



## Indo-Swiss Joint Research Programme in the Social Sciences

### Scholars Exchange Grants (SEG) Call for Projects 2015

#### FINAL JOINT SCIENTIFIC REPORT

*Please note that part 1 & 2 of this report can be published on the website of the programme or in programme reports*

#### Part 1 - General Information

<b>Project Title:</b>	<i>A moral economy of labour? Tea cooperatives in Eastern Himalayan and sub-Himalayan Bengal tea zone</i>
<b>Reporting period:</b>	<b>1 August 2016 – 30 September 2017</b>
<b>Swiss Principal Investigator:</b>	<i>Dr Miriam Wenner</i>
<b>Indian Principal Investigator:</b>	<i>Dr Swatahsiddha Sarkar</i>
<b>Official start date:</b>	1 August 2016
<b>Official end date:</b>	30 September 2017

#### Part 2 - Scientific Information

##### A) SYNTHESIS OF THE PROJECT

The aim of this project was to explore the problems and prospects of tea cooperatives and other collective enterprises as an alternative mode of production for the tea plantation zone of northern West Bengal and Eastern Nepal. We asked whether and how cooperatives and collective enterprises respond to and accommodate the requirements of labour and small-tea growers on the one hand, and of the domestic and global tea markets on the other.

This aim was formulated against the background of what has been described as a severe crisis of the tea economy, becoming visible in abandoned tea plantations and suffering workers. Inspired by the concepts of “moral economy” (Thompson 2014; Palomera and Vetta 2016; Scott 1976) and global production networks (Coe 2012; Henderson et al. 2002), we focused on the following issues:

- (i) the changing relations between labour, tea companies, and the market as an outcome of the abandonment and scaling down of tea plantations;
- (ii) the shifting power relations at the lower level of global tea production networks; and
- (iii) the feasibility of collective production set-ups such as cooperatives as alternative modes of production.

This research included a comparative analysis of the historical emergence of formal and informal collective initiatives as embedded in social, political and economic institutions, different stakeholders' (unions, labourers, state representatives, international organisations, tea companies) perceptions of cooperatives, their roles and positions in the global production network of tea in both countries, and the practical realities of cooperatives.

The Swiss team spent six to eight weeks in the field from December 2016 till February 2017. While the Swiss principal researcher focussed on the emergence and functioning of tea cooperatives and the meanings they hold for their members in Nepal and Darjeeling hills, the Swiss master student researched the role of fair trade and its notions in relation to global production networks of tea. The Indian team focused on the closed tea plantations of the Dooars, researching various forms of collective initiatives in relation to broader socio-economic and political structures. Both teams met several times during field period to discuss the research framework and plan. The Swiss team discussed their preliminary findings at a workshop organised at the NBU on February 13, 2017.

During the Indian team's two-weeks-long stay in Switzerland in June 2017, both teams engaged in intensive discussions to identify main topics, overlaps, and findings, which resulted in a detailed plan for a paper draft. The paper will compare the institutional opportunity structures for the formation of cooperatives in India and Nepal, with a special focus on tea cooperatives.

The team came up with following findings:

1. The rise of small-tea-growers especially in the Indian Dooars and the Terai is paralleled by the downfall and closure of estate plantations. Contrary to the common perception that the tea economy was in a "crisis", we rather found a *crisis of labour* on the tea plantations.
2. The possibilities of workers and farmers' collective action are determined by the nexus of state apparatus, plantation management and companies, local agents, and national/international organisations (such as fair trade). This particular constellation also results in a depoliticisation of labour, the creation of new dependencies, and the dilution of labour initiatives and labour concerns in broader policies and public perception.
3. Ideas of cooperatives are muted by state and non-state organisations. The question of land-ownership as a means of production and workers'/farmers' awareness of cooperatives heavily influences the possibilities of their emergence.
4. While the emergence of cooperatives is inspired by its members' imaginations of a "better live" the relations between members are evenly shaped by shared moral values of mutual respect and support, which – in some cases – are violated, leading to conflicts between the cooperative members.

The present project has served as an impetus to the already existing research focus of the Indian principal researcher. The findings of the present research opened up ways to further explore his areas of interest concerning the politics of labour and the spatio-temporal dynamics of labour and capital in the study area and beyond. The Swiss principal researcher expanded her focus on autonomy-politics through a closer observations of labour dynamics in the region. Especially the significance or moral values in cooperative emergence and functioning fit well with her interest in ethics, politics, and the economy.

Both Indian research students expressed how participation in the research has helped them better understanding the interplay between formal and informal institutions, labour, and the means of production in the formation of cooperatives. This very much facilitated their own research and dissertation projects. The Swiss research student utilised the project to conduct research for his Master thesis.

#### References

- Coe, N. M. 2012. "Geographies of Production II: A Global Production Network A-Z." *Progress in Human Geography* 36 (3): 389–402.
- Henderson, Jeffrey, Peter Dicken, Martin Hess, Neil Coe, and Henry Wai-Chung Yeung. 2002. "Global Production Networks and the Analysis of Economic Development." *Review of*

- International Political Economy* 9 (3).
- Palomera, Jaime, and Theodora Vetta. 2016. "Moral Economy: Rethinking a Radical Concept." *Anthropological Theory* 0 (0): 1–21.
- Scott, James C. 1976. *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Subsistence and Rebellion in Southeast Asia*. Yale UP (New Haven). New Haven/London: Yale University Press.
- Thompson, Edward Palmer. 2014. "The Moral Economy of the Crowd." In *Moral Anthropology. A Critical Reader*, edited by Didier Fassin and Samuel Lézé, 201–4. Abingdon, New York: Routledge.

## B) LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

<b>Publications in peer-reviewed journals</b>	We are currently working on a draft paper which compares the institutional opportunity context for the evolution of cooperatives in Nepal and India. We plan to submit the paper to "World Development" or a similar journal by the end of November 2017. We also have ideas for a second paper to be submitted to <i>Economic and Political Weekly</i> .
<b>All other publications (book chapters, edited books, working papers, conference papers, etc.)</b>	Andri Brugger will complete his master thesis as part of the project by September 2017.
<b>Participation in conferences</b>	Andri Brugger presented his research at the conference of the Royal Geographical Society in London in August 2017. Swatahsiddha Sarkar has participated and presented one paper each in National Seminar held in NBU (March 2017) and TISS Guwahati (April 2016)
<b>Posters</b>	
<b>Organisation of conferences, workshops, round tables</b>	A one-day workshop titled « Tea cooperatives in the Eastern Himalayas. Issues of Ownership and Marketing » was held at the North Bengal University on 13 February 2017. Andri Brugger and Miriam Wenner presented their preliminary results from field work and discussed their findings with the faculty and students. A second, larger workshop cum roundtable took place at North Bengal University on 29 and 30 August. Day one consisted of a scientific seminar ; day two hosted a roundtable where various stakeholders involved with the tea economy (including workers' and farmers' representatives) were invited to discuss possible futures of the tea economy and cooperative set-ups.
<b>Talks</b>	The Indian team actively participated in Ms Wenner's Bachelor course on Economic Geography by providing an input on the history of tea plantations and labour.

## Part 3 – Milestones & Visits

### C) MILESTONES

The following milestones have been achieved :

« Derive initial findings on the potential of cooperatives to meet the aspirations of workers and small-farmers. »

- We came up with initial findings that help us to pave the way for further research.

« Initiate dialogue on tea cooperatives as alternative production modus. » and « Foster South-South cooperation »

- The workshop/round table at NBU at the end of August, and a planned publication in Economic and Political Weekly foster this objective.
- By inviting cooperative representatives from Nepal, Darjeeling, and Dooars region we hope to foster an exchange of experiences as a form of South-South cooperation.

« Joint Publications in form of research articles and a policy-paper »

- We are in the process of drafting a first paper on the institutional and political opportunity structures framing the emergence of cooperatives in Nepal and India that we want to submit to the journal “World Development”. We plan to publish a condensed version of this paper in “Economic and Political Weekly” which would take more the form of a policy paper.
- Both teams plan to publish separate papers on their respective areas of specialization.

The following milestones have not been achieved:

« International workshop to be held on cooperatives at University of Zurich”

- Since the Swiss principal researcher left University of Zurich and began working at University of Goettingen from May 2017, the planned workshop at Zurich had to be cancelled.

Potential social and policy impact made out of the study

- The workshop/roundtable at NBU is the political heart-piece of the project since it aimed at building a bridge between our scientific take on the topic and practitioners and stakeholders of the tea economy and collective forms of production. Also, during the research, both teams managed to expand their networks to members of civil society and NGOs actively involved in shaping the transformations in the economy.

### D) SCIENTIFIC EXCHANGES/VISITS ORGANIZED IN CONNECTION WITH THIS PROJECT

01.08.2016 – 07.09.2017

VISITING SCIENTISTS	HOST(S)	PURPOSE	START DATE & DURATION OF VISIT
Andri Brugger	Indian Team	Field work	15.12.16-15.2.17
Miriam Wenner	Indian Team	Field work	27.12.16-25.2.17
Swatahsiddha Sarkar	Swiss Team	Internal workshop and discussion	12.6.-27.6.17
Bebika Khawas	Swiss Team	Internal workshop and discussion	12.6.-27.6.17
Viveka Gurung	Swiss Team	Internal workshop and discussion	12.6.-27.6.17
Miriam Wenner	Indian Team	Workshop/roundtable and follow-up research	21.7.-1.9.17

Miriam Wenner & Swatahsiddha Sarkar	UNIL & ICSSR	Final Presentation in Basel 4th JRP Conference (4-6 September 2017)	3.9.-7.9.17
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## Part 4 – Partnership

### A) COLLABORATION

Although Dr Sarkar and Dr Wenner knew each other before applying for the project, this is the first time that they actively collaborated in a joint project. The lead of the project was shared between the two, although we want to stress the immense contribution of the other team members, Ms Khawas, Ms Gurung, and Mr Brugger. The Indian and Swiss teams both focussed on different regions (the Swiss team put more emphasis on small-tea-growers in Nepal and Darjeeling, the Indian team on tea plantations in the Dooars region). This allowed us to complement our findings and chalk out a broader picture of the transformations in the tea-producing region researched

The collaboration was characterized by intense and open discussions. The team and the partners remained the same over the period. We did not face any major problems for the collaboration, also due to the immense support from UNIL.

### B) FURTHER STEPS

During the one-year lasting cooperation we made some important steps towards a better understanding of the transformations of the tea economy in the region. We aim at finalising one publication (possibly for “World Development”), accompanied by a shorter version for Economic and Political Weekly. We also spread awareness on tea cooperatives and other collective set-ups through the Roundtable in August, and deepened our engagement with civil society in the region. Both Indian Phd students are planning to continue working on the topic; Miriam Wenner considers turning the explorative study on cooperatives into a larger proposal as part of her habilitation project at Göttingen University/Germany.

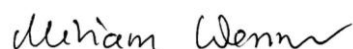
### C) OTHER COMMENTS OR CONCERNS

Provisions for grants for field work for the Indian research team would have facilitated the research work from the very beginning. However, the ICSSR was generous enough to approve the grant at a later phase of research. Also a grant provision for organising a workshop would have saved much of the energy and time that the Indian lead researcher had to invest for organising the 30<sup>th</sup> August event at NBU. Fortunately ICSSR-ERC (Kolkata, West Bengal) finally approved a partial amount to cover the expenses of the workshop. We are very thankful to ICSSR-ERC without their support the workshop would not have been a success. Further, we would have welcomed a research budget for the Indian team for the stay in Switzerland, since we had earlier considered a broader research framework including European importers of tea. This would have allowed an analysis beyond the « local ». Fortunately, part of the global connections could be covered by the Swiss master student.

#### Swiss Principal Investigator

Göttingen, 22.09.2017

Place and date:



Signature

#### Indian Principal Investigator

Raja Rammohan Pur, NBU, 22.09.2017

Place and date



Signature

