

## Socio-economic crisis of Darjeeling tea gardens: An insight

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### ABSTRACT

*The tea industry is one of the major sources of employment and economy in India as a whole and especially in the Northern part of West Bengal. It has been evident that post-2000 the condition of the tea industry of India, North Bengal in specific has been falling with the series of lockdowns and abandonment. The closing or abandonment of the industry severely affects the socio-political life of the people living and depending on the industry.*

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Tea has earned the reputation of being a cheap and readily available beverage. This great popularity of tea draws attention of almost all tea producing countries from the economic point of view. Tea is an intensively managed perennial monoculture crop cultivated on large and small-scale. It is the chief plantation crop of the Darjeeling Hills and its adjoining plains (Terai and the Dooars). It is world famous for its quality (leaf tea) and excellent aroma.

The best of India's prize Darjeeling Tea is considered the world's finest tea. The region has been cultivating, growing and producing tea for the last 150 years. The complex and unique combination of geo-environmental and agro-climatic conditions characterising the region with varying slopes covering about 18000 hectares of land (O'Malley, 1907; Chaudhury, 1978) lends to the tea grown in the area a distinct quality and flavour that has won the patronage and recognition all over the world for the last 1.5 century. The establishment of the first commercial tea plantation, Tukvar Tea Estate in 1856 was believed to opened the beginning of a new era in the Darjeeling hills by bringing about much needed economic growth of British- owned East India Company (O'Malley, 1907; Eden, 1965).

The setup of tea plantation industry required large area of cultivable land and a large labour force. The suited areas were scarcely populated, so there was an acute labour shortage. Hence, they depended on migrant labour that was brought there by the planters as bonded labourers. Migrant labours, low wage system and coercion were the major components of plantation industry. This enabled planters to make more profit. The bonded migrant labours made sure that they bound to work on whatever wage given to them (Bhowmik, 1980). The composition of the labourer shows that eighty per cent are Adivasis from Chotanagpur and twenty per cent are of Nepali origin (Prasanneswari, 1984).

The system continued after the independence of India and the transfer of ownership to Indian owners. Those owners were cash –rich Marwari traders and *baniyas*, who were also indigenous moneylenders to the British. With little knowledge about the industry, the tea gardens became just a ground for extracting profits for them. Although the State played vital role in securing the welfare of labours by implementing Acts like Industrial dispute Act, Plantation labour Act etc. still the condition of the labours remained gruesome.

Darjeeling tea industry is presently in the grip of a mounting crisis. The existing tea estates will be obsolete within 50 years unless remedial steps are taken immediately. The best varieties of China tea bushes were planted in the Darjeeling hills before 1863 and there has been little replanting since then. Series of lockdown, closing and abandonment of many tea estates have led to a deep crisis on the workers especially those who were manual labourers and who had no other socio-economic support besides the tea estate. It is important to know that the condition of fully functioning tea estates is also not very good. Once the owner abandons the tea estate, problems start to rise up.

Migration is another very common phenomenon not only from the closed or abandoned Tea Estate but for this region as a whole. The vulnerable situation of the tea garden adds more to it and pushes majority of the young men and women to migrate in search for a better life. The migrants leave their home with a dream and hope of earning money so that they can provide a comfortable life to their family. Highest percentage of migration is from the age group of 18 to 50. Both men and women have migrated and are still migrating in search of work to support the family. They mostly migrate to bigger urban cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Kerala etc. Men gets employed as security-guards, daily wage earners in factories, waiters in restaurants and hotels etc. while the women usually work as domestic help for the rich families

or work as babysitters. Trafficking is happening not only from the closed gardens but from the running gardens as well. Since, the daily wage of a tea garden worker is very minimum, that does not help to meet the ends. So, now and then we hear the cases of trafficking of young children, mainly girls. Water crisis is another grave problem in these abandoned or sick gardens.

The Indian tea economy is in a proclaimed “crisis” (Hayami and Damodaran 2004; Anantharaman 2019). Stagnant exports, abandoned plantations and declining or sluggish prices in the domestic and international markets (World Bank 2019) suggest that tea is no longer a profitable commodity (Mishra et al 2011). In the mid-2000s, two major tea companies (Tata and Unilever) divested from tea production to focus on more value-generating activities, such as packaging and retail, leaving more than 36,000 permanent workers jobless (Kadavil 2007; Herre et al 2014: 16). More than 11 lakh workers are directly employed in the tea industry, especially in remote rural areas, with most of them located in Assam and West Bengal (Bose 2017; Government of India 2017).

While companies complain about low profits, tea plantation labourers are struggling with the closure and abandonment of their plantations, the non-payment or curtailment of wages and other statutory benefits, declining living and health standards and even starvation (Mishra et al 2011; Herre et al 2014; CEC 2007; Biswas et al 2005: 1; Bhowmik 2011). Unable to make a living inside or outside of the plantations, labourers and their families suffer from malnourishment, forced migration and lack of basic facilities. But even plantations in Darjeeling—famous for their high-quality tea—struggle with abandonment, payments below the

minimum wage, and lack of the companies’ commitment to the provisions of the Plantations Labour Act (PLA), 1951.

The Act under discussion has a clause saying “every employer of plantation shall be responsible to provide and maintain welfare facilities through his own resources relating to drinking water, housing, medical, education and toilet to the workers in the plantation or through schemes for such purpose sponsored by the Central or State government, municipality or panchayat for the locality in which the plantation is situated.” But the management is declining these rights to the labourers.

The management blames the failing condition and overall crisis of the Tea industry to the fall in tea prices, low productivity of the workers, increasing social costs of production. But if we closely analyse the reports of the Tea Board, the production as well as the price of tea has gone high. It would not be wrong to say that the industry is in profit but the failure to invest the profit back to the tea industry pushes the workers into vulnerability. The siphoning of profit to other industry by the owner and mismanagement are the main reasons for the failing of tea industry. The State intervention has been decreased over the years especially after the implementation of Neo-liberal policies. The nexus between the State and crony capitalist had created the problem which the workers and their families are facing today in the tea industry pushing them to the edge of vulnerability.

The challenges to worker movements call for new approaches and new methods of cooperation with other social institutions.

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