggested analytical concept of justice, *justice at work* is about what justice does “as an idea or a practice” (Brunnegger 2019, 4). It analyzes how everyday conceptualizations of justice maintain, enhance, limit, or “work at” differently positioned actors’ odds to act, and vice versa. Odds to act have been discussed regarding the question of the relationship between structure and agency. Some positions rather focus on how structures predispose and thus reproduce agency. For instance, Ann Stoler (1985, viii) in her study on the development of plantations in Sumatra under Dutch colonial rule studied “how and why certain social hierarchies, economic inequalities, and political privileges were created, made to appear immutable, contested, and reproduced.” Stoler argued that it “includes more than the imposition of a dominant ideology expressing and serving the interests of a ruling class but ‘its acceptance as “normal reality” or “commonsense” by those in practice subordinated to it” (Williams 1980, 118; quoted in Stoler 1985, 8–9). Another example of a stronger focus on structural constraints is Jayaseelan Raj’s analysis of transformations in plantation economies in the South Indian state of Kerala in the context of the Indian tea crisis in his book *Plantation Crisis*. For Raj (2022, 14), the tea crisis is a “situated event”—at the same time a situation or “the context in which the event takes place” and an event that “restructures the context.”

Other positions in anthropology have placed a strong focus on nonhuman and decentralized agency (e.g., Latour 2005; Viveiros de Castro 1998; Holbraad 2012; Haraway 1991), which also resonates with studies on plantation economies that emphasize networks between human and more-than-human actors like tea plants (e.g., Barua 2024; Besky 2014; Kumpf 2020). For instance, Sarah

Besky's tripartite moral economy includes the more-than-human agro-environment among other actors such as tea plantation workers and managers. In these posthuman approaches, the singularity of human agency has been dispersed to decenter humans and redistribute capabilities to act beyond humans.

Some positions place a stronger focus on specifically human agency and freedoms to act despite structural constraints. Supurna Banerjee (2017, 157) in her ethnography of activism and agency on tea plantations in Dooars in the Northeast Indian state of West Bengal, for example, wants to overcome binaries of agency and victimhood by asking "what sort of agents the women can be despite their subordination." Agency is articulated for Banerjee in her research field either by choice and decision-making or by resistance. An agential choice may be seen in a woman laborer's preference not to remarry, thereby undermining social norms and expectations of how she as a woman should behave. Agency as resistance is shown, for instance, in delaying work or cheating the management. Resistance can also be seen in practices such as gossiping or critiquing the system through carnivalesque performances or critical poetry and songs recited in public events. These acts of resistance, according to Banerjee, are a way to critique an unequal and oppressive system and "serve as means for the women to achieve their own ends, however limited these might be" (156). Following Banerjee, my position is also a stronger focus on specifically human agency and freedoms to act despite structural constraints that Anthony Giddens (1984, 9) has pointedly called humans' capability to act or have acted differently while nonetheless acknowledging that agency is structurally situated and constrained (see also Zenker 2018).

Everyday conceptions of justice are part of the structures that shape possibilities to act (differently), and they are simultaneously transformed by people's actions. While previous studies have situated agency almost exclusively in acts of resistance and emancipation from oppressive systems, I consider agency in both choices for and against oppressive systems. Seeing people's agency only in acts of resistance, while excluding people's "declarations of dependence" (Ferguson 2013) as agential choices, may amount to giving voice to tea laborers, not in order to make their own words heard "but to make their words address our own concerns, and to render their figures in our own self image" (O'Hanlon 1988, 210) or to render their figures in our own justice imaginaries instead of their own.

In the book, based on my empirical findings, I develop four workings of justice: justice on scales, justice in context, justice in transition, and justice in conflict. *Justice on scales* implies that justice imaginaries work differently on different scales such as plantations, nation-states, or globally (see chap. 1). When justice is upscaled, subjects and objects of justice are less clearly definable and therefore more difficult to approach. When justice is downscaled, for instance to the

plantation scale, subjects and objects of justice are more easily identifiable, but it is less likely that the identified agents of justice have the capacity to implement what is due to different subjects of justice. *Justice in context* illustrates that justice imaginaries work different in different spatiotemporal contexts (see chap. 3). While justice imaginaries may appear structure preserving in one context, they may be structure undermining in other contexts. *Justice in transition* analyzes how subjects of justice change when objects of justice change—even if subjects of justice are said not to change—and how this can effect categories of collective identification and trigger social transformations beyond given ideas of justice (see chap. 4). *Justice in conflict* highlights that people are usually placed between multiple justice imaginaries that work either together or against each other and attribute different and sometimes contradictory obligations to responsible agents of justice, which need to be weighed against one another (see chap. 5).

The workings of justice and their relation to the collective maintenance of an exploitive old-style plantation economy by tea laborers, trade unionists, and tea planters must be understood within the historical and current transformations of the political economy of tea production in Assam that are discussed in the next section.

Political Economy of Assam Tea in Transition

The Cradle of Industrial Tea

The region of Assam is considered the cradle of industrial tea production and remains the largest tea-cultivating region in India (Mishra et al. 2012, 3–4). As one of India's northeastern federal states, Assam is located between India's international borders with Bhutan, China, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. The only land connection between India's Northeast and other parts of India is the Siliguri Corridor bordered by Bangladesh and Nepal. Sanjib Baruah (2020, 1) describes Northeast India as “an artifact of deliberate policy” because the region was “put together for mundane administrative reasons” (25).

Large parts of Northeast India were ruled by Ahom kings between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries, and Assam's landscape was dominated by forest areas and small urban clusters with a few thousand inhabitants until the nineteenth century (J. Sharma 2011, 1–2). While Assam's difficult geographical accessibility, due to its hilly landscape and the absence of wheel-ready roads, helped the region to remain politically independent—for instance, from Mughal rulers in Central India—it also led to the perception of Assam as a “remote periphery” (2). The East India Company's military intervention in Assam between 1824 and

1826 to “protect” Assam from Burmese expansionist endeavors, in what is called the first Anglo-Burmese war, resulted in the British annexation of Assam and neighboring chiefdoms (A. Guha 2016, 1). The British annexation of Assam provided the basis for the establishment of commercial tea cultivation in the region (Xaxa 1996, 16–19).

The beginning of the commercial tea cultivation in Assam in the late 1830s coincided with a growing popularity of tea in Britain beyond a small elite circle and a wider circulation among people from a working-class background (Chatterjee 2001, 43). To meet the growing demand, the British first tried to intensify trade with China, where tea was locally cultivated and consumed in monasteries since about the fourth century BCE (Besky 2014, 3). Opium was smuggled illegally to China from India and sold for silver. The silver then could be used to pay for the official tea supply from China. Yet, the growing demand and stricter constrictions on opium trade by China made new strategies necessary to guarantee the tea supply (3–6). These developments can be seen in the context of the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the British gradually started to acquire political functions in India (J. Sharma 2011, 27).

The common narrative about the first tea leaf discovery in Assam tells the story of Charles and Robert Bruce, two brothers and colonial officers who undertook an expedition to the Assam-Burma border in 1823 and discovered native tea plants in the forests of Assam, which were used by the Singpho and Khamti groups for medical and ritual purposes. But “no one ever validated the Bruces’ observations, and the ‘jungle’ tea bushes of Assam remained a myth for several more years” (Besky 2014, 51). It was only a decade later, when an army officer called Andrew Charlton sent tea leaves from Assam to the Tea Committee, that the potential of Assam as a tea-growing region was discovered. The Tea Committee had been established in 1834 by Lord Bentinck, governor-general in India at that time, to look for suitable land to grow tea within India to gain independence from Chinese tea supply (J. Sharma 2011, 29). The first Assam tea, which was sold in London in 1838, was a success. It was auctioned twenty times the price of Chinese tea. This was not, however, because of its taste—which was merely acceptable—but because of the excitement over being able to grow tea in a British colony (31–32). The tea industry was quickly privatized into a single corporation, the Assam Company, which was founded in 1839. However, the “wild” Assam plant was only valued “after its modification by Chinese culture and western science” (31). Chinese tea production served as a model for the establishment of the tea industry in Assam, but planters envisioned the Assam tea industry to become more efficient through mechanization, on the one hand, and better labor organization, on the other hand.

There was a linguistic shift from “tea forest” to “tea garden,” which indicated private property as opposed to previously communally owned property, after

the Charter Act of 1833 facilitated landownership for Europeans in India and encouraged the British rather than Indians to engage in agrarian enterprises in Assam (34, 40). The Wasteland Rules of 1838 further regulated that people could apply for long-term leases of land if they had a particular amount of capital. This did not explicitly exclude Indians but excluded them indirectly because hardly any Indian had the amount of capital required for leasing land. Applicants for long-term leases of land could then get land cheaply (34–35). Many lands granted for tea remained uncultivated for some time, which guaranteed the British tenants free access to timber and other natural resources that were communally owned previously (40). In addition, tax was much lower for freehold for plantation owners and high for local cultivators (85). Due to these legal incentives, which were guaranteed, early British tea planters faced no scarcity of land and capital at the time when the tea industry was established in Assam, yet the availability of labor turned out to be difficult for them.

In the beginning of industrial tea production in India, laborers were recruited from China, but Chinese laborers were unwilling to do hard manual labor and were comparatively expensive. Therefore, the British looked for an alternative cheap and hardworking labor force from the mid-nineteenth century onward (40). First, they considered local inhabitants of Assam, who were either rice-cultivating subsistence farmers in the Brahmaputra plains or nomads in the hilly regions of Assam. They, however, did not agree to work on long-term contracts; tea labor was not appealing because wages were low, and work was hard on the plantations (38–39). In 1885, the Indian Tea Association was founded to solve the so-called labor question.

A decision was made to recruit laborers mainly from the eastern part of the “tribal belt” in North India, also called the Chotanagpur Plateau, which includes (parts of) the present-day states of Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Jharkhand, and Bihar in central and eastern North India. This is a hot, dry, famine-ridden region and has the highest number of Indigenous populations in India. According to Indian census data (of 1911 and 1921), 50–60 percent of the recruited labor force were Adivasis (called “tribals” or “aboriginals” in the census), around 30 percent came from lower castes, and about 10–15 percent were categorized as caste Hindus (Behal 2014, 255–256).¹⁷ Laborers from the Chotanagpur area were also recruited to other regions and fields of labor. They worked, for example, as indentured laborers on plantations overseas. After slavery was legally abolished in India in 1843, the migrant laborers on tea plantations in Assam were employed as indentured laborers (J. Sharma 2011, 49).¹⁸ Whole families were recruited and employed by distributing tasks along gender and age lines (75). From the beginning of industrial tea production in Assam, the tea industry has employed a relatively high number of women workers compared to other industries in India.

Women work primarily as tea pluckers. Men work mainly, but not exclusively, as field staff or in the factory. Some men also pluck tea. During the colonial era, supervisors were Assamese or Bengali caste Hindus. At the top of the labor hierarchy were British planters (76).¹⁹ Nowadays, some former male (and very few female) tea laborers have become supervisors. Managers today are mainly male Assamese, Bengali, or Marvari caste Hindus.²⁰

The “Old-Style” Plantation Economy

The indentured labor system was officially repealed at the beginning of the twentieth century, and after Indian independence, the Plantations Labour Act (PLA) became the most important legal framework that has regulated labor conditions for tea plantation workers in Assam since it was enforced in 1951; it applies to all plantations in India.²¹ The PLA makes provisions for working hours, paid and unpaid holidays, wages, and health and welfare facilities, as well as control and punishment mechanisms for violations against the act. The regular working hours are forty-eight hours per week. Workers work from Monday to Saturday. According to the act, no worker shall be allowed to work for more than nine hours per day or fifty-four hours per week. Overtime work must be paid at twice the rate of the ordinary wages. In addition to public holidays, the workers are entitled to one day of rest (unpaid) every week and a day of leave with wages for every twenty working days. Sick leave is guaranteed if laborers provide a proper medical certificate. Women are, moreover, entitled to (prenatal and postnatal) maternal leave. According to the act, every worker must be informed about these regulations by the plantations’ management. The PLA prescribes drinking water supply, accessible latrines and urinals, and medical facilities for all workers. Educational and housing facilities shall also be provided as well as canteens and crèches. All nonmonetary benefits shall be provided for workers and their family members alike. As per PLA, public access must be guaranteed “to those parts of the plantation wherein the workers are housed” (Section 16f). The 2010 amendment also prescribes safety provisions for workers dealing with insecticides, chemicals, and toxic substances (Chapter IV A). The state government appoints inspectors who can visit plantations at any time to examine whether the provisions are followed by the plantations’ management. If the provisions and regulations are violated, the offender is to be punished with imprisonment (up to six months) and may be fined (up to ten thousand rupees). Any further violation by the same person is to be punished with up to one-year imprisonment and/or a monetary fine.

Laborers receive part of their payment in cash and part of it in kind following a dual wage structure. For the definition of wages, the PLA refers to the Mini-

imum Wages Act (Section 2 [h]). The section defines wages as “all remuneration, capable of being expressed in terms of money.” Wage increases used to be negotiated bilaterally between the trade union for tea plantation laborers, the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS), and the tea planters’ Consultative Committee of Plantation Associations (CCPA) in the Assam Valley. Wage agreements are supposed to be revised every three years (Mishra et al. 2012, 105).²² The 15th Indian Labour Conference of 1957 decided on a need-based minimum wage that calculates three units of consumption (two adults and two children) per wage of a worker. However, the tea planters protested this calculation by arguing that every family on a plantation has at least two workers since employment is family based. Therefore, only one and a half units of consumption should be considered for determining workers’ wages. The Central Wage Board for the Tea Plantation Industry declared the planters’ argument baseless, but the planters “obstinately stuck to their own concept of wage determination. As a result, tea plantation workers are the lowest paid in the organised sector” (Bhowmik et al. 1996, 9).

Wages are fixed on a timely basis for a whole working day. Moreover, tea pluckers must pluck a minimum of tea leaves (currently twenty-four kilos) to receive their full wage and get incentives for plucking beyond prescribed kilos. Wages in North India are much lower than in South India, but North Indian plantations provide more benefits in-kind for workers. However, the wages in the north are still lower than in the south even after including all nonmonetary benefits (Mishra et al. 2012, 108–109). The Equal Remuneration Act of 1975 declared that equal wages had to be paid for male and female workers. Assam implemented the equal remuneration only in 1990, while other states introduced it much earlier, such as West Bengal, who implemented equal wages in 1976 (Xaxa 1996, 24).

Since the wage negotiations in 2014/2015, the Assam government has advised the wage negotiations with a Minimum Wage Advisory Committee. Until 2014, tea plantation laborers’ wages in the Assam Valley were increased by just a few rupees per year, after which the increases became bigger: From Rs. 94 in 2014, they jumped to Rs. 115 in 2015; to Rs. 126 in 2016; to Rs. 137 in 2017; to Rs. 205 in 2021; to Rs. 232 in 2022, and to currently Rs. 250 since 2023.

The PLA has been criticized mainly for its lack of implementation (Banerji and Willoughby 2019; Rowlatt and Deith 2015) and for its creation of laborers’ dependence on plantation welfare provisions. Therefore, the labor law regime based on the PLA has been described “as a form of bondage” (Besky 2017a, 619) or “modern-day slavery” (Ray 2016). Tea plantations have been called “states within states” (Raman 2015, 146), and tea companies have been said to “act as a welfare state” (Raj 2013, 477), due to the encompassing welfare measures of the PLA.

Current Transformations in the Political Economy of Assam Tea

The “old-style” political economy of Assam tea production based on regulations of the Plantations Labour Act is currently transforming. Transformations started to develop from the 1970s onward. After India required foreign capital to be “Indianized” in the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act (FERA) of 1973, international companies withdrew from Indian tea production. This process had already started with Indian independence, when British companies turned to other tea-growing regions among its colonies, such as Kenya (Raman 2015, 148). India was the largest tea exporter until the 1960s but is now only the fourth-largest exporter (Mishra et al. 2012, 35–36) after Kenya, China, and Sri Lanka (Tea Board of India 2017, 10).²³ Accordingly, one factor that is said to have caused the “plantation crisis” (Raj 2022), which lasted from about 1998 to 2008, was an oversupply of tea in the world market causing falling sales prices of tea. India had higher production costs than, for example, Kenya or Sri Lanka. A tariffication and regional free trade among countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, additionally, increased India’s imports of low-quality tea from other Asian countries, such as Sri Lanka or Bangladesh (Raman 2015, 151). The tea crisis is also said to be caused by a decrease in the productivity of tea bushes due to poor management and maintenance of plantations. Last, the disintegration of the Soviet Union is often seen as a main factor that contributed to the crisis because it was the main importer of Indian tea (Raj 2013, 471). While global exports of Indian tea have decreased significantly during the crisis, domestic tea consumption has increased at lower prices (Raman 2015, 152). During the Indian tea crisis, 118 tea estates were closed in India between 2000 and 2005 (158). The closures have affected seventy thousand tea workers. On some closed plantations, cases of starvation and suicides were reported, while on other plantations, workers organized themselves to keep the tea production running, sometimes with help from trade unions (Raman 2015, 158–160). Tea plantation closures were less in Assam than in other tea-growing regions in India (Mishra et al. 2012, 15). Statistics from the Tea Board of India suggest that Indian tea markets recovered from the crisis by the end of 2010 (see Raj 2013, 480).²⁴

Multinational companies started to withdraw from tea production on large-scale plantations in Assam during the crisis. The Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA) of 2000 again liberalized trade in India and “in the wake of the post-1990s neo-liberalisation, the Government of India permitted a 100 percent FDI [Foreign Direct Investment] in tea in a throwback to the colonial era” (Raman 2015, 149). However, international companies lost interest in Indian tea production. Tea plantations are either owned by the government or by private compa-

nies. Private companies are either “vertically integrated tea manufacturers with a stake in all the nodes along the entire value chain . . . whose operations span plantations, trading and blending” or local companies “with stakes in certain nodes alone . . . in the lower segments of the value chain” (Raman 2015, 151). Hindustan Unilever used to be the largest integrated tea manufacturer in India and Assam, followed by Tata Consumer Products Limited. Both companies withdrew from the production of tea in the mid-2000s and started to focus solely on packaging, branding, and marketing tea, which constitute the more profitable elements of the tea sector (Columbia Law School 2014, 16). While Hindustan Unilever sold all its plantations (mainly to McLeod Russel), Tata reached out to the International Finance Corporation to establish a new company called Amalgamated Plantations Private Limited (APPL), which took over Tata’s tea plantations and therefore its production by implementing shared ownership and diversifying beyond tea (Columbia Law School 2014, 7).

During this time, the number of small tea growers increased. The state of Assam has approximately 803 tea plantations, which employ altogether 686,000 laborers, and it is assumed that at least that many or more people live on tea plantations as dependents of the workers (Mishra et al. 2012, 81–82; Raj 2013, 471).²⁵ However, tea production on plantations made up less than 50 percent of the tea produced in India in 2022 (Tea Board of India 2022). The majority was produced by small growers, who are steadily increasing and thereby changing the political economy of tea production in India. Small growers raise tea on smaller plots of land of about two acres and sell fresh tea leaves to so-called Bought Leaf Factories, where the tea is processed and further sold (K. Das 2012). It is estimated that about five laborers work on a tea smallholding (Borah 2013, 86). Yet, since most small growers are excluded from important labor laws, they do not have to make the same provisions for their laborers, and they mainly offer only temporary employment (Biggs et al. 2018). While Kaberi Borah (2013) and others (e.g., Besky 2017b) consider tea smallholdings a potentially promising opportunity for self-employment of tea laborers or rural population, tea plantation laborers whom I met hardly became smallholders because they did not own sufficient land to start a smallholding but would also never work on a smallholding because the labor conditions are much worse compared to plantation work. The casualization of labor has also increased on large-scale plantations since the 1990s (Mishra et al. 2012, 9).

The political economy of Assam tea production is also shaped by significant changes in the legal framework governing plantation labor in India. The Indian government has consolidated forty-four labor laws in India into four new labor codes, covering wages, industrial relations, social security and welfare, and safety and working conditions. While the implementation of these new labor laws is

ongoing, the impact on plantations remains unclear. Proposed changes include the repeal of the Plantations Labour Act and the elimination of the dual wage structure (Singh 2020). The two paragraphs of the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code of 2020 on plantations are much less comprehensive and less legally binding as compared to the Plantations Labour Act. For example, section 92 of the new code stipulates that “the State Government *may* prescribe requiring every employer to make provisions in his plantation,” (emphasis added) while prescriptions in the PLA were framed as legally binding: “It *shall* be the *duty* of every employer to provide and maintain necessary housing accommodation” (emphasis added).

In short, since the 1970s, the political economy of Assam tea has gradually shifted from a scarcity of labor toward an era of labor surplus; from being the world’s largest tea exporter to being gradually disarticulated from the capitalist world economy; from a plantation-dominated industry to a gradual replacement of plantations with small growers; from the standard of permanent labor contracts to a casualization of labor; and from welfare labor laws to a new labor law regime that dismantles labor laws characterized by extensive social welfare measures. These transformations are not unique to Assam tea plantations. Colonially established plantation economies are also repealed or radically transformed in other regions of the world. To give but one example, Andrew C. Willford (2014, 6) conducted research on former Tamil rubber plantation workers in Malaysia at a time when “the old, long-term, community-based model of plantation production that was introduced by British and French companies in colonial Malay has been replaced by a model based primarily on itinerant labor, mechanization, and a subsequent gradual contraction of the plantation economy.”

Tea planters, trade unionists, and tea laborers’ justice imaginaries are equally attached to normative ideals of the old paternalist economy of tea production with a dual wage structure and part compensation in-kind that had initially been created to develop a totalitarian work environment during the colonial establishment of the tea plantation economy in the mid-nineteenth century. When tea plantation laborers, like Anjali who was introduced in the beginning of the book, nowadays defend nonmonetary entitlements to escape the emerging more fully marketized, casualized, and neoliberal economy of tea production, they enter unlikely alliances with the representatives of capital—the tea planters—because the transformation of the tea economy into a landscape of small-farm, casual-labor tea production has neither a place for “labor lines” nor for managers’ bungalows.²⁶ Both of their labor is on the line. Laborers supported the maintenance of the old paternalist economy of tea production along with trade unionists and tea planters because the justice imaginary based on the old paternalist model of

tea production “worked” structure-undermining when placed in the context of a new political economy of Assam tea.

Assam Tea Laborers’ Manifold Designations

The terminologies used to describe the social composition of the labor force on tea plantations in Assam needs more explanation and critical discussion. The categories are not to be understood as clear-cut, uncontroversial, and fixed. Scholars who engage with the historical development of social categories in India have questioned categories like “Adivasi,” “Hindu,” or “Dalit” because they are seen as social constructions that were established through administrative practices of British colonial rulers, such as census surveys (see Bates and Shah 2014). A strict social-constructivist perception of these categories, however, has equally been questioned because it is unlikely that the categories emerged from a social vacuum. Categories, at least to a certain extent, resemble then-present social structures although the categories were established and fixed by practices such as the British’s meticulous census surveys that later made it difficult to switch between categories or identify situationally with different categories (Eckert 2002, 25).

While it is crucial to reflect on the deconstruction of collective categories, it is also necessary to acknowledge that these categories matter to people and their life worlds in India today. They constitute a social reality for many people. To refer to my field of study, ethnic and religious belonging, for example, played a decisive role with regard to marriage alliances on tea plantations in Assam. There are, nonetheless, limitations to fitting social realities into categories, and, moreover, there is a strategic situational use of these categories, which illustrates that categories as well as their defense or denial are often politically charged. This will be discussed in more detail in chapter 4 (see also Baruah 1986, 1999).

Adivasis constitute the largest group among tea laborers on plantations in Assam, which is different from other tea-growing areas in India where Tamil Dalits (Kerala) or Gorkha (Darjeeling) constitute the majority. The term *Adivasi*, glossed from Hindi, literally means “indigenous,” although the indigeneity of Adivasis is controversial in India (see Bêteille 1998). The term is used as an umbrella term to designate different ethnic groups, such as Munda or Oraon, which are said to have historically lived mainly in nonsedentary social formations in hilly or forested areas in the so-called tribal belt of Central India. The idea of Adivasi indigeneity in India is based on the Indo-Aryan migration theory, which assumes that Indo-Aryan invaders migrated to North India from Central Asia around 1500 BCE and subjugated the local population. According to the

Indo-Aryan migration theory, the Indo-Aryan invaders are seen as the ancestors of higher-caste Hindus, while the local population, which lived in India at the time of the Indo-Aryan invasion, is seen as indigenous to India—therefore called “Adivasis” (Kulke and Rothermund 1998, 44–46). However, Hindu fundamentalists challenge the Indo-Aryan migration theory by stating that Indo-Aryans were also indigenous to the Indian subcontinent and did not migrate to India from Central Asia. They call Adivasis “Vanvasis” instead, which literally means “forest dwellers,” to emphasize that they do not deserve any special “indigenous” status in India. The Indian government also objects Adivasis’ claim to indigeneity, arguing that “the entire population of the country at the time of independence from British rule and their successors are indigenous” (Parmar 2016, 6), which makes “indigeneity” obsolete. Instead, the Indian government categorizes Adivasis as Scheduled Tribes (ST). Adivasis are often equated with Scheduled Tribes and vice versa in India. However, the terms have a different trajectory. Scheduled Tribes are those “tribes” listed in the periodically revised schedule of the Indian constitution who have historically been discriminated against and who are officially characterized by their “primitive” traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large, and overall “backwardness” (Government of India 2005). The Indian Constituent Assembly decided to use the term *Scheduled Tribes* instead of *Adivasis* when it drafted the Indian Constitution against the opinion of the Adivasi representative Jaipal Singh because the term *Adivasi* would lack legal specificity (Parmar 2016, 5–6).²⁷ Therefore, the term *Adivasi* has limited legal significance in India today (6).

Scheduled Tribes is one of the administrative categories for minorities in India next to Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes (OBC). The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government introduced further 10 percent reservations for so-called Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) with the Constitution (124th Amendment) Bill of 2019 (Kumar 2023, 193). More than seven hundred ethnic groups are recognized as Scheduled Tribes in India. They constitute about 8.6 percent of the Indian population, or 104 million people (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs 2021, 205). People categorized as ST are eligible to affirmative action by the Indian government to facilitate social upward mobility through preferences in public sector jobs and educational institutions and in the electoral sphere (Deshpande 2013, 56). It is the different federal states that recommend to the union government which ethnic groups are acknowledged as Scheduled Tribes. This means that some ethnic groups that are categorized as ST in one Indian federal state are not necessarily recognized as such in another state. The ethnic groups (e.g., Munda, Oraon, Saora) that are designated as Adivasis and acknowledged as Scheduled Tribes in Central Indian states such as Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Jharkhand, and Bihar are not among the twenty-nine ethnic groups

that are acknowledged as Scheduled Tribes in Assam (Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2019). Adivasis constitute the majority of Assam's tea plantation laborers, who moved to Assam as labor migrants from Central India (A. Sharma and Khan 2018, 196), and in Assam, they are categorized as OBC. The OBC category was introduced in 1980 with the Mandal Commission report and was implemented in the 1990s. It considers economic dimensions in addition to historical discrimination based on ethnicity or caste but does not provide the same affirmative action provisions as the Scheduled Tribes category (Deshpande 2013, 52–53).

Tea plantation laborers' shared migration history results in them being labeled as "tea tribes" in postcolonial Assam, and those who migrated to the villages in Assam from the tea plantations are called "ex-tea tribes." According to the labor historian Rana Behal, the category of "tea tribes" came up in the 1920s when managers started to produce data on "tea tribes" for manager trainings. The category has gained official status to some extent, manifested, for instance, in official administrative designations such as the "Tea Tribes and Adivasi Welfare Department" of the Assamese government. Tea plantation laborers are also designated as *bāgāniyā* or *bāgān ke log* (lit. "people of the garden"). The term *bāgān* literally means "garden" in Assamese (and Hindi)—which is a commonly used euphemism for the large-scale capitalist tea plantations in Assam. While still commonly used in Assam, the terms *tea tribes*, *ex-tea tribes*, and *bāgāniyā* are considered highly problematic by Adivasi activists (see chap. 4).

In the following chapters, the situational contingency, political dimension, and strategic appropriation of Assam tea plantation laborers' different (self)designations will demonstrate the flexibility and ambiguity of these terms in practice. In the next section, I will now turn to the background of my empirical research.

"This Is Me Here in the Field . . ."

I conducted altogether thirteen months of fieldwork in India between 2014 and 2017, divided into three research stays. I visited different plantations in the Assam districts of Cachar, Jorhat, Sonitpur, Dibrugarh, and the Bodoland Territorial Region. Initially, I commuted between Delhi and Assam to follow different activists working for tea laborers in Assam when I was a research affiliate at the Centre for the Study of Law and Governance at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi. While I conducted semistructured and informal interviews with representatives of all interest groups that represented tea laborers, I spent most of my time together with Adivasi activists and the international nongovernment organization (NGO) representatives who guided them. I conducted participant observation at legal capacity trainings, protests, and activists' meetings. More-

over, I stayed in an NGO training center for some time, which was located next to a government-owned plantation with about two thousand permanent laborers. During my fieldwork, I lived for altogether six months in a “labor line” (labor quarter) on a privately owned plantation in Lower Assam, which I call Dolani Tea Estate, with around fifteen hundred permanent laborers. While I stayed on Dolani Tea Estate, I was able to participate and observe many aspects of the laborers’ daily lives: I went to work with tea pluckers and plucked tea with them, I hung out with laborers in their spare time in the afternoon and evening, I took part in celebrations, and so forth. In 2015, I also stayed in a manager’s bungalow on a plantation in Jorhat district. In addition to participant observation among activists, laborers, and managers, I visited tea auction houses in Guwahati and Kolkata to get some insights into the selling and distribution of Assam tea (see chap. 5). I conducted problem-centered qualitative interviews with representatives from tea research institutions, such as the Tocklai Tea Research Institute and the Agricultural University in Jorhat city. Altogether, I conducted seventy-four interviews with tea plantation workers, their children, staff members, former tea workers, managers, owners, activists, trade unionists, tea brokers, and researchers, in either English, Hindi, or Sadri. While I speak English and Hindi fluently, the plantation laborers mainly spoke their own ethnic groups’ languages at home and Sadri as a lingua franca. Sadri is to some extent related to Hindi but not identical, and there were many different Sadri dialects spoken on different plantations. After some time, I was able to understand the Sadri dialect spoken on Dolani Tea Estate well enough to follow ordinary conversations, which made mutual understanding not ideal but possible. However, I conducted interviews in Sadri mainly with the help of formal research assistants or informal translators such as children of laborers who spoke better Hindi than their parents.

At the beginning of my field research, a researcher asked me whether I would like to take part in a study that examined researchers’ emotions while conducting empirical research. My participation included, among other things, answering some questions during the research. In a questionnaire that I answered in 2015, one of these questions was to complete the sentence “This is me here in the field.” I wrote, “I am the tall, white woman who wears Indian clothes, works with the workers, sits with them on the floor to eat rice with her hands, who speaks Hindi fluently, and who somehow fits in here surprisingly well, and yet is still a stranger.” Debarati Sen (2017, 35) describes herself as “insider-outsider” in her field of study with Nepali tea workers in Darjeeling. She is an insider because she is an Indian woman speaking Nepali fluently. But she remains an outsider as a middle-class and upper-caste *bhadramohila* “deeply aware of my class and caste privilege in India” (40). I was an “insider-outsider” in a different way. What helped me to “somehow fit in here surprisingly well” was that I had already lived

and worked in India with marginalized people for some time before conducting my research on Assam tea plantations. What probably also helped me to fit in was that I come from a working-class family in rural Germany. Therefore, conversation patterns with the tea laborers were more “habitual” (Bourdieu 1977) for me than conversations with upper-class academics are for me to date. However, as a foreigner, I remained an obvious stranger from a globally seen structurally privileged position compared to tea workers, activists, and managers alike.

Chapter Outline

In the introduction I suggest that justice—what people consider to be due to them and others—is inevitably “at work,” which means that justice imaginaries maintain, enhance, or limit people’s odds to act and vice versa. Based on this premise, each chapter of this book elaborates different workings of justice.

The first chapter analyzes how justice imaginaries work on different scales. I show how a “methodological enclavism” in plantation studies naturalized an analytical view on plantation labor as immobile, bounded, and fixed. I attempt an epistemic move to create new foci in studies of plantation work that move beyond “methodological enclavism” and reconsider plantations as permeable and transforming spaces and show that certain forms of inequality and injustice attributed to plantation economies due to methodological enclavism need to be located beyond plantation enclaves. I argue that tea labor is not spatially immobile but that spatial mobility does not necessarily lead to upward social mobility. Regarding the workings of justice, chapter 1 illustrates that when defining plantations as the scale to address matters of justice, responsible agents of justice (tea planters) can be more clearly identified as those responsible for implementing labor justice to tea laborers. When upscaling questions of justice beyond plantations, economic exploitation and structural casteism beyond Assam tea plantations can be addressed. However, responsible agents of justice are more difficult to define. Justice works differently on different scales, highlighting certain aspects of justice while disregarding others.

Chapters 2 and 3 analyze justice in context. The second chapter introduces life and work on Assam tea plantations in ethnographic fiction. I composed different observations of my fieldwork into one fictive day on a plantation through the eyes of Jiya, a tea laborer on Dolani Tea Estate. The narrative introduces differently positioned actors on Assam tea plantations and hints at their everyday conceptualizations of justice. Tea laborers demonstrate loyalty toward tea companies, which is part of laborers’ justice imaginaries, further elaborated in chapter 3. Based on the argument by James Scott (1976, 158) that injustice can only

be perceived if people have a norm of justice in mind from which it has departed, chapter 3 explores tea plantation laborers' open and hidden protests in order to understand underlying norms of justice. I argue that many laborers aspired to be acknowledged for their hard work and rather held onto effectuating the "old" political economy of tea production based on regulations of the Plantations Labour Act. Justice in context suggests that when justice imaginaries are placed into another context, they can turn from structure-preserving frames of justice into structure-undermining frames of justice. Justice ideals of the "old" political economy of tea production that worked structure-preserving in the twentieth century, turn into structure-undermining frames of justice when placed in the context of a new political economy of tea production in the twenty-first century.

Chapter 4 focuses on how changing concepts of justice in organized labor struggles transform tea laborers' categories of collective identification and leadership patterns among labor rights activists working on behalf of Assam tea laborers. While activists as concerned agents of justice claim to embrace better objects of justice, such as affirmative action or minimum wages, in order to give seemingly identical subjects of justice (tea workers, Adivasis, subjects of labor rights) what is due to them, the scope of the categories of collective identification of subjects of justice are adapted situationally flexible, which also impacts who is seen as the concerned agents of justice.

Chapter 5 analyzes justice in conflict, taking tea planters' "bungalow doctrines" as an example. Tea planters' gestures of proximity have been interpreted in the literature on tea plantations as a means to exploit rather than being truly affectionate toward laborers. I analyze planters' structural position in the tea plantation economy between different justice imaginaries that make different, contradictory claims on them. I argue that different justice imaginaries work together or against one another when people try to balance the different demands posed on them by different justice imaginaries.

While the analysis of the workings of justice was deducted from my experience of living and working with different actors on Assam tea plantations when dealing with the puzzling observation of unexpected alliances, I suggest that *justice at work* can be operationalized in other settings, including in other Indian contexts and beyond.²⁸ In the conclusion, I discuss empirical examples that are not related to Assam tea plantations, in which the analytical lens of different workings of justice may be applied to demonstrate the more general analytical value of *justice at work*. The concluding chapter also draws more general political conclusions. I content to resist the low-hanging fruit of fundamentally critiquing the tea plantation economy when there is labor on the line.