

Socio-Economic Conditions of
Tea Garden Labourers in Darjeeling Hills

Vimal Khawas



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Introduction

1.1 India: Largest Tea Producer and Consumer

India is the largest tea producer and consumer in the world. It produced 854 million kilograms of tea and consumed 673 million kilograms in the year 2001¹. The last 60 years of the country, particularly after Independence, saw Indian tea growth over 250 per cent. Today it accounts for about 31 per cent of the global production of tea with the total turnover of around Rs. 10,000 crores. The country exports over 180 million kilograms of tea every year earning net foreign exchange of around Rs 1,847 crores per annum. India has over 13,000 tea estates with a combined acreage of about one million, most of it in northern India. The sector employs close to one and a half million people with foreign participation in the majority of tea plantations at 25-30 per cent².

The credit for creating India's vast tea empire goes to the British, who discovered tea in India and cultivated and consumed it in enormous quantities between the early 1800s and India's independence from Great Britain in 1947. The Scottish adventurer, Robert Bruce, discovered tea plants growing in Assam in the 1820s. At this time, no one thought that tea existed in India; however, Major Bruce discovered the plants growing wild in the jungles controlled by the tribal chiefs. The British East India Company's monopoly in China ended in 1832 and it became necessary to find other sources to supply the English consumers of tea. In 1834, a tea committee was appointed to investigate the possibility of cultivating tea in India. After a thorough investigation and study of the crop, the first commercial batch of tea ever produced outside China came from Assam in 1839. The first contract for Indian teas between 500 and 1,000 chests was issued by London brokers at that time³.

1 Centre for Education and Communication, 2003, *Tea Plantations of West Bengal in Crisis*, Research Report, pp. 13. Developing countries in South Asia and East Africa account for more than 85 per cent of world tea production and exports. India and Sri Lanka are dominant in both. Developed countries account for about 62 per cent of world tea imports. The larger importers include the UK, US, Netherlands, Australia, Canada, Japan, South Africa, Ireland and the former Soviet Union.

2 <http://www.american.edu/TED/indiatea.htm>

3 *ibid.*

Traditionally, India has the distinction of producing both the highest and lowest quality teas: the famed Darjeeling as well as the generic (cut-tear-curl), a nondescript blend used in teas. Two of India's major teas are Darjeeling and Assam. India's famed Darjeeling is named after the erstwhile summer capital of West Bengal, where tea is cultivated at altitudes of

Table 1.1 Black Tea Production by Country (thousand metric tons)

Country	1990	2000	2010*
World	-	2145	2443
China	27	65	54
India	451	815	1 070
Indonesia	51	131	147
Sri Lanka	214	305	329
Kenya	46	236	304
Malawi	21	42	42
Uganda	21	29	39
Tanzania	-	24	29

*Projected
Source:

1. For 1990: FAO, Tea Statistics: *FAO Production Yearbook*; and *FAO Monthly Bulletin of Agriculture Statistics*.
2. For 2000 and 2010: <http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/MEETING/003/Y1419E.HTM>.

4,000-10,000 feet in the Darjeeling Hills. India's other major tea, Assam is named for the state in which it is grown, which lies in north-east India along the border between India and Burma. This region produced more black tea than any other area in the world, with the exception of some parts of China. Assam tea which is strong, dark and rich is a component of many standard blends, including Irish Breakfast. The best of India's prize Darjeeling Tea is considered the world's finest tea, and almost all of it is exported. Apart from Assam and West Bengal, the southern states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala produce tea in the country. Production of tea in the country takes place both in large and smaller gardens⁴.

⁴ Centre for Education and Communication, 2003, *Tea Plantations of West Bengal, in Crisis*, Research Report, pp. 13.

1.2 Crisis in Indian Tea Industry

India, the world's largest tea producer, has been facing rising competition in the world tea market more recently. Tea, in India is currently on a downward trend with reduced demand followed by an overabundance of tea. Tea prices have been falling worldwide because of an oversupply in production. While world market prices in real terms have declined, the cost of production has increased steadily, cutting producers costs. Moreover, big buyers like Russia, Iran and Iraq have become inactive owing to political reasons⁵. Changing consumption patterns have also contributed to the decline in tea prices. It is also argued that the competition from African countries and Sri Lanka followed by the declining absolute and per capita consumption in Europe has contributed to the declining market of Indian tea. Also shifts in the composition of demand for tea in the developed importing countries have had unfavourable effects on aggregate export earnings from tea in India.

Table 1.2 World Tea Export (million kilograms)

Country	January to	2003	2002
India	August	87.8	125.7
Bangladesh	May	3.3	4.9
China	June	132.8	122.4
Kenya	June	135.5	123.9
Malawi	May	26.7	24.2
Sri Lanka	June	137.8	142.2
Zimbabwe	June	10.8	10.9

Source: Asia Times Online, 2003, www.atimes.com

The increasing use of tea bags and soluble instant tea effectively reduces the quantity of tea needed per cup and also raises the demand for plain cheaper tea at the expense of those of high quality. Tea bags account for about 10 per cent of the volume of world consumption. Factors that seem to have stimulated consumption of instant tea include its demand as a cold drink and the growing prevalence of vending machines. It is these changes in the consumption patterns of tea which contribute to the decline in tea prices⁶. Although many industrialised countries are drinking less

⁵ <http://www.american.edu/TED/indiatea.htm>.

⁶ *ibid.*

tea, developing nations increasingly demand the beverage (Middle East, Asia, and former Soviet Bloc); yet do not have the hard currency to pay for it⁷.

The international market price of tea is determined at major auctions in centres such as Kolkata, Colombo, and London. The UK has historically held about 50 per cent of world tea stocks, the remainder being held by producing countries. Since Britain is the largest tea importer, London provides the leading price indicator in the world market. Also affecting tea prices has been the collapse of the Soviet Union, a major market for Indian exports. The former Soviet bloc countries have mostly withdrawn from the tea market due to hard-currency shortages forcing the tea prices downwards. In 1991, the average price of tea in London fell from the 1990s 114 pence/kg to 105 pence. Furthermore, the price premium that Indian and Sri Lankan teas commanded in the early 1950s has gradually been eroded through the quality of improved African teas⁸. Despite India's historical success with the tea industry, in recent years, Indian teas have faced serious competition in the international market. The UK now imports tea cheaper from Kenya and Malawi. Hence, tea producers in India face serious challenges: how to keep quality, production, and exports up without driving prices down.

Table 1.3 Indian Tea Production and Exports (million kg)

	January-November 2004		January-November 2003	
	Production	Exports	Production	Exports
North India	604	70.0	631	82.8
South India	170	85.9	179	70.5
All India	773	155.9	810	153.3

Source: Indian Tea Association as cited in, Tea Industry Update, March 03, 2005, <http://www.indiaonline.com/nevi/teud.html>

Apart from the forces mentioned above, we also have our own domestic conditions that have led to the deterioration and downward movement of our tea industry. The domestic tea industry is faced with a situation of continuously falling tea prices at auctions for the last couple of years. The average auction prices of tea were about Rs.76 per kilogram in 1998.

⁷ *ibid.*
⁸ *ibid.*

They started declining from mid-1999 onwards. Presently, they have reached about Rs. 55 per kilogram⁹. Domestic prices of tea move more or less in tandem with the international prices. These prices have remained depressed over the last few years due to the over supply of tea in the global market. They declined from about US\$ 1.88 per kilogram in 1998 to US\$ 1.32 per kilogram in 2002¹⁰. This decline in international prices coupled with problems like decreasing exports, sluggish rate of growth of domestic demand, and higher cost of production has adversely affected the domestic tea industry.

Individual tea gardens, particularly the medium and smaller ones and those financially weak, have been severely affected by the decline in prices, allegedly because the cost of production continues to be high. Most of the tea gardens are sick and some have closed down in the States of West Bengal, Kerala, Assam and Tripura. According to information available, 43 tea gardens are presently closed. Of these, 25 are in West Bengal, 12 in Kerala and 3 each in Assam and Tripura. More than 35,000 workers are affected by the closure¹¹. Recently, 36 closed gardens were studied by Expert Committees appointed by the Government of India. The reports of the Committees indicate that these gardens have been inherently weak, which have suffered from chronic low yields and poor garden management and, in many cases, strained industrial relations¹². The fall in the prices of tea hastened their closure. Apart from closure and sickness, there has been another dimension, desertion by the owners of the tea estates, and there is a consequence to that. It is posing serious law and order problems in those areas. Further, in Kerala, 71 per cent of the tea bushes are 50 years old, while in West Bengal 46 per cent of the bushes are over 50 years old¹³.

⁹ Taken from Arun Jaitley's uncorrected speech in the Rajya Sabha (undated). The data is taken from the uncorrected Verbatim Debates. Shri Gobind Lal, Chief Parl. Reporter (Reporting) Tele:No.23034137 and Shri R.C.Virwani, Chief Parl. Reporter (Reporting) Tele:No.23034275 may be informed of errors and omissions.
Source: rajyasabha.nic.in/rsdebate/deb_ndx/200/19122003/12to1.htm - 155k - 27 June 2005

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Taken from Tarini Kanta Roy's uncorrected speech in the Rajya Sabha (undated). The data is taken from the uncorrected Verbatim Debates. Shri Gobind Lal, Chief Parl. Reporter (Reporting) Tele:No.23034137 and Shri R.C.Virwani, Chief Parl. Reporter (Reporting) Tele:No.23034275 may be informed of errors and omissions.
Source: rajyasabha.nic.in/rsdebate/deb_ndx/200/19122003/12to1.htm - 155k - 27 June 2005.

Further, one new factor has developed, especially in Dooars, and North Bengal Tea Gardens, partly in Assam and also in other areas in recent times, that the small planters are selling the green leaves. The leaves are being processed in places that are popularly called *bot leaf factories*. There are 62 bot leaf factories¹⁴. They do not maintain any gardens, and they do not have any statutory responsibilities to the workers or to the labourers. They simply buy leaves from the producers. Their cost of production is cheap, and as a result also cause problems in addition to the international price decline.

While the cost of production per unit in India is \$US1.62, in one of the major countries from where we are facing competition, Kenya, the cost is \$US1.16. Even in Sri Lanka, the cost of production is \$US1.23¹⁵. The second aspect is that with the removal of quantitative restrictions on import, despite the fact that in two years the import duty has increased substantially, almost two hundred per cent, still a substantial quantum of tea is now being imported, especially from Indonesia and Vietnam. Such development is posing problems for the domestic market. As we are party to the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the quantitative restrictions on imports are not possible and we are not covered by balance of payment criteria. Such problems are adding to the already deteriorating situation.

Table 1.4 Patterns of Daily Wages in Tea Producing States of India

States	Daily Wages (in Rs.)
West Bengal	48.40
Assam	48.40
Tamil Nadu	72.60
Kerala	77.60
Karnataka	64.75

Source: Compiled by the author

14 Taken from Pranab Mukherjee's uncorrected speech in the Rajya Sabha (undated). The data is taken from the uncorrected Verbatim Debates. Shri Gobind Lal, Chief Parl. Reporter (Reporting) Tele:No.23034137 and Shri R.C.Virwani, Chief Parl. Reporter (Reporting) Tele:No.23034275 may be informed of errors and omissions.
Source: rajyasabha.nic.in/rsdebate/deb_ndx/200/19122003/12to1.htm - 155k - 27 June 2005.

15 *ibid*.

At least 100,000 workers have lost their jobs in the present crisis of the Indian tea industry and reports of destitution, starvation and suicide are common¹⁶. The Government of India is fully alive to the problems confronting the tea industry. Several steps have been taken to support the tea industry. As already mentioned, Expert Committees were constituted to study in depth 36 closed gardens. According to the Reports of the Committees, all these estates are required to invest both in the plantations as well as in the factory and other infrastructure to achieve better results in terms of quantity, quality and price realisation of their teas. However, the bulk of the investment is required in the plantation itself. The government has facilitated discussions by the managements of these gardens with their bankers to work out a revival package. This package would include promoters' contribution, further loans from concerned banks with restructuring of the accounts and also assistance from the central government. The assistance would be in the form of an interest subsidy up to a maximum of 5 per cent for those gardens which are considered financially viable by the concerned banks.

Other measures taken by the government to provide necessary support to the tea industry, include the following¹⁷: (a) The excise duty of Re. 1 per kilogram on tea has been replaced by an additional duty of excise of Re. 1 per kilogram as a surcharge, which would form a fund for the development, modernisation and rehabilitation of the tea plantation sector. Assistance, through this fund, would be extended for providing interest subsidy to closed gardens which are potentially viable, increasing production of orthodox tea, generic promotion of tea and research and development. The schemes are being finalised for implementation.

(b) Implementation of a number of developmental schemes during the Tenth Five Year Plan by the Tea Board for enhancing productivity, quality and marketability of tea produced in the country. Financial and technical assistance is being provided for various plantation development activities such as replanting, rejuvenation, creation of irrigation facilities, etc. An

16 See *The Times of India*, March 13, 2003.

17 Taken from Arun Jaitely's uncorrected speech in the Rajya Sabha (undated). The data is taken from the uncorrected Verbatim Debates. Shri Gobind Lal, Chief Parl. Reporter (Reporting) Tele:No.23034137 and Shri R.C.Virwani, Chief Parl. Reporter (Reporting) Tele:No.23034275 may be informed of errors and omissions.
Source: rajyasabha.nic.in/rsdebate/deb_ndx/200/19122003/12to1.htm-155k-27 June 2005.

outlay of Rs. 350 crores has been provided in the Tenth Plan for the Tea Board for this purpose.

(c) A Price Stabilisation Fund with an initial corpus of Rs. 500 crores has been established for providing relief to the small growers of plantation commodities such as tea, coffee, rubber and tobacco.

(d) The government has moved the RBI and the Indian Banks Association for providing an effective credit relief package for the tea industry from the banking sector.

(e) The Tea Board is in the process of implementing an IT-based Information Dissemination Plan for the tea industry, including electronisation of auction centres. This would improve the efficiency of the tea purchase systems and reduce transaction time and costs.

(f) In order to promote exports of tea, financial assistance is provided to tea exporters to meet part of the cost of handling, packaging, transport/freight and value addition, even as efforts are being made to improve the quality of teas produced in the country through a quality upgradation programme being implemented by the Tea Board.

(g) Promotional support is being lent to Indian exporters in their promotion and marketing of tea brands.

(h) The import duty on items of machinery used to improve productivity and quality of tea, including value addition, has been reduced to an all inclusive rate of 5 per cent.

(i) An Inter-Ministerial Committee, set up by the Ministry of Labour, has also studied the issues relating to the plantation sector, particularly the social costs, provident fund dues of the plantation workers and taxation structures. The recommendations of this Committee are under consideration.

Besides these measures, the government has also got a study conducted on the primary marketing system for tea, including the auction system. Based on the study, the government has notified the Tea Marketing Control Order, 2003 and modified the auction rules in order to bring about greater transparency in the price discovery mechanism for tea. Owing to these changes, there has been a saving in transaction time and cost in selling teas through the auctions resulting in larger volumes of tea being sold in shorter periods of time.

1.3 Situation in West Bengal

The tea industry of West Bengal ranks second in the country after Assam. There are around 343 tea gardens in the state spreading across the Darjeeling Hills, Dooars and Terai areas of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts with their majority in Dooars. The tea plantations in the state produced around 190 million kgs of tea in the year 2003¹⁸.

Tea plantations in West Bengal are not mere economic production units but are social institutions and, to a large extent, control the lives of their resident workforce. Over three lakh workers are engaged and employed in the tea industry in the state. Most of the workers are tribals whose ancestors immigrated to the area during the colonial period from the neighbouring provinces and Nepal. These workers live and work exclusively for their respective plantations without any freedom of choice in terms of work and residence. They are completely dependent on the plantation management for food, water, shelter, education, health and sanitation¹⁹.

The West Bengal Network on the Right to Food and Work and Anuradha Talwar, the West Bengal Adviser to the Supreme Court, in consultation with the IUF South Asia Education Office, decided to examine the labour situation in North Bengal tea gardens in December 2003 in the context of the widespread reports of hunger and starvation deaths across the tea gardens of the country.

The study trip revealed that as many as 22 plantations, 21,000 permanent workers and about 95,000 people have been affected in Jalpaiguri district alone²⁰. Plantation hospital records, though not meticulously maintained, show a substantial increase in deaths after closure. A door-to-door survey of 204 households in two plantations done by the study team revealed an even more frightening picture with the average number of deaths per year increasing by 241 per cent after closure of the plantations.

The study also looked at the role of the management in many of the plantations. It found that the management had defaulted on wage payments and rations for some months before they abandoned the plantations. There were cases of stripping the plantations of their assets before the

¹⁸ Centre for Education and Communication, 2003, *Tea Plantations of West Bengal, in Crisis*, Research Report, pp. 21.

¹⁹ *ibid*.

²⁰ <http://www.asianfoodworker.net/india/040223tea-wb.htm>. No such studies were conducted as far as the plight across the tea gardens in Darjeeling Hills is concerned. Hence we do not have any information in this connection.

management fled secretly. Employers had not deposited even the workers' dues with the Provident Fund Commissioner, sometimes from 1997 onwards, let alone their own contributions. Large arrears in revenue payment to the government were also detected.

While the government does not seem to have taken effective action *vis-a-vis* the management, its implementation of the Supreme Court's orders in Writ Petition 196/2001²¹ have also been found inadequate. By the orders under this case, the government is required to identify all those affected by scarcity and to make provisions through nine central government funded state government schemes for food and work for them. The study team found that though the workers were living in situations of near starvation, the state government had not listed them as 'Below Poverty Line' families, thus depriving them of many of the facilities available under these schemes. This especially meant that these families were not eligible for subsidised rations. Funds to provide employment and payment in foodgrains and cash had only been used in the closed plantations since October 2003, though the plantations have been closed for over two years. The state government has provided six days of work on an average to each worker in the closed plantations under this scheme. This amounts to giving only Rs. 88 (US\$2) per capita to the families. Till November 2003, 46 per cent of the cash and 43 per cent of the foodgrains under this scheme for 2003-2004 were unused and there was thus ample scope for further work to be provided.

In July 2005, tea plantation workers in West Bengal went on a general strike to protest against the prevailing wage structure in the state. The strike that lasted for 22 days began on July 5, 2005, and ended on July 26, 2005²². Over 3 lakh tea workers, more than half of whom were women, took part in the strike and virtually brought the industry to a

21 In 2001, the People's Union of Civil Liberties (Rajasthan) filed a case in the Supreme Court of India (Writ Petition 196/2001). It sought the court's intervention in a situation, where, on the one hand, India had overflowing stocks of foodgrains, while on the other hand, people were suffering from chronic hunger, with reports of starvation deaths in the country. The Supreme Court has since given interim orders on the steps that the government must take to prevent such situations of hunger and starvation. In the process, the Right to Food and in a more limited way, the Right to Work, has become the statutory right of the people of India.

22 See Bhowmik, Sharit K., 2005, Tea Plantation Workers Lose Out on Wages, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XL No 38, September, for details in the connection.

standstill. According to the estimates of the industry, the strike cost it between Rs. 15 to 20 crores²³ daily, while the state and central governments too lost their revenues. The main demand of the workers was wage revision that was due two years ago. After considerable bargaining that followed during the strike, workers saw their daily wage increase of Rs. 2.50 for the current year. Further, it was decided that another increase of Rs. 2.50 and Rs. 3 would be granted in the following years, respectively.

Table 1.5 Closed/Abandoned Tea Gardens in West Bengal

Tea Gardens	District	Closed Since
Peshok	Darjeeling*	November 1995
Vahtukvar	Darjeeling*	November 1995
Putong	Darjeeling*	May 2000
Kathalguri	Jalpaiguri	July 2002
Ramjhora	Jalpaiguri	August 2002
Jogmaya	Darjeeling*	September 2003
Sepoydhura	Darjeeling*	October 2003
Chamurchi	Jalpaiguri	April 2004
Raipur	Jalpaiguri	July 2005
Thanjhora	Darjeeling	October 2005
Bamondanga	Jalpaiguri	November 2005
Madhu	Jalpaiguri	November 2005
Samsing	Jalpaiguri	December 2005

Source: Lakhota, Anuradha Sharma, 2005, Closure threat in lean term, *The Telegraph*, December 2003.

Note: *These tea gardens are located in the hills and hence produce Darjeeling tea; others located in the districts are not part of Darjeeling Tea. Further according to the conversations of the author with the trade union leaders, only Peshok, Putong and Vahtukvar tea gardens have been abandoned completely, while other tea gardens in the hills keep closing and reopening from time to time. Hence, we are informed that Sepoydhura and Jogmaya have been reopened of late with bare minimum facilities to their workers.

23 Bhowmik, Sharit K., 2005, Tea Plantation Workers Lose Out on Wages, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XL No 38, September, pp. 4103.

Table 1.6 Tea Production in West Bengal

(Million KG)

Regions	1997			1998			1999			2000			2001			2002*		
	CTC	OR	Total	CTC	OR	Total	CTC	OR	Total	CTC	OR	Total	CTC	OR	Total	CTC	OR	Total
Darjeeling	0	10	10	0	10	10	0	9	9	0	10	10	0	11	11	0	11	11
Dooars	129	1	130	146	1	147	134	0	134	136	0	136	142	1	143	141	1	142
Terai	30	0	30	36	0	36	37	0	37	35	0	35	37	0	37	37	0	37
West Bengal	159	11	170	182	11	193	171	9	180	171	10	181	179	12	191	178	12	190

Source: Centre for Education and Communication, 2003, *Tea Plantations of West Bengal, in Crisis*, Research Report, pp. 21.

CTC= Cut-Tea-Curl

OR= Orthodox Tea

*Tentative

Table 1.7 Profiles of Daily Wages in West Bengal

Year	Daily Wages (In Rs.)	Difference
2000-2001	37.80	
2001-2002	41.80	4.00
2002-2003	45.90	4.10
2003-2004	45.90	0.00
2004-2005	45.90	0.00
2005-2006	48.40	2.50
2006-2007	50.90	2.50
2007-2008	53.90	3.00

Source: Compiled and computed by the author.

1.4 Statement of the Problem

In the context of the widespread crisis across the tea gardens of the country, Darjeeling Hills have not been an exception. There has been frequent reporting in the leading news dailies²⁴ that tea estates in Darjeeling Hills suffer from more than one problem. Sickness and closure of the tea gardens, labour and wage issues, education, health and livelihood issues, issues with respect to the crop productivity, frequent violence and strikes across tea gardens, issues of intellectual property rights under the WTO²⁵ regime, competition from the tea coming from Nepal, Sri Lanka and African countries²⁶ are some of the major problems faced by tea gardens in the Darjeeling tea industry in recent times.

In the last five years or so, a number of studies have been carried out in the context of the crisis faced by the tea industry and tea gardens in the country. In West Bengal, two important studies were conducted in 2002-03. One by the Centre for Education and Communication, New Delhi (*Tea Plantations of West Bengal in Crisis*) and the other by the West Bengal Network on the *Right to Food and Work*. These studies, however, focused only on the tea gardens and the associated labour issues of Terai and Dooars regions of North Bengal. Tea gardens across Darjeeling Hills are still to be studied and the issues brought to light.

1.5 Research Questions

1. What is the status of tea gardens in Darjeeling Hills in view of the widespread crises in the tea industry of the country?
2. What have been the social and economic conditions of the garden labourers across the tea gardens in Darjeeling Hills?

²⁴ *The Statesman* and *The Telegraph*: North Bengal and Sikkim edition.

²⁵ See American University, 2004, Intellectual Property Rights of Darjeeling Tea in the Age of Globalisation and World Trade, *Trade & Environment Database (TED) Journal*, Number 752, July, <http://www.american.edu/TED/darjeeling.htm>

²⁶ "Almost 40 million kgs are sold as "Darjeeling Tea" when the actual production capacity is just 10 million. Most of these teas come from Sri Lanka and Kenya and in an effort to stop this market a logotype is developed. Some of the fake tea is called Lanka Darjeeling or Hamburg Darjeeling but most of the time it is called Pure Darjeeling. Japan, a largely orthodox tea-growing area, has already discovered the chemical constituents present in the Darjeeling variety, but industry watchers say that this will not enable them to grow the true Darjeeling variety." http://darjeelingnews.net/tea_facts.html.

1.6 Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the social situations including education, health, and housing and sanitation of the garden labourers.
2. To understand the economic conditions – livelihood pattern, income, alternative skills (if any) – of the garden labourers.

1.7 Research Design

Methods Adopted

The study was carried out with the help of the following research methodological techniques. First, three tea gardens (estates) were selected. This was done after a detailed discussion with the trade union leaders in the area and officials of the Darjeeling Tea Association. Talk with the trade union leaders brought to light that all the tea gardens in the region are sick, although they have not been declared so officially, and a number of gardens have been abandoned in the last one decade. Further, it was also revealed that closure and reopening of the gardens were regular phenomena in recent times. Hence, if a Happy Valley Tea Garden was closed/locked out during the time of field visit²⁷ of this study there was a possibility that the garden would reopen by the end of the year and again closed/locked up during the spring of next year. Keeping in view these complexities, we selected one abandoned tea garden, one very sick tea garden and one that is also sick but doing relatively better as compared to most of the sick tea gardens. The selection was done purely on the basis of discussion with trade union leaders and information provided by them in this connection. Fifty households were picked up with the help of a simple random sampling method from the selected villages and a primary survey was conducted with the help of a structured questionnaire.

Secondly, apart from the primary household survey, we attempted to bring out relevant issues from the management side. We conducted a semi-structured interview with the manager and/or assistant manager of the tea estates²⁸.

Further, we also attempted to document the views and counterinterviews of the local experts, NGOs, and activists in the context of the socio-economic

²⁷ In the month of October 2005.

²⁸ Excluding the abandoned tea garden.

situations and the associated dynamics of the tea garden workers and tea managements in Darjeeling Hills.

Finally, focus group discussion with the garden labourers was another important primary source that enriched us with the information pertaining to their socio-economic situations and response of the managements that was hitherto unexplored.

Sample Garden Villages²⁹

As indicated in the preceding paragraph, a case study of three tea garden villages bearing different functional status was attempted as part of this pilot study. The studied garden villages include Ambiok Tea Estate (TE), Teesta Valley TE and Peshok TE. Ambiok TE is one of the severely sick tea gardens in the region as per the discussion with the relevant resource people in the region. While Teesta Valley TE, although not functioning in the way it should normally, is relatively better off as compared to most of the sick gardens in the area. Peshok TE is one of the closed and abandoned tea gardens in the region where the economy of the village is carried forward by the abandoned labourers themselves for quite some time now.

Ambiok Tea Garden

Ambiok is located on the way between Kalimpong Town and Sombaray Bazar in Gorubathan. It lies about 80 kilometres south-east of Kalimpong Town. The village is a part of Kalimpong subdivision. According to the Census of India (2001) information, the village has 255 households and a population of 1250 of which 622 are females and 628 are constituted by men. The village as a whole has a sex ratio of 990 females per 1000 males.

Teesta Valley Tea Garden

Teesta Valley is a part of the Sadar Darjeeling sub-division. It is located south of the abandoned Peshok Tea Garden. It lies about 35 kilometres from Kalimpong Town and about 40 kilometres away from Darjeeling Town. According to the Census of India (2001) information, the village has 1113 households and a population of 5511 of which 2779 are females and 2732 are constituted by men. The village has a sex ratio of 1017 females per 1000 males.

²⁹ This is a pilot study to explore the socio-economic issues of the garden labourers in Darjeeling Hills. We hope the report will lead to a larger and a more detailed research project where other associated issues would also be explored.

Table 1.8 Basic Demographic Information

Village	Household	Population	Male	Female	Children (0-6 yrs)	Male	Female
Peshok Tea Garden	782	3542	1741	1801	326	166	160
Teesta Valley Tea Garden	1113	5511	2732	2779	593	290	303
Ambiok Tea Garden	255	1250	628	622	155	65	90

Source: Census of India, 2001, Primary Census Abstract.

Peshok Tea Garden

Peshok is located on the way between Kalimpong and Darjeeling Towns. It lies about 23 kilometres west of Kalimpong Town and borders Kalimpong subdivision with that of Darjeeling subdivision. The village is a part of Sadar Darjeeling subdivision. The village has a total of 782 households and a population of 3542 of which 1801 are females and 1741 are constituted by men. Hence the village as a whole has a sex ratio of 1034 females per 1000 males.

1.8 Time-Frame of the Study

Some of the background tasks and review of the relevant literature pertaining to the study was done in the month of August 2005 before the draft proposal was prepared and presented before the faculty members of the Council. Correction of the proposal was made during the first half of September where critical points and ideas raised by the faculty members were accommodated and the proposal was updated. The second half of September was taken by the preparation of survey tools for field study, while during the first week of October discussion of the prepared questionnaire with the Director and faculty members of the Council was done. The field work of the study was carried out in the second half of October. Data tabulation, data editing, and data analysis was done during the month of November and the first half of December 2005. The paper was prepared in the second half of December 2005 and January 2006.

1.9 Limitations of the Study

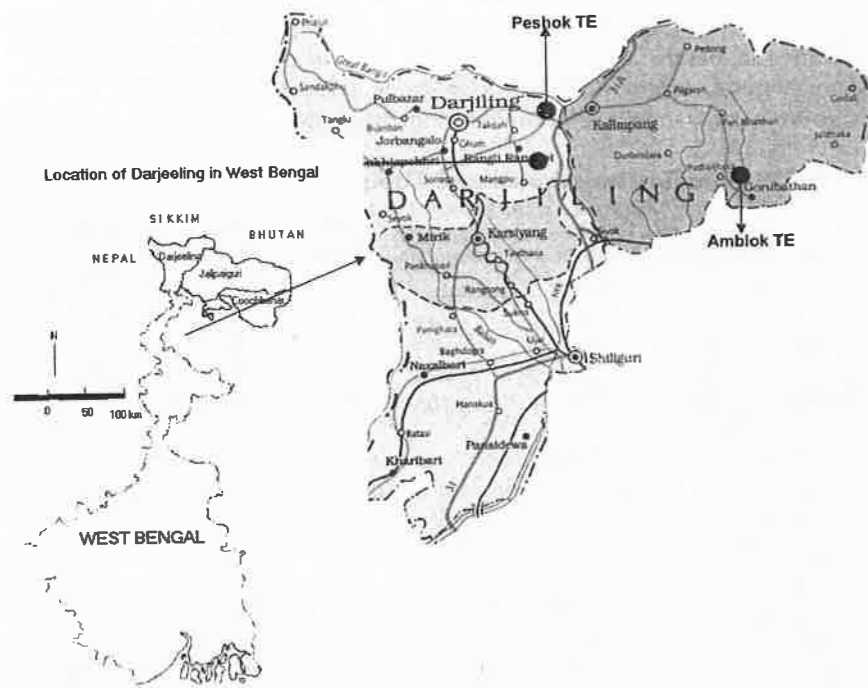
This is not a thorough and a detailed research study to explore various issues characterising Darjeeling Tea and Tea Gardens in Darjeeling Hills.

It is a pilot study to explore the socio-economic issues of the garden labourers in Darjeeling Hills. We hope the report will lead to a larger and a more detailed research project where other associated issues will also be explored. The basic aim of this report is to highlight the pertinent socio-economic issues characterising the garden labourers in the region. One of the major limitations of the study is that it takes only three garden villages as a case study to represent the region. Moreover, the sample size taken is relatively small. The findings of the study may only be indicative in nature and may not reflect the true picture prevailing in the area. A much larger and extensive study is thus required in order to explore various situations characterising the region.

Table 1.9 Sample Households and Population

Villages	Sample Households	Percentage Share	Sample Population	Percentage Share	Total Household Size	Sample Household Size
Peshok	51	6.5	244	6.9	4.5	4.8
Teesta Valley	51	4.6	241	4.4	5.0	4.7
Ambiok	45	17.6	223	17.8	4.9	5.0
Total/Average	147	6.8	708	6.9	4.8	4.8

Map 1.1 Location of the Study Area



Darjeeling Himalaya: Society, Economy and Polity

2.1 Introduction

Darjeeling district is the northernmost district of West Bengal. It is located on the lap of the Himalayas. The district comprises four subdivisions, namely Sadar Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Kurseong and Siliguri. Darjeeling Himalaya consists of the first three subdivisions of the district, while Siliguri is mainly characterised by the Terai and foothills of the district. It forms a part of Eastern Himalayan ranges and are bounded by Sikkim, Nepal and Bhutan on the north, west and east respectively. Darjeeling Himalaya consists of a portion of the outlying hills of lower Himalayas and a stretch of territory lying along the base of the hills known as the Terai. The Terai is only about 91 metres high above the sea level but there are parts, which are as high as 3660 m. at Sandakpu. The exquisite scenic grandeur and invigorating climate in the area have earned the place the title of 'Queen of the Hill Stations'.

The first access of the man in the Darjeeling Hills and who fell down the first tree to establish a living are not known. But when the British came, it was inhabited by a few hundred souls who lived in the pure natural environment, between the untouched flora and fauna. Nonetheless as of today, Darjeeling Himalaya is known across the globe for tourism and for tea. Both of these important industries are attributed largely to the climate. Darjeeling Himalaya's strategic location and vulnerable position have made it witness different events in history, each having a marked effect in the region. The agitation for the separate state of Gorkhaland during the 1980s shook the state of West Bengal and inflicted far-reaching consequences on the society, economy and environment in this Queen of the Hills. Large-scale environmental, social, economic and political problems that plague the region in recent times are in many ways related to the agitation of the 1980s.

2.2 History of Darjeeling Himalaya: A Brief Review

The name Darjeeling is considered to be a derivation of 'Dorjeling', meaning the place of the Dorje, the majestic thunderbolt of the Lamaistic religion. Historically, the British Government of India acquired the district of Darjeeling from two neighbouring states of Sikkim and Bhutan. This small and beautiful territory, which

once belonged to the Kingdom of Sikkim, was snatched away by Bhutan in 1706 (Kalimpong and the adjoining Dooars region) and Nepal by 1800 (Darjeeling and the Terai part which today includes the Siliguri subdivision).

Along with a part of Kalimpong and Dooars (Terai), Darjeeling was under the King of Sikkim before 1706. The Bhutanese seized the present Kalimpong area in the same year. During the middle of the 18th century, the Gorkhas won Sikkim along with the Terai. While the East India Company was busy expanding their territories in the south, Nepal had already become a strong nation by expanding its areas from Teesta to Kangra along with several plain areas in 1800. In 1816 the Sugauli Treaty was signed and thus Nepal handed over Sikkim and its Terai part to the British. The Treaty of Titeleya followed shortly. On February 10, 1817 Sikkim and the Terai were returned to the King of Sikkim making it a buffer state. At this stage, Darjeeling (proper) was a small village under the *Kazi* (minister) of the King of Sikkim.

It was in 1827 when Captain Lloyd and Mr. Grant, on their way to settling a dispute between Nepal and Sikkim, visited Darjeeling and discovered its invigorating climate. The healthy climatic condition was favourable for the establishment of the winter capital and military base. Through Lloyd's efforts, the Governor General Lord Bentinck started the dialogue with the King of Sikkim. On February 1, 1835, the King of Sikkim, with a view to enabling the British servants to avail themselves of the healthy weather of the place, presented Darjeeling, what was to him a worthless uninhabited mountain, to the British Government, as a token of friendship. Darjeeling in 1836 was a small market of a few mat-roofed houses popularly known as Goondri Bazar. Due to the various political tensions between the Kingdom of Sikkim and British India, the Terai part of Sikkim, which forms the present Siliguri subdivision was also annexed by the British in 1850. Kalimpong subdivision along with the adjacent Dooars was annexed to British India in 1865 following the Indo-Bhutanese war of 1864.

The hill of Kalimpong after its brief inclusion in the Jalpaiguri district was included in the Darjeeling district in 1866 leaving out the Dooars. In 1880 the subdivision of Siliguri was taken out from the Jalpaiguri district and included in Darjeeling district. Thus it was only in 1880 that the present shape of Darjeeling took its full shape. However, the geopolitical placement of the district kept changing periodically. The district of Darjeeling was annexed to Rajshahi (now in Bangladesh) after 1850. In 1905 the region in the present shape was included in the Bhagalpur of Bihar (Bengal, Bihar and Orissa being undivided) but to be taken away to Rajshahi again in 1912 and for that matter to Bengal after Independence.

2.3 Population

The then superintendent Dr. Campbell had reported the population of Darjeeling Himalaya to be 1900 in 1850 and 2200 in 1869. The years that followed saw the rapid growth in the population in the region. Over the years, people belonging to different castes, tribes, religions and speaking various languages have found places across the geographical and temporal spaces in the 'queen of the hills'. It can be said that Darjeeling today is an ethnographic museum and a cultural melting pot. Darjeeling Himalaya offers the most remarkable example of growth of population stemming mainly from immigration from outside. The most potent factor contributing to the growth of population in the area has been the tea industry. Another important factor which also encouraged immigration in the district has been the general agriculture. This is especially true in case of Kalimpong subdivision with relatively low altitude and comparatively high potential for agriculture. Besides, immigrations due to political reasons (mainly from Bangladesh, Tibet and Bhutan) have played a significant role in the growth of population in Darjeeling.

Table 2.1 Darjeeling - Percent Share of Hill Population 1901- 2001

Year	District Population	Hill Population	Percentage Share
1901	265780	178651	67.22
1911	279899	193304	69.06
1921	294237	206961	70.34
1931	332061	239377	72.09
1941	390899	286355	73.26
1951	459617	328785	71.53
1961	624640	404792	64.80
1971	781777	479978	61.40
1981	1024269	551374	53.83
1991	1299919	684818	52.68
2001	1605900	*850558	*52.96

Source: Computed from *District Census Handbook, Darjeeling, 1961 - 1991 and Provisional Population Totals, West Bengal, Census of India, 2001*. *As projected using exponential growth.³⁰

30 Population is projected as:
 $P_t = P_o \cdot e^{rt}$
 Where, P_t = Projected Population (2001)
 P_o = Population of 1991
 r = Rate of Growth (1981-91)
 t = Time.

The rapid population increase has caused the expansion of the area of cultivated fields. Natural *pakhas* (slopes) and jungles have thus receded to greater distances from the original settlement. The daily transportation of fodder leaves and grasses, as well as firewood has become far more difficult and painstaking. This has reduced the number of animals per household over a period of time, which has in turn impacted the agricultural productivity in the Himalaya.

Such a situation has forced the local residents to construct new terraced fields on increasingly inappropriate slopes. Vast areas of forests have shrunk and many *pakhas* have been turned into cultivated fields. Consequently, the jungles around the villages have begun to disappear. This nibbling effect is apparent around the hill villages and its diameter is increasing every day. As a consequence, soil erosion has accelerated. In areas where the cover of natural vegetation has been stripped off, the cycle of successive landslides has been abruptly shortened. Thus a number of landslides have begun to destroy fields and threaten the areas of inhabitants. Sources of water have begun to decrease in quantity. Consequently, the burden of the everyday task of carrying water has become far more severe than before affecting the rural women. In a number of cases, the quality of water has also dropped and, as a result, sickness increased. This simply means additional distress and economic burden.

2.4 Society

Darjeeling Himalaya is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-lingual area. The society in the area is made up of various elements drawn from diverse origins. The social diversity is perhaps the most powerful manifestation of the area. The social groups with diverse ethnic and linguistic origins, representing various racial stocks and social status have found a place for themselves at different points of time adapting themselves to the different ecological niches offered by the physiographic and climatic setting of the area. The waves of immigration have drawn the ancestors of the majority of the present population of the area from the surrounding territories across the Himalayas. Their dispersal has resulted in a creation of a social mosaic with ethnic distinctiveness.

Approximate ethnic group-wise composition of the population of Darjeeling Himalaya may be mentioned as follows -

- Nepali: This is a generic term and subsumes more than 15 ethnic groups under it. Various castes and tribes (like Sherpa, Subbas, and Tamangs) that immigrated to the area during the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries

from Nepal are subsumed under this group. Today they are the permanent settlers and bona fide citizens of India³¹.

- Lepcha: They are the earliest settlers and are regarded as the autochthonous tribe of the region.
- Bhutia: They are the tribe that migrated to the area from Bhutan, Sikkim and Tibet during both the colonial and post-colonial era.
- Tibetan: They include refugees that fled Tibet and came to the area after the Sino-Indian war of 1961.
- Bengali : They comprise both permanent settlers and migrant Bengalis of south Bengal and the refugees from Bangladesh (encouraged by the Left Front Government of West Bengal over the years).
- Other Indians.

The social groups with diverse history and corresponding needs and demands have not been satisfied with the multilevel planning and development framework in India and continuously struggle for their separate politico-administrative identity. Evidences available in this context highlight that the people living in the district had to pass through different phases in the process of development and importantly never formed part of the mainstream development process. The district saw various ethnic insurgencies with diverse characteristics and demands for a long period of time. Ultimately, Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council was formed under the State Act in 1988, in response to the continuous struggle, which looks after the developmental aspects in the hill areas of the district, apart from the traditional administrative (i.e. district collectorate) unit of the state.

2.5 Economy

Environmental conditions play a major role in conditioning the livelihood and economy of the people in Darjeeling Himalaya. The topography, climatic variations and soil condition have all influenced human occupation. Subsistence agriculture, livestock, forestry, plantations and allied activities are the major

³¹ The term 'Nepalese' refers to the national identity or nationality of the people of Nepal, while the term 'Nepali' connotes the ethnic identity of the Indian Nepalis. The former is basically used to represent people with Nepalese citizenship, while the latter is used to denote the Nepali-speaking Indian nationals (see Khawas, Vimal, Nepali v/s Nepalese, *The Hindu*, June 19, 2005 for details).

activity of the rural folks. Darjeeling Himalaya has only over 13 per cent cultivable land in proportion to its total geographical area. No effort has been made by the government to maximise the utilisation of the land.

Physiography in the area has made agricultural conditions extremely diverse. Agriculture is greatly impacted by altitude and slope aspect. On account of the cold no crops are grown above 9500 feet a.s.l. Such a situation in Darjeeling Himalaya has made cultivation extremely difficult and needs considerable input of human labour. Large sections of people who live in *Khasmal* areas practise traditional agriculture, more than 35 per cent of land falling under such a category. Bare rocky land and steepness restrict agriculture operations to a great extent.

Broadly, agricultural crops in the Himalaya can be grouped into two categories: Food crops and cash crops. Food crops include rice, maize, potato, wheat, barley, etc., while the cash crops are tea, cinchona, ginger, etc. The methods of agriculture change with the crops. Fruits such as orange, papaya, peaches, guava, plums and even mangoes are grown in the valleys and in areas with low altitudes. Livestock and animal husbandry engages a measurable proportion of rural folks in the area. Grazing of livestock is a regular practice in the valley area of the Darjeeling Himalaya.

Usually agriculture is practised on irrigated terraces called *Khet* or rain-fed terraces called *Bari*. *Khets* are mostly seen on the lower altitudes (below 1500 metres, approximately) and are meant mainly for paddy cultivation, although winter or dry season crops are also grown in addition to paddy in many cases. *Bari*, on the other hand, are prevalent both at lower and higher altitudes (up to 3500 metres, approximately). With the increase in altitudes, the proportion of *Bari* to *Khet* increases, as a result of cooler dry season conditions, increasing slope gradient and inaccessibility of water. Livestock supply and draught power serve as the primary and perhaps the most important source of fertiliser. The villagers use pairs of oxen to cultivate the terraced fields. Animal manure is indispensable for field fertilisation since artificial fertilisers are hardly used.

Tea, tourism and timber are much discussed by the establishment here. Cinchona and other medicinal plants have their base here. Sericulture is another section, which has spread with time. Darjeeling Himalaya has produced the finest quality tea in the world fetching the highest price. Starting on a commercial scale in 1856 the present area under Tea Gardens is 20200 hectares producing about 9 million kgs of tea per year. Cinchona was introduced during 1861-

1869 on trial; large-scale production started from 1887. The best of Indian quality mulberry silk is produced in Darjeeling Hills. Forestry is an important occupation of the people of Darjeeling. Darjeeling has about 38.91 per cent of its area under forest. Many forest-based industries have come up and there is huge potential for further development. Cultivation of aromatic medicine and exotic plants and orchids is a source of income in the regional economy. Tourism is one such industry, which is most promising in a place like Darjeeling. It attracts a large number of tourists from all over the country as well as from abroad.

Over the years the influence of dense human and livestock population in the Himalayas, like many other parts of the country, has led to large-scale destruction of both renewable and non-renewable resources (in this sensitive area). Moreover, routine damages through faulty agricultural practices, overgrazing of the hill slopes in the catchments areas, cutting and lopping of natural forests for fuel, fodder and timber for house building and agricultural implements are other forces contributing to Himalayan degradation. The forest areas in the hills have diminished considerably in recent years. Owing to the high rate of population increase, the per capita agricultural and forest areas have shown a sharp decline. With increase in harvesting practices and shrinkage in open *pakhas* and jungles the practice of grazing has also increased. The continuous and regular practice of grazing has exposed the rock and soil layers. This has reduced the compactness of the soil paving the way for soil erosion. Unplanned growth of tourism has led to deterioration of the environment and ecosystem, which has in turn affected the tourist traffic in the area. Tourism as an industry is undoubtedly a part of the socio-economic development of any nation but from the point of view of sustainable development; this industry has yielded many negative results.

Unfortunately, the economic status of rural Darjeeling is disappointing. Darjeeling is excluded from the industrial map of the country. Surely, the economic viability and environmental feasibility do not welcome the industrialists. Yet, small and cottage industries that have great potentialities in the region have not been brought in as required. The deep-rooted poverty and ignorance have become chronic over a period of time. Besides, the people live in an underdeveloped infrastructure. As one can in many parts of the country, the economic structure cannot be analysed in the Queen of the Hills merely by observing the towns and roadside developments. A house-to-house survey in the rural villages will reveal the real picture as to how people struggle for their

livelihood. That the infrastructure is unsatisfactory is evident on seeing the poor of remote villages still trudging a day long walk to shop in the towns. It means many villages are without proper transport and communication facilities. The rural folks have to walk all day to sell their produce in the nearest town. The situation becomes worse during the monsoon when frequent large-scale landslides and other forms of mass wasting take place in the hills. During this period a large number of villagers lost their lives. Safe drinking water, educational institutions, primary health centres, power supply, etc. face a similar fate in the rural hills.

Moreover, rural Darjeeling in the last few decades has witnessed a notable male selective migration for better opportunities. The migration is mainly taking place towards the urban environment of the district and to the major cities of the country like Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai, and Mumbai, to name the important few. Population pressure, degradation of the Common Property Resources, forests, long neglect of the region, backwardness of the economy and society, low agricultural productivity, lack of opportunity, etc. have played a prominent role in this regard. Though this has been bringing in money, much needed hands are diminished from native villages. As a result, agricultural production has seriously been disrupted and is on the decline. The draining of the labour force has caused damage to the subsistence economy on the one hand, while on the other hand, efforts towards self-reliance in the villages are discouraged. Also, although, the money earned is sent to the villages to buy provisions, the ecological constraints, inadequate manpower and low technology traditional agriculture do not allow the local hill folks to have adequate income to meet their basic necessities. Thus, the money again flows back to the plains as cost of provisions acquired from the plains. This vicious cycle keeps the rural people of Darjeeling Himalaya with minimal savings or no savings at all.

2.6 Polity

The 'Queen of Hills' witnessed a long lasting agitation of more than a half-century for the separate state of 'Gorkhaland' outside the state of West Bengal and within India. The historic movement that shook the state of West Bengal in the early 1980s stood for the formation of a separate political administrative unit outside West Bengal and within the Indian Union. The movement headed by the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF), formed in July 1980, turned into a mass movement of the Nepali-speaking people in the three-hill subdivisions of the district. The primary demands of the agitation were –

1. A separate state of Gorkhaland within the Indian Union;
2. The question of citizenship of the settled Gorkhas to be resolved on the basis of incorporation of territories (as provided for in Section 7 of the Indian Citizenship Act, 1955) and for this purpose a notification to be issued by the Government of India;
3. A separate Indian Gorkha regiment exclusively for the Indian Gorkhas to be created;
4. Inclusion of the Gorkha language in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution.

Subash Ghising, ex-army personnel, poet and a novelist led GNLF. However, the autonomy claim was the central theme of Darjeeling politics long before Independence. Repeated demands were raised in 1907, 1917, 1920 and 1934 by different local political groups. Demand for a separate statehood of Darjeeling including the adjoining Dooars areas of Jalpaiguri was raised by GNLF in the true sense during 1980-88. The issue was promoted in 1980 by invoking Article 3 (a) of the Constitution of India for the first time.

Demand for abrogation of Article 7 of the Indo-Nepal Treaty of 1950 and the question of citizenship of the Indian Nepalis were later developments. Since Article 7 allows the Nepalese of Nepal to cross over to India, reside and own property and also participate in trade and commerce, the GNLF alleged that the clause had jeopardised the position of Indian Nepalis, for they would be confused with the Nepalese of Nepal and face eviction. To stress the distinction between the Indian Nepalis and Nepalese Nepalis, the term "Gorkha" and "Gorkha Bhasha" were increasingly being used in place of Nepali and Nepali language, respectively.

It was also considered that people living in the district of Darjeeling were ethnically, culturally, linguistically, socially and historically distinct from West Bengal. Therefore, there was also an increasing demand for constitutional recognition of the Nepali language, more importantly since 1972 in order to maintain ethnic and linguistic identity of the hill people. Although, Morarji Desai openly discarded the demand and levelled it as a foreign language, it was during Rajiv Gandhi's tenure by a gazette notification that the Centre recognised the "Gorkhas" as Indian citizens. Later in the early 1990s, the Nepali language was included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India, though it was not recognised as the Gorkhali Bhasha.

Besides, growing unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, lack of educational facilities and medical care, increasing deforestation, lack of opportunities and, most importantly, the step-motherly treatment by the West Bengal Government towards the hill people were among the major causes which added an impetus to the Gorkhaland Movement.

The period between 1986 and 1988 saw a series of violence and counter-violence in the hills of Darjeeling, parts of Terai and Dooars of Jalpaiguri district. The Centre in turn reacted with the counter-violence unleashed by CRPF, BSF and State Armed Police. GNLFF, a political party maintained an armed wing, namely, Gorkha Volunteer Corps (GVC). The GVC maintained a distinct identity within the GNLFF. The GNLFF cadres began to arm themselves by the end of 1986. There was no reconciliation among the members of GNLFF and GVC. As a result, there were large-scale clashes between GNLFF and GVC, notably in Kalimpong. It was in 1988 that an ex-army personnel named Chhatre Subba emerged as the leader of GVC and the president of the Gorkha Liberation Organisation (GLO) from Kalimpong itself. The ego-clash between the GNLFF and GVC followers led to clashes with frequent intra-kidnapping and intra-raiding of each other's strongholds. A large number of men were killed and beheaded, while hundreds were tortured in the clashes. There were also intra GNLFF clashes. Mutual mistrust and enmity led to more than 500 houses set on fire and more than 65 killed by the end of 1987.

The agitation was brought to a standstill by mid-1988 after Ghising signed a political document on August 22, 1988, in New Delhi, promising not to proceed with the agitation henceforth. In return, Darjeeling Hills was granted an autonomous Council, i.e. Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) consisting of the three hill subdivisions to look after the interest of the hill people. It was given independent financial power to use the development of these areas by the central government with the concurrence of the state government. A majority of the local people were not happy with the decision and raised their voices against it but they were silenced with an iron hand. It was felt that the DGHC was just a replacement of the erstwhile *Jilla Parishad* (local body at the district level).

The decade of the 1990s saw radical changes in the political scenario of Darjeeling. The DGHC consisted of councillors elected by the people of Darjeeling. This body was granted autonomy to function as an independent entity. However, with the passage of time, over-confidence set in among the councillors of Darjeeling. An easy win in elections ensured the councillors'

lethargy to work. Moreover, almost all the councillors were illiterate or uneducated. There was frequent mismanagement of funds. Close observers assert that Ghising repeatedly failed to deliver the goods. Thus, not only did the movement lose fire, the functioning of DGHC became slothful. Development of the area took a back seat. The economic conditions of the local folk became worse over a period of time. Funds earmarked for development projects were diverted to pay for overheads. Over the years, the situation gained momentum. It is alleged, in spite of the formation of DGHC, Darjeeling is still a neglected region. Development work has failed to yield the desired results.

More recently, repeated *bandhs* have become a regular feature and its effects are widely reflected on the society and economy of the region. There had been voices of including the whole of Darjeeling Hills under the Sixth Schedule or Article 371 of the Indian Constitution. Local political forces were also talking of including the leftover Siliguri subdivision of Darjeeling district and the Gorkha/Nepali dominated Dooars region of Jalpaiguri district within the preview of DGHC. Consequently, a new chapter to the history of Darjeeling Hills was added on December 6, 2005 following a tripartite agreement between the DGHC, the West Bengal Government, and the Government of India. It was formally agreed upon to include Darjeeling Hills in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution with two more *mauzas* of Sevak Hill Forest and Sevak Forest to be part of the updated Council. The objective of this agreement is to replace the existing Darjeeling Gorkha Hills Council to be known as Gorkha Hill Council, Darjeeling, and to fulfil economic, educational and linguistic aspirations and the preservation of land rights, socio-cultural and ethnic identity of the hill people and to accelerate the infrastructure development in the hill areas.

The extension of the Sixth Schedule to Darjeeling Hills is not without controversies. There is hardly any difference between what the Council was earlier and what it is now except that it got constitutional recognition. The Council already had a considerable amount of autonomy with respect to administrative and development matters. There will only be some minor changes and revision of electoral representation in the updated Council. Further, as earlier, the offices of the District Magistrate and Superintendent of Police will be outside the control and direction of the new Council. Hence, many political observers do not hesitate to maintain that the Sixth Schedule drama is nothing more than Ghising's ploy to delay further the long overdue DGHC election in the region. Suffice to say, Darjeeling Himalaya as of today is a living confusion. It is up to the local people to decide where they would take the "Queen of the Hills".

In short, Darjeeling Himalaya is one of the socio-economically backward regions in India. Its backwardness can be attributed to environmental/physical constraints like rugged topography, harsh climate, varying altitude with steep slopes, unfavourable valleys, ethnic clashes, and political instability which makes life painstaking and hazardous. These parameters have a bearing on the social, economic, political and environmental health of the hill folk that are often ventilated through frustration seeking linguistic and political autonomy. Besides, unprecedented demographic threats coupled with a host of other factors have inflicted incalculable damages on the Himalaya. Various development programmes and agencies of development operating in the region lack seriousness and comprehensiveness in approach and hence do not come up to expectations. There is a need to work out a comprehensive regional planning strategy capable of addressing social, economic, political, demographic and environmental issues and concerns in this fragile, strategic, backward, and unstable region in order to bring in sustainable regional development, employment potential, regional income and general improvement in the quality of human life.

3

Overview of Tea Gardens and the Labour Situation in Darjeeling Hills

3.1 Introduction: A Brand Called 'Darjeeling Tea'

Among the teas cultivated in India, the most celebrated one comes from Darjeeling Hills. 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 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 1½ centuries. The tea produced in the region having special characteristics has for long been known across the globe as 'Darjeeling Tea'³². Darjeeling Tea is grown and produced only in the hilly areas of Darjeeling district.

What then is Darjeeling Tea?

According to the Tea Board of India - "Darjeeling Tea" means:

- Tea which has been cultivated, grown, produced, manufactured and processed in tea gardens (current schedule whereof is attached hereto) in the hilly areas of Sardar Sub-Division, only hilly areas of Kalimpong subdivision comprising Samabeong Tea Estate, Ambiok Tea Estate, Mission Hill Tea Estate and Kumai Tea Estate and Kurseong Sub-Division excluding the areas in jurisdiction list 20, 21, 23, 24, 29, 31 and 33 comprising Subtiguri Sub-Division of New Chumta Tea Estate, Simulbari and Marionbari Tea Estate of Kurseong Police Station in Kurseong Sub-Division of the district of Darjeeling in the State of West Bengal, India.
- Tea which has been processed and manufactured in a factory located in the aforesaid area.
- Which when brewed has a distinctive, naturally accruing aroma and taste with light tea liquor and infused leaf of which has a distinctive fragrance.

³² Kumar, R. and Vasundhara Nair, Darjeeling Tea-Challenges in the Protection and Enforcement of Intellectual Property Rights, <http://teaap2.indiateaportal.com/forms/darjeelingtea.pdf>

3.2 Historical Profile

The then superintendent of Darjeeling, Dr. Campbell and Major Crommelin are said to have first introduced tea in Darjeeling during 1840-50 on an experimental basis out of the seeds imported from China. According to records, the first commercial tea gardens were planted in 1852. Darjeeling was then a very sparsely populated region and was only used as a hill resort. Tea, being a labour-intensive industry, needed a sufficient number of workers to plant, tend, pluck and finally manufacture the produce. Hence, the people from the neighbouring regions, mainly Nepal, were encouraged to immigrate and engage as labourers in the tea gardens.

It appears that by the year 1866, Darjeeling had 39 gardens producing a total crop of 21,000 kilograms of tea. In 1870, the number of gardens increased to 56 to produce about 71,000 kgs of tea harvested from 4,400 hectares. By 1874, tea cultivation in Darjeeling was found to be a profitable venture and there were 113 gardens with approximately 6000 hectares. Today there are 87 registered gardens sprawled across the geographical area of 20,200 hectares.

3.3 Geographical Distribution

The total area of Darjeeling Hills comes to 2417 sq kms of which about 40 per cent is estimated to be under forest, 40 per cent under khasmahal and municipalities, 2 per cent under cinchona plantations and 18 per cent under tea plantation. Most of the tea gardens are located in Sadar Darjeeling and Kurseong subdivisions. There are only four tea gardens in Kalimpong subdivision. Kalimpong is largely agricultural in character and agriculture forms the backbone of the regional economy of Kalimpong.

3.4 Production and Revenue Generation

The total production of tea in Darjeeling Hills has varied between 8-11 million kilograms in the last one decade or so. A major part of the annual production of Darjeeling tea is exported. The key buyers of Darjeeling Tea are Germany, Japan, UK, USA, and other EU countries. In the year 2000 about 8.5 million kgs of Darjeeling Tea was exported, amounting to a total value of USD 30 million³³. There has been a continuous decline in the total production of tea and per hectare yield of Darjeeling Tea in the last 50 years. There was a time

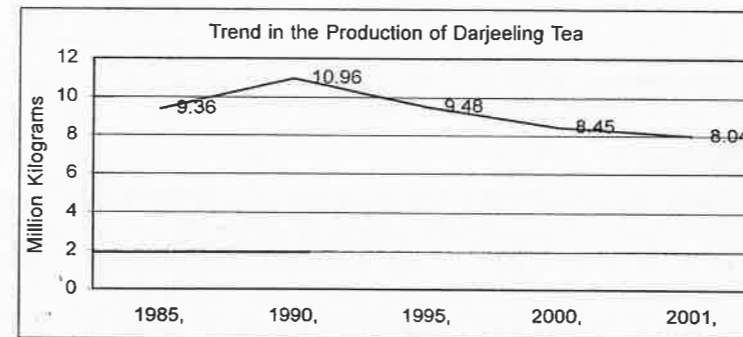
³³ Kumar, R. and Vasundhara Nair, Darjeeling Tea- Challenges in the Protection and Enforcement of Intellectual Property Rights, <http://teaap2.indiateaportal.com/forms/darjeelingtea.pdf>

during the 1960s and 70s when Darjeeling Himalaya used to produce over 15 million kgs of tea. This figure fell during the 1990s. The decline has been drastic since the mid-1990s. Today the region produces less than 9 million kgs of tea. One of the main reasons of the falling production is attributed to the declining yield of tea leaves in the area. The Darjeeling tea industry roughly generates about Rs. 150-200 crores annually. However, none of the tea estates in Darjeeling has made public the exact figure of its annual earnings so far³⁴. Tea companies have always remained silent in this connection and thus have kept the workers in the dark over the years. There have, however, been plenty of rumours that the price of Darjeeling Tea has been falling in the global market in recent times owing to competition from Kenya, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Japan and South East Asian countries.

Table 3.1 Vital Statistics: Darjeeling Tea

Area (hectare) under Darjeeling Tea		
	1960	1994
India	331229	424469
Darjeeling Tea	18,605	20,200
Percentage	5.62	4.76
Average Yield (kg/hectare)		
	1960	1994
India	964	1752
Darjeeling Tea	544	532

Figure 3.1 Trend in the Production of Darjeeling Tea



³⁴ Based on the discussion with the labourers, critical observers and trade union leaders.

3.5 Sickness and Closure

The global tea market is shrinking owing to various inescapable forces; the India Tea Industry is in a crisis and many such negative attributes pertaining to the tea industry have found a place in different discussion forums in the country recently. Consequently, tea gardens across the country along with the garden workers have been negatively impacted. Tea gardens located in Darjeeling Himalaya have not been an exception in this respect.

Out of the 87 registered tea gardens on paper, three of them, namely Peshok, Vah Tukvar and Potong Tea Estates have been closed down and abandoned since 1995 and many have seen a number of closures and reopening drama. For example, at the time of the field visit, five of the tea gardens were closed down/locked up. Further, a number of the tea gardens have been merged with other gardens. In this connection, Lingia Tea Garden has been merged with Risihat, Steinthal Tea Garden with Singtom Tea Estate. Hence, as in October 2005, there were only 79 tea gardens functioning in Darjeeling Himalaya. This figure keeps changing periodically as the closed down/locked gardens often reopen and then again close down several times a year.

Table 3.2 Status of Tea Gardens in Darjeeling Hills as in October 2005

<i>Closed and Abandoned Tea Gardens</i>	<i>Closed/Locked Up Tea Gardens</i>	<i>Sick Tea Gardens</i>
Peshok	Happy Valley	All the functioning
Vah Tukvar	Allobari	Tea Gardens are sick,
Potong	Narbada Majhua	although not defined/
	Mohan Majhua	declared officially.

Source: Based on the discussion with Mr. K. B. Subba, Convenor, Darjeeling Hill Tea Coordination Committee (conglomerate of CPRM, CPM, Congress and AIGLs trade wings).

3.6 Tea Bushes

One of the main concerns of Darjeeling Tea is that most of the tea bushes in Darjeeling Hills have well passed their prime age. About 66 per cent of the total tea bushes are over 50 years of age, while more that 50 per cent have been in existence for over 100 years now. Over 16 per cent of the bushes are between 20-50 years of age, while only about 20 per cent are under the age of 20 years. Further, there are tea bushes that are over 140 years old. According to the recent study conducted by the Tea Board of India, only 8 per cent of the

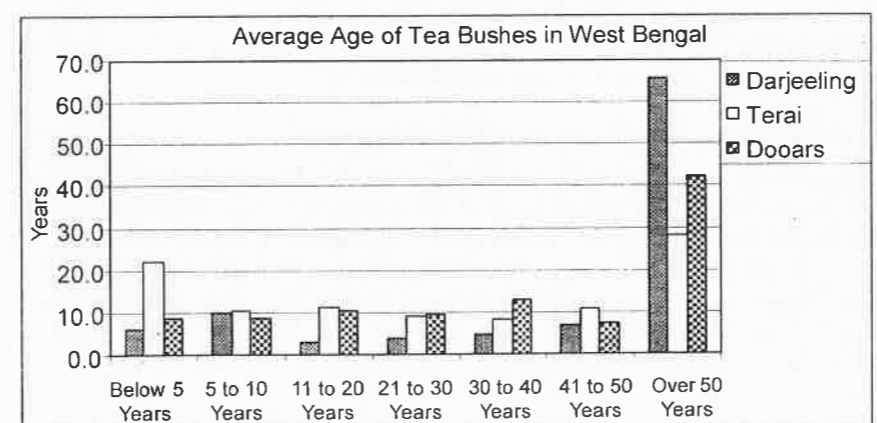
old tea bushes have been uprooted and replanted. This has seriously impacted the productivity of the tea gardens and the annual production has declined from over 14 million kilograms in the 1960s to less than 10 million kilograms in recent times. The yield of Darjeeling Tea, in recent times, is below 550 kgs per hectare, far below the national average of over 1750 kgs per hectare.

Table 3.3 Region-wise Age Group of Tea Bushes

<i>Region</i>	<i>Below 5 Years</i>	<i>5 to 10 Years</i>	<i>11 to 20 Years</i>	<i>21 to 30 Years</i>	<i>31 to 40 Years</i>	<i>41 to 50 Years</i>	<i>Over 50 Years</i>	<i>Total</i>
Hills (Darjeeling Tea)	795	1,270	402	510	614	883	8,562	13,036
Terai	2,300	1,087	1,192	969	874	1,116	2,955	10,493
Dooars	5,350	5,330	6,383	6,040	8,108	4,626	26,517	62,354
	Percentage Value							
Darjeeling	6.10	9.74	3.08	3.91	4.71	6.77	65.68	100.00
Terai	21.92	10.36	11.36	9.23	8.33	10.64	28.16	100.00
Dooars	8.58	8.55	10.24	9.69	13.00	7.42	42.53	100.00

Source: Fareedi, Masqura and Lepcha, Pasang Dorjee (?). Area and Issue Profile of Dajreeling and Sikkim, Darjeeling.

Figure 3.2 Average Age of Tea Bushes in West Bengal



3.7 Tea Garden Workers

Tea Gardens in Darjeeling Himalaya, at present, employ about 55,000 people on a permanent basis; while a further 25,000 persons are engaged as seasonal/casual labourers during the plucking season which lasts from March to November³⁵. It further sustains about 2 lakh dependents comprising children, senior citizens and unemployed youths.

A unique feature of the workforce is that more than 60 per cent are women and the employment is on a family basis. Most of the labourers belong to the third or fourth generation workers who emigrated from Nepal and got employed in the tea gardens. They consider the gardens as their permanent home as the employment has traditionally been passed on from parent to child. Their entire lives are spent in the gardens. The retired ones breathe their last on the same garden. They are completely dependent on the tea plantations for their livelihood and have no other means of existence. Apart from the direct employment figures mentioned above, a large segment of the population earns their livelihood from the peripheral sector of the industry. This consists of transport, supplies, repairs, establishment, etc.

Tea gardens across the Darjeeling Hills are featured by a group of permanent labourers that constitute about 20-35 per cent of the total population of a particular garden. During the plucking season that lasts from March to November, extra labour is needed in the tea gardens as leaf growth is not continuous but comes in flushes. During this period the management employs seasonal labourers, preferably women from the garden. These casual workers are locally called *biga* workers. The wages of these casual workers are based on the quantity of the green leaves plucked in a day. The rate varies from one garden to another as there is no stipulated rate fixed by the Darjeeling Planters' Association in this regard. There are cases when *biga* workers have been paid as highly as Rs. 13 per kg and there are some gardens that pay less than Rs. 5 per kg of green leaves plucked. The rate depends on two important factors. First, it depends on the total production of a particular tea garden and secondly, it is also impacted by the time factor. During the peak plucking season the rate is generally higher and as the season proceeds, the rate declines.

The income of a garden worker is partially in the form of cash and the other half by way of perquisites. It, traditionally, has effectively provided the labourers with free accommodation, subsidised cereal ration, free medical benefits and such other benefits. Regular labourers engaged in plucking tea leaves are given an incentive

35 <http://www.exploredarjeeling.com/estates.htm>

wage for plucking more than the quota, fixed by the plantation, which is known as *thika*. Hence, in the case of Darjeeling Hill's Plantations, if the quota is 8.5 kgs, the worker is paid extra for every kg plucked above the *thika*. Such a facility increases the daily wages as during the peak season (July-August-September) workers pluck nearly double the *thika*. As women are mainly engaged in the plucking business, this extra perk goes to them. The extra income is usually earned during the monsoon period when the growth of the tea leaves is at its peak³⁶.

During other months corresponding to phase I and II, as indicated in the Table below, the plucking rates of the labourers fall as there are fewer potential leaves in the garden. There are cases when the management lowers the *thika* during this period to as low as 6 kg /per labour/ day.

Usually, plucking stops during December-February. This is the period when the garden is weeded, pruned, and cleaned. New drains are dug across the garden. This is also the period when the labourers do some winter cultivation in their allocated land.

Table 3.4 Tentative Plucking Season (March-November)

(Phase I)	(Phase II)	(Phase III)
March -June	July-September (peak plucking season)	October-November

Source: Based on discussion with the workers, officials, trade union leaders and field observation

Table 3.5 Ratio of Regular Workers to Population in Selective Tea Gardens

Tea Estates	Total Population	No. of Labourers (regular)	Ratio
Ambiok(Hilton)	1250	273	21.84
Ambootia	4240	902	21.27
Badamtam	5184	1300	25.08
Dhotray	4724	1206	25.53
Gielle	3184	606	19.03
Gopaldhara	1889	427	22.60
Mondakotee	3389	1286	37.95
Poobong	1359	511	37.60
Pussimbing	2509	408	16.26
Runglee Rungliot	2501	440	17.59
Seeyok	2097	480	22.89
Singhel	2399	658	27.43
Teesta Valley	5511	1013	18.38

36 Tentatively, the plucking season can be stretched for nine months beginning from March and ending in November. The labourers' productivity and the yield of the tea garden vary across the spectrum of the whole season.

Mention should be made that tea plantation is a capitalistic institution that operates with wage labour. The ownership of a tea estate may assume any of the three forms:

- 1) Foreign control via trans-national corporations,
- 2) Indigenous ownership (either in the public or private sector), or
- 3) A joint venture comprising foreign and national parties.

The ownership pattern, however, assumes little or no significance when it comes to wages or working conditions of the labourers. They have been kept at a quasi-subsistence level by all the parties including the MNCs.

While the tea industry in India is almost completely in the private sector, it has been statutorily controlled by the government since 1933 under various enactments culminating in the Tea Act, 1953. The Tea Board in India is a Board set up under the same Act of Parliament. The Board is administratively under the control of the Ministry of Commerce & Industry of the Government of India (the federal or central government). The Tea Board is vested with the authority to administer all stages of tea cultivation, processing and sale of the tea industry, including the Darjeeling segment through various orders. The Tea Board, however, works in close cooperation with the Darjeeling Planters' Association, which is the sole producers' forum for Darjeeling Tea.

Socio-Economic Conditions of Garden Labourers: A Case Study of Three Tea Garden Villages

4.1 Basic Infrastructure Facilities

Ambiok Tea Estate

The village is traversed by a metalled road that connects Kalimpong Town with that of Sombaray and other places in Jalpaiguri District. The village has no supply of electricity and has to sustain itself on kerosene and candles. All the villages surrounding this Tea Garden have long been electrified. Primary investigation highlights the fact that this village too was supposed to be electrified in the mid-1980s when wiring was completed in early 1988. However, the then political problem triggered by the Gorkhaland agitation hindered the formal supply of electricity then. After the agitation, while other surrounding villages were gradually supplied with electricity, this Tea Garden Village was silently left out.

The disappointed villagers speak their mind and say that it is the management not willing to supply electricity because of various internal reasons. They also confide that they are more than willing to pay for the electricity but the management has been keeping them in the dark for a long time. They have, time and again, put up applications to the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council to look into the matter and take the necessary action. However, even DGHC has been overlooking the issue. Hence they continue to depend on kerosene and candles.

The village has one primary school and a junior high school within its vicinity. For secondary and higher secondary education students have to travel to Sombaray over 8 kilometres south of the village. The garden has a small dispensary provided by the management. It is without adequate medical accessories and human resources where only minor ailments are treated. Labourers are devoid of proper medical facilities. The nearest primary health centre is located in Sombaray. For major medical problems the villagers have either to go to Siliguri Medical College about 100 kilometres away or to the subdivisional Hospital in Kalimpong about 80 kilometres away. The management dispensary has its own ambulance which transports the ailing labourers at the time of need free of cost. A sum of Rs. 30 is granted to each labourer per day for a total of 14 days if s/he falls ill.

The Gram Panchayat office is located about 12 kilometres away from the village in a place called Gorubathan Tar. There are no voluntary organisations or NGOs working in the village.

Teesta Valley Tea Estate

The village is traversed by a metalled road that connects NH 31A with this garden and other places of the district. The village is fully electrified and there are no labour households in the garden that are debarred from the supply of electricity.

The village has three primary schools and one junior high school within its vicinity. For secondary and higher secondary education students have to travel to Takdah about 6 kilometres away from the village. The village has a Primary Health Centre (PHC) provided by the management with 30 beds, 1 doctor, 2 pharmacists, 1 nurse and 4 midwives. For the treatment of major health problems, the villagers have to go either to the District Hospital in Darjeeling, Subdivisional Hospital in Kalimpong or the Medical College in Siliguri (about 55 kms). Teesta Valley falls under Rongli Rongliot Gram Panchayat. The Gram Panchayat office is located in this village. There are no voluntary organisations or NGOs working in the village.

Peshok Tea Estate (Closed/Abandoned)

The village is traversed longitudinally by a metalled road that connects Kalimpong Town with that of Darjeeling. About 60 per cent of the village is electrified, while 40 per cent do not have electricity and are sustained by kerosene and candles. The village has 1 primary school, 1 secondary and 1 higher secondary school in its vicinity. Further there are about 4 private nursery schools scattered across the village. Peshok does not have any health centres including dispensaries in its close vicinity. However, there is a private clinic located in a place called Lopchu about 8 kilometres north of the village. The nearest hospital available is Subdivisional Hospital located in Kalimpong Town at a distance of about 23 kilometres. The Gram Panchayat office is located about 13 kilometres away from the village in a place called 9th mile.

Discussion

Traditionally, tea estates in Darjeeling Hills and the villages therein have had the privilege of road communication unlike other ordinary villages scattered across the spaces of the region. The transportation of tea from the factories of

the respective tea estates required a road network. Hence the British constructed roads and connected all the tea estates with the mainstream road network. In the process, the garden labourers had the opportunity to avail themselves of this facility. However, as of today, most of the roads constructed by the colonial rulers are in a bad shape. The ruling establishment in the area has little or no interest to maintain the roads, not to mention their upgradation. The respective management of the gardens takes care of only that part of the roads that fall within its premises, while the remaining stretch has to be looked after by the state government or DGHC.

The situation of electricity supply varies across the tea estates. During the British period, there was no supply in the region. The supply of electricity is a relatively recent phenomenon. Even at present, less than 50 per cent of the region is electrified. Across the tea estates, although all the tea gardens have the facility of electricity connection there are cases where only the offices, factory and the houses of higher officials of the tea estate are provided with electricity, while the labourers are deprived.

The responsibility of providing basic health facilities in the forms of primary health centre and other associated requirements falls with the management of the respective tea estates in accordance with the Plantation Act, 1951. However, most of the tea estates do not have primary health institutions and the related infrastructure facilities like ambulances. The occasionally functional health dispensaries across the tea estates are most of the time short of basic medical facilities required by the garden labourers.

Of late, primary education does not fall within the direct responsibility of the tea management. The responsibility has been transferred to the DGHC till the upper primary level, while the Government of West Bengal looks after the secondary and higher secondary institutes. Most of the tea estates have a fairly large number of government primary and upper primary schools. This is in the context of the situation that has been prevailing across the ordinary villages of Darjeeling Hills and the State of West Bengal. Mention should also be made that Darjeeling Hills is well-known for its educational institutions (public schools) in the country.

4.2 Levels of Educational Attainment

The levels of education have been worked out in terms of various stages of educational attainment, namely, elementary (between Standard 1-8th),

secondary, higher secondary, etc., in the sample tea gardens. While examining the levels of education, children below the age of six have been excluded. Besides, the educational situation of the school-going children (6-14 years) has been worked out.

Table 4.1 Levels of Education

Tea Estate	Illiterate			Elementary			Secondary			Higher Secondary		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Ambiok	29.07	23.68	34.51	52.86	50.00	55.75	15.86	21.93	9.73	0.44	0.88	0.00
Teesta Valley	26.72	16.67	37.50	57.76	62.50	52.68	11.21	14.17	8.04	2.59	4.17	0.89
Peshok	26.89	19.42	33.94	54.72	64.08	45.87	14.62	13.59	15.60	1.89	0.97	2.75
Average	27.56	19.92	35.32	55.11	58.86	51.43	13.90	16.56	11.12	1.64	2.00	1.22

Illiterate Population

About 28 per cent of the population represented by sample villages are illiterate where almost 20 per cent of the males are illiterate, while over 35 per cent of the women are illiterate. Across the villages, Ambiok has over 29 per cent of its total sample population illiterate, while in both Teesta Valley and Peshok the percentage of total illiterate population amounts to about 27 per cent. Ambiok further tops the list of villages with respect to male illiterates representing about 24 per cent, while Teesta Valley and Peshok have almost 17 per cent and 19 per cent of their male population illiterate, respectively. Among the female illiterates, Teesta Valley is ahead of the other two villages with over 37 per cent followed by Ambiok and Peshok with about 35 per cent and 34 of the female illiterates respectively.

Elementary Education

The average figure of population with elementary education is over 55 per cent with about 59 per cent represented by the males and over 51 per cent constituted by females. Across the villages, Teesta Valley has the highest percentage of population having elementary education with about 58 per cent under its fold. Teesta Valley is followed by Peshok with almost 55 per cent of its total population having elementary education, while Ambiok has about 53 per cent of its population with elementary education. Peshok has the highest percentage of male population with elementary education accounting for 64

per cent, while Teesta Valley and Ambiok have over 62 per cent and 50 per cent respectively. Among the female population, about 56 per cent in Ambiok have elementary education, while about 53 per cent and 46 per cent females have primary education in Teesta Valley and Peshok respectively.

Secondary and Higher Secondary Education

On an average, there is only about 14 per cent of the population who have studied up to secondary level. This figure goes down to less than 2 per cent when it comes to higher secondary level. Among the sample villages, Ambiok has about 16 per cent of its population with secondary education and less than 1 per cent with higher secondary. Teesta Valley has over 11 per cent of its population with secondary education and about 3 per cent with higher secondary, while in the case of Peshok the figures come to about 15 per cent with respect to secondary and about 2 per cent for higher secondary education.

Ambiok has the highest percentage share of male population accounting for about 22 per cent with secondary education but has less than 1 per cent with higher secondary. Teesta Valley has over 14 per cent of its male members with secondary level education and 4 per cent with higher secondary, while in the case of Peshok there are about 14 per cent males with secondary level education and about 1 per cent with higher secondary. With respect to females, Peshok occupies the first position among the sample villages with about 16 per cent of its population with secondary level education and about 3 per cent with higher secondary. Ambiok has about 10 per cent females with secondary education and none at higher secondary level, while in the case of Teesta Valley there are 8 per cent females in the secondary category and about 1 per cent at higher secondary.

Higher Studies

There are 1.3 per cent of the total population who have studied up to graduation with the males representing 1.7 per cent and females less than 1 per cent in Teesta Valley. In Peshok there are 1.9 per cent of the total population who have studied up to graduation with the males representing 1.9 per cent and females 1.8 per cent. Less than one per cent of the total population in Ambiok have studied up to the BA/BSc level with no females on the scene. Teesta Valley is the only tea garden village among the studied gardens where we found one male postgraduate. There are no postgraduates in Peshok and Ambiok.

Children Between 6-14 Years and Their Education

There are over 17 per cent of the total population under this category where the males share 16.7 per cent and females 18.3 per cent of their respective sexes. Ambiok and Teesta Valley have over 18 per cent of their total population under this category, while Peshok has about 16 per cent. There are 19 per cent of males and over 18 per cent of females in Teesta Valley in this category, while Ambiok has over 15 per cent of males and about 21 per cent of females. In case of Peshok the figures are about 16 per cent with respect to both males and females.

Table 4.2 Children Enrolled in School and Dropped Out

Tea Estate	Children (6 -14 yrs)			Enrolled in the School			Dropped Out		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Ambiok	18.03	15.32	20.83	88.64	94.74	84.00	11.36	5.26	16.00
Teesta Valley	18.67	18.90	18.42	88.89	95.83	80.95	11.11	4.17	19.05
Peshok	15.70	15.74	15.65	91.43	94.12	88.89	8.57	5.88	11.11
Average	17.47	16.65	18.30	89.65	94.90	84.61	10.35	5.10	15.39

Out of the total children about 90 per cent have enrolled and are attending schools, while over 10 per cent of them have dropped out. In case of boys the figures are almost 95 per cent and 5 per cent respectively, while as regards girls about 85 per cent are going to school and over 15 per cent opted out of the schools. Across the villages, Ambiok and Teesta Valley have about 90 per cent of the children in the schools, while over 11 per cent are out of the schools, while Peshok leads with over 91 per cent of its children enrolled in the schools. Across the sex, almost 95 per cent of the boys in Teesta Valley are going to school, while the same for Ambiok and Peshok are about 95 per cent and over 94 per cent respectively. In case of girls, it is Peshok that leads again with almost 89 per cent going to school, while 84 per cent of girls go to school in Ambiok and 81 per cent in Teesta Valley.

One of the main reasons cited by the labourers in all the villages for being unable to send their children, particularly girl children to schools is the poor financial condition of the household. And as a result, they prefer to send their sons to schools instead of daughters.

Discussion

Looking at literacy rates across the tea estates, one tends to come to a rather positive conclusion with regard to the educational attainment in the area.

However, as one dissects the literacy into various formal levels of educational attainments, a deplorable picture emerges altogether. As noted in the relevant table represented by the sample villages, almost 55 per cent of the population among the labour households have studied only up to elementary levels. The figure continues to decline as we move ahead on the educational ladder. Less than 15 per cent have studied up to secondary level, while less than 2 per cent have attended higher secondary. There are negligible proportions of population who are graduates and postgraduates. There are large numbers of villages across the rural spaces of Darjeeling Hills where we do not find graduates and postgraduates. Technical and professional education are yet to penetrate into the rural spaces of Darjeeling Hills. Further, a fairly noticeable gender gap still persists across many levels of educational attainment in the area. Such levels of educational attainment in the area deconstructs the very notion that Darjeeling Hills is one of the most educated geographical regions in the State of West Bengal, as highlighted by various mainstream studies.

4.3 Major Health Issues

Health is a dynamic situation that needs a considerable amount of time and expertise to capture its sundry aspects. This study does not go into the detail of health complexities characterising the area. It only navigates major diseases suffered by the members of labour households and their response in this connection.

Table 4.3 Health Problems and Response of the Labourers

Tea Estate	Health Problems in the Last One Year			Medical Advice Taken
	Total	Male	Female	Total
Ambiok	6.15	4.84	7.50	93.33
Teesta Valley	4.56	4.72	4.39	100.00
Peshok	6.73	8.33	5.22	100.00
Average	5.81	5.97	5.70	97.78

Almost 6 per cent of the total sample population suffered from one or the other health problems in the last one year with almost the same figure in case of both male and female. The highest proportion of population with health problems comes from Peshok with almost 8 per cent followed by Ambiok and Teesta Valley with 6 and over 5 per cent respectively. Peshok has over 8 per cent males and 5 per cent females with health problems in the last one year, while Teesta Valley has less than 5 per cent of both males and females with health

problems. In case of Ambik, about 5 per cent males and over 7 per cent females suffered health problems in the last one year.

About 98 per cent of the sufferers in the sample households consulted doctors or medicinal practitioners in this connection. Besides Ambik with 93 per cent in both Teesta Valley and Peshok, all the sufferers consulted the doctors or medicinal practitioners was done. Traditional ethno-spiritual faith healing is also prevalent in the area.

Table 4.4 Major Health Problems

Ambik	Teesta Valley	Peshok
Liver jaundice	Liver jaundice	Liver jaundice
Mental problems	Paralysis	Tuberculosis
Typhoid	Heart	Gastric
Paralysis	Gland TB	Malaria
Heart	Asthma	Sugar
Asthma	Heart	
Pressure	Pressure	
Stones		
Blindness		

Discussion

The issue of health in Darjeeling Hills has to be seen in the context of the geo-environmental set-up of the region. The geographical locations of the human habitations and the climatic constraints in the regions have a deep bearing on the overall health of the people in the region. To make the situation worse, irresponsibility of the health system with respect to the proper health planning in the region often exacerbates the conditions of health. Most of the villages located across the tea gardens and other rural spaces are devoid of proper health centres and medical facilities.

In case of health situations of labour households across the region's tea gardens it is the responsibility of the tea management. Tea companies and other legal custodians of the tea gardens are legally responsible to protect the health of the workers as per the Plantation Act 1951. Many of the health problems as listed in the relevant Table are the result of the improper health planning and medical facilities in the area. Although people across the garden villages are quite aware of the medical advice to be taken in recent times, poor accessibility of the health centres often proves to be costly. Moreover, many of the health benefits hitherto provided

to the workers have been withdrawn by the management on the pretext of falling production, productivity and market value of Darjeeling Tea in recent times:

4.4 Economic Conditions of the Labour Households

The economic conditions of the labour households have been assessed in the context of their activity pattern and available household assets. Other economic activities performed by the members of labour households who are not engaged in the labour activity of tea gardens have also been recorded in the study. The nature of economic activity varies among the functioning and abandoned tea gardens. Moreover, even across the functioning tea estates the villagers are not only engaged in the tea gardens but also practise other kinds of economic activities to supplement their livelihoods.

Functional Tea Gardens

Nature of Work

According to our primary investigation of sample labour households there are only about 32 per cent of the total members of the surveyed households that were engaged in the gardens either as regular or casual labourers³⁷. Out of the total sample male population only 30 per cent were engaged as garden labourers, while the figure comes to about 34 per cent in case of women. The proportion of garden labourers to total population of a particular tea garden varies across the tea estate as reflected by the sample tea gardens. As seen in the relevant Table below the proportion of garden labourers is considerably more in Ambik as compared to Teesta Valley. Again, there is a considerable difference between male/female labourers' participation in Ambik and Teesta Valley.

Over 11 per cent of the population were engaged in the household activity. Here the share of women is considerably high representing 19.5 per cent of the total women's population, while only 3.6 per cent of the males were engaged in household activity. Household activity refers mainly to the traditional domestic chores like cooking, fetching water, fuelwood, fodder, taking care of the children, siblings and senior citizens. They are often considered as non-economic in nature, although such a claim has been increasingly debated by scholars.

Over 7 per cent of the population is reported to be engaged in the agriculture and livestock activity. Agriculture and livestock go parallel in the region as the

³⁷ There are about 20 per cent of the total labourers in the studied tea gardens/estates who work as casual or *bigha* workers out of which 80 per cent consists of women workers.

villagers need organic manure to practise agriculture. The share of men in this connection comes to 9 per cent, while in case of women it is over 5 per cent. Across the gardens, however, we see variations in the level of agriculture activity as reflected by the sample gardens. The level of agricultural involvement in Ambik is relatively lower than in Teesta Valley.

There are some people across the gardens who are involved in private work. Although this is a recent phenomenon in the region, it is, nevertheless, rising with time in view of the frequent closure and lockup syndrome of the gardens. As reflected by the sample villages, such engagement is mainly sought by the qualified male members of the family. In our context, private workers mainly refer to those individuals who are teaching in private schools, working in small firms, giving tuitions, etc.

About 6 per cent of the total male sample populations are engaged in other work and surprisingly none of the women are engaged in this category. This category includes those people that work outside their village mainly, in the army, or as security guards, etc., government servants; agriculture labourers; other labourers; and local politicians.

Students constitute 26.6 per cent of the total sample population in the area. Out of the total male population 27.4 per cent are students, while girl students share 25.6 per cent of the total female population. The figures vary across the tea villages as per their overall economy. As reflected by the sample villages, the proportion of the students is higher in the tea villages where the garden is doing relatively better.

There are over 7 per cent of the sample population reporting to be unemployed and looking for jobs. The unemployed males constitute 7.6 per cent of the total male population, while females account for 6.4 per cent of their total. The relatively sick Ambik has done comparatively badly in this connection accounting for over 9 per cent of its working age population unemployed, while the figure is less than 5 per cent in case of Teesta Valley. The proportion of unemployed population in the sample villages might be considerably higher than it is indicated here. All the workers besides garden labourers are reported to be looking for more lucrative jobs and they are engaged in agriculture, livestock, household chores, private works, and other forms of labour since they have no other economic options. They, however, do not identify themselves as unemployed. The total dependent population, including the unemployed youths, registers about 18 per cent of the total sample household population.

Out of the total male population 19.6 per cent are dependent, while the figure is reduced slightly to about 16 per cent in case of women. Ambik has a considerably higher proportion of dependent population as compared to Teesta Valley.

Daily Wages and Other Benefits to the Garden Labourers

The daily wage of labourers both in Ambik and Teesta Valley Tea Gardens has been upgraded from August 2005 to Rs. 48.40 from Rs. 45.90 prevalent earlier. This wage structure has been implemented across all the functioning tea gardens in the region. However, as per the agreement arrived after 22 days of labour strike in July 2005³⁸ across the State of West Bengal the revision was to be implemented from the month of April. The arrears of the labourers are still to be paid in this connection.

In case of Ambik, the labourers often face the problem of getting wages³⁹ paid in time and other legal benefits. The management, specifically, creates problems and starts bargaining with the labourers during the off season. Moreover, the management keeps circulating the information that they are facing a loss in the market. The management often bargains with the wages and benefits of the labourers on the strength of such information. Most of the benefits⁴⁰ traditionally entitled to the labourers have recently been stopped or curtailed drastically by the management. The management grants the ration to the labourers to the tune of 2 kgs of rice and 4 kgs of atta (wheat flour) and 250 grams tea per 15 days. Dependency that was granted to the tune of 1 kg of atta and 0.5 kgs of rice per head to the children of the labourers until they attain the age of 18 years have been stopped of late. Often, the quality of the foodgrains provided by the management is sub-standard in nature. Slippers/shoes, umbrellas, raincoats, blankets that were supplied annually to the labourers have all been stopped. Earlier the management used to supply 1 litre of kerosene per labourer every fifteen days, the amount has been reduced to 0.5 litres at present. Further, labour households used to get 320 kgs of firewood per annum, which has been totally stopped at present. In the context of the labourers' economic situation, Ambik Tea Estate has been hit very badly. Villagers feel that the life of the garden is thinkable in the near future. The garden was closed in 2003 for

³⁸ Refer to Section 1 for the information in this connection.

³⁹ According to the manager, there is no problem with respect to the payment of wages. The wages are given on time and that there are no dues left in this connection.

⁴⁰ The management says that all the traditional benefits hitherto given to the workers are still provided.

about 6 months as the factory caught fire. Discussion with the labourers highlights the fact that there has been some migration from the village in the last couple of years. Migration is mainly opted for by unemployed youth of the garden and not labourers. Sikkim is reportedly a safe haven in this connection. Besides other urban habitations of the district and metropolises of the country.

With respect to Teesta Valley, the labourers in Teesta Valley Tea Garden are relatively better off as compared to its Ambiok counterpart. Wages are, in the majority of cases, cleared in time and the associated benefits are still granted to the labourers, excluding a few of them. Most of the benefits traditionally entitled to the labourers are still given but the frequency, quality and quantity have changed in recent years. The management grants the ration to the labourers to the tune of 1 kg rice, 2.3 kgs *atta* per week⁴¹. Dependency is granted to the tune of 0.5 kgs rice, 0.7 kgs *atta* per week per child until s/he attains 18 years of age. Slippers/shoes (Rs. 49 per annum per labour), umbrellas, and raincoats are supplied to the labourers, while the supply of blankets has, reportedly, been stopped since the last four years. Further, 19 maunds fuelwood per year, 2 litres of kerosene per labour head per week, and 400 grams of tea every month are supplied to the labourers.

Table 4.5 Nature of Work Across the Tea Gardens

Tea Estate		Tea Labour	House Hold	Agril Live-stock	Pvt Work	Other Work	Student	Unem-ployed	Other Dependents	Total Dependents
Ambiok (Functioning)	Total	35.25	13.52	2.87	2.46	0.82	24.59	9.43	11.07	20.49
	Male	44.35	1.61	1.61	4.84	1.61	23.39	10.48	12.10	22.58
	Female	25.83	25.83	4.17	-	-	25.83	8.33	10.00	18.33
Teesta Valley (Functioning)	Total	28.22	9.13	11.62	2.49	4.98	28.63	4.56	10.37	14.94
	Male	15.75	5.51	16.54	4.72	5.45	31.50	4.72	11.81	16.54
	Female	42.11	13.16	6.14	-	-	25.44	4.39	8.77	13.16
Average	Total	31.73	11.33	7.24	2.47	2.90	26.61	7.00	10.72	17.71
	Male	30.05	3.56	9.07	4.78	5.53	27.44	7.60	11.95	19.56
	Female	33.97	19.50	5.15	0.00	-	25.64	6.36	9.39	15.75
Peshok (Abandoned)	Total	-	15.25	26.01	5.38	14.80	22.42	7.17	8.97	16.14
	Male	-	2.78	26.85	9.26	24.07	24.07	5.56	7.41	12.96
	Female	-	26.96	25.22	1.74	6.09	20.87	8.70	10.43	19.13

41 The ration is provided at a subsidised price of Rs 2 / kg for both rice and wheat, not free.

Table 4.6 Agriculture and Other Labourers in Peshok

Peshok (Abandoned) Tea Estate	Agriculture Labour	Other Labour
Total	9.87	2.24
Male	14.81	3.70
Female	5.22	0.87

Table 4.7 Entitlements to the Labourers: Ambiok Tea Garden

Category of Benefits	According to Management	According to Labourers	Remarks
Provident Fund	Yes	Yes	-
Diwali Bonus	Yes	Yes	8.33 per cent of annual income
Gratuity/Arrears	Yes	No	-
Medical	Yes	Yes	Maternity leave, minimum facilities in the dispensary, provides only ambulance with majority of other health benefits curtailed in recent times. Further, benefits are only valid to the regular workers not the casuals.
Rations	Yes	Yes	2 kgs rice, 4 kgs <i>atta</i> (wheat flour) per 15 days, no dependencies are granted
Firewood	Yes	No	Stopped
Kerosene	Yes	Yes	Earlier 3 litres per labour head in 15 days. It was later reduced to 1 litre, now only 0.5 litres are given.
Umbrellas	Yes	No	Stopped
Raincoats	Yes	No	Stopped
Slippers	Yes	No	Stopped
Blankets	Yes	No	Stopped
Tea	Yes	Yes	250 grams per labour head in 15 days

Table 4.8 Entitlements to the Labourers in Teesta Valley Tea Garden

Category of Benefits	According to Management	According to Labourers	Remarks
Provident Fund	Yes	Yes	-
Diwali Bonus	Yes	Yes	8.33 per cent of annual income
Gratuity/Arrears	Yes	No	-
Medical:	Yes	Yes	Maternity leave, minimum medicines, no ambulance, medical benefits granted only if a labourer sees the doctor in district hospital, Darjeeling. Further, benefits are only valid to the regular workers not the casuals.

Rations	Yes	Yes	1 kg rice, 2.3 kgs wheat and 0.5 kgs rice, 0.7 kgs oil per week as dependency per child until s/he attains 18 years
Firewood	Yes	Yes	19 maunds / year per labour (1 maund = 40 kgs = 760 kgs)
Kerosene	Yes	Yes	2 litres per labour head in a month.
Umbrellas	Yes	Yes	Supplied annually
Raincoats	Yes	Yes	Supplied only once in 3 years
Slippers/shoes	Yes	Yes	Rs 49/- granted to the labourer annually
Blankets	Yes	No	Stopped since the last four years
Tea	Yes	Yes	400 grams per labour head in a month

Abandoned Tea Gardens

Nature of Work

The nature of economic activity across the abandoned tea gardens deviated from what it used to be after the closure and subsequent abandonment of the gardens by the management. Over 26 per cent of the total sample populations in Peshok are engaged in agricultural and livestock activities out of which about 27 per cent is represented by men and 25 per cent women. About 10 per cent are engaged as agricultural labourers where 14.8 per cent are male and 5.2 per cent are shared by females. Labourers other than agricultural labourers constitute 2.2 per cent with about 3 per cent represented by males and 1 per cent by females in this category. There are 3 per cent of the male populations working in government offices on a regular basis with zero per cent share of females. There are 5.4 per cent who are doing some kind of private work, mainly teaching. Over 9 per cent of the males are engaged in private works, while only about 2 per cent females are there in this category.

There are 22.4 per cent students out of the total sample population. Male students represent 24 per cent of the male population, while the figure is about 21 per cent in case of girl students. Over 7 per cent of the sample population reported that they are unemployed out of which 5 per cent are males and 8.7 per cent females. The total dependent population including unemployed, minors and senior citizens comes to over 16 per cent of the total sample population in Peshok. The male share of the dependents is about 13 per cent, while it is over 19 per cent in case of females.

Box 4.1 The Story of Abandoned Garden Labourers in Peshok Tea Garden Village

The garden was in an utter crisis since the late 1960s. It closed down for the first time in 1969-1970 for 42 days. The workers suffered tremendous hardships during the period. Again it was locked up in 1972-73 and was reopened after two years. Many of the benefits including the wages of the labourers were not paid. There were many closing and reopening dramas during the second half of the 1970s, the whole of the 80s and early 90s. The garden was taken over by TTCL in 1984-85 from the private company owned by Mr. Ramdin only to make the situation worse. In 1993, the workers in a fit of anger burnt the factory and the medical centre and the garden has remained closed after that. The garden was finally declared abandoned in November 1995 by the Government of India. Nobody knows whether the garden will be reopened again in the near future. According to the villagers, the garden was closed because of inefficient management. The management did not clear wages and other legal benefits for several pending months. Gratuities of the retired labourers have also not been cleared. Labourers were not shocked⁴² but were disappointed when they learned that the garden was being abandoned indefinitely.

Mention should be made that over Rs. 5 crores concerning the wages of labourers has still been pending. Before it was abruptly declared abandoned in 1995, labourers had not been paid their wages and other legal benefits for over one year. They had been working without wages hoping that the payment would be made once the situation of the garden becomes better. However, to their utter disappointment, without even giving notice and making known to workers that the garden was being abandoned one fine morning in November 1995 the garden was declared abandoned.

After four years since the garden was declared abandoned, the Government of India started granting the labourers a pension of Rs. 500 per month with the interference of the Labour Court. The pension is to be granted until the abandoned labour attains the age of 57.5

⁴² As the closing and reopening had been continuing since the late 1960s.

years after which it is stopped. Many abandoned labourers who have already crossed the age limit feel that it is an unsound approach on the part of the government. It is after crossing the age of 60 years that they start becoming physically weak and need the monetary and other forms of support systems. But ironically the government stops the pension when they are in need of it. There were many labourers who were in their mid-fifties when the garden was abandoned and who could not avail themselves of the pension benefit for more than a few years.

There were no incidences of direct starvation deaths after the closure and abandonment of the garden. However, there was a famine and near-starvation situation (1996-97) for over six months after the garden was abandoned. This was the worst phase in the history of Peshok, the sufferers reflect. During the period a large number of working people migrated from the village to earn their livelihood. There were several cases of children who were malnourished in the village. Many children who fell sick during the period died due to the lack of financial resources of the labour parents to take them to hospital for treatment.

The labourers were not trained with any alternative livelihood skills before the garden was declared abandoned. Further, no voluntary organisation or non-governmental organisation offered to extend support to the left out labourers after the garden was abandoned. Many labourers migrated from the area to Sikkim, Orissa, Jharkhand, Bihar, Bangalore, Kolkata, Delhi, etc in search of a livelihood. They were mainly inducted as security guards, helpers/cooks in hotels, watchmen, etc. Several retrenched workers also migrated to neighbouring villages dependent on agriculture like Mangmaya basti and to the towns of Darjeeling and Kalimpong seeking employment. Many of them began practising agriculture along with their engagement in other forms of labour, while many others enlisted in the army.

The frequent closure and reopening drama of the garden during the 1970s, 80s and 90s made the workers somewhat cautious. They, in the meantime, began to supplement their income with other activities besides the benefits they occasionally got from the management. They took up agriculture, started cultivating oranges, cardamom, ginger, foodgrains, vegetables, etc on leftover garden land. Further, they also

began keeping livestock like cows, goats and pigs for emergency use. During the dire need of money they would sell the livestock and do what was necessary. Further, small-scale local poultry is practised across almost every rural hill household in Darjeeling irrespective of whether it is a tea garden or other ordinary villages. The village, however, has to sustain several natural problems. Agriculture cannot be practised properly because of wild animals like wild boar, deer, peacock/hens, *dumsi*, wild rabbits, etc in the area.

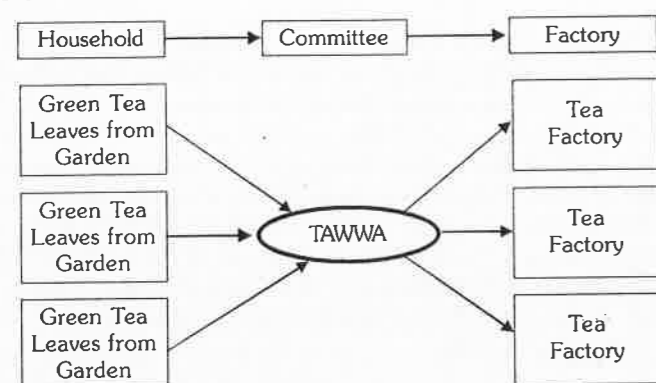
Managing the Tea Garden Through Informal Committees in Peshok

Today apart from practising agriculture and livestock the people of Peshok also maintain their garden. The former labourers have divided the garden into four major parts. The activity of the garden is under the control of four informal committees formed by the former labourers themselves. Each divided part of the garden is shared among the labour households residing in that part of the garden equitably. The households supply the green tea leaves to *tawwa* where the leaves are weighed and taken over by the committee after paying them.

The household garden produces about 10,000 kgs of green tea leaves per year. The price of the green tea leaves at the village level is decided by the respective committees. Talk with the labourers enlightened us about the price variance across the seasons. The first plucking season tentatively corresponding to the period during late February and July fetch the labourer Rs. 22 per kilo of green tea leaves at *tawwa*. The second plucking season roughly corresponding to August-early November fetches a slightly lower amount of Rs. 14 per kilo of green tea leaves. After the green tea leaves are weighed and lifted by the committees, they are supplied to garden factory (ies)⁴³ as per the negotiations. The committees keep some profit and sell the leaves. According to the information, during the former season Rs. 27 per kilo is charged and Rs 18 during the latter season. This was, however, the rate at the time of the primary survey of this study during the month of October 2005. It varies with time and the market situation.

⁴³ The committees supply green tea leaves to the factories of other functional tea estates. The factories may vary periodically as the committee supplies to those factories that provide them competitive prices.

Figure 4.1 Management of Peshok Tea Garden by the Abandoned Labourers



Household Assets

Cows, goats and pigs constitute the main livestock and important assets in the area. Traditionally livestock has been kept at subsistence level but more recently they are also used as economic assets. About 57 per cent of the labour households keep livestock in Ambik Tea Garden, while the figures are 74.5 per cent and about 58 per cent for Teesta Valley and Peshok respectively. The average livestock per household comes to less than one in all the villages.

Table 4.9 Household Assets

Tea Estate	Livestock	Vehicles	Television	Bank Account
Ambik	56.9	3.9	19.6	33.3
Teesta Valley	74.5	0.0	49.0	45.1
Peshok	57.8	2.2	40.0	37.8
Average	63.1	2.0	36.2	38.7

Table 4.10 Average Livestock per Household

Tea Estate	Cows	Goats	Pigs
Ambik	0.9	0.8	0.1
Teesta Valley	0.7	0.2	0.4
Peshok	0.5	0.7	0.4
Average	0.7	0.6	0.3

Only 4 per cent of the total labour households possess vehicles in Ambik, while about 20 per cent have televisions in their houses. In Teesta Valley, none of the sample households have vehicles, while 49 per cent have televisions in their houses. In case of Peshok, over 2 per cent of the households have vehicles and 36 per cent possess televisions. There are only 33 per cent of labour households that maintain their bank accounts in Ambik, while in the case of Teesta Valley and Peshok it is 45 per cent and about 38 per cent respectively.

Average 4.11 Income and Expenditure (Rs.)

Tea Estate	Average Monthly Income	Average Monthly Expenditure
Ambik	2076	1371
Teesta Valley	2448	1439
Peshok	2227	1387
Average	2250	1399

The average monthly income of the sample labour households in Ambik amounts to just over Rs. 2000, while the average monthly expenditure touches Rs. 1371 leaving less than Rs. 700 to be saved. The average monthly income in Teesta Valley is Rs. 2448 and the average monthly expenditure touches Rs. 1439 leaving Rs. 1009 to be saved. In Peshok the average monthly income of the sample labour households is Rs. 2227 and the average monthly expenditure touches Rs. 1387 leaving Rs. 840 to be saved.

Discussion

The economic activity and the nature of work across the tea gardens in Darjeeling Hills have been gradually diversifying with time. This is to a large extent a result of the deteriorating situation of tea gardens, the rising population and their economic aspirations. The fact that a major chunk of the garden populations are outside the economic responsibility of the tea management demands that the garden population opt for some other economic pastures. Further, even the garden workers who are directly engaged with the gardens are not quite satisfied with the meagre economic benefits provided to them. To make the situation worse many of the traditional socio-economic benefits given to the garden labourers have been withdrawn by the tea managements in recent times under the pretext of

the tea industry's ill health. Most of the garden labourers are not satisfied with the prevailing wage structure and want a serious revision of the same in the context of the prevailing market rate⁴⁴.

The closed gardens that were subsequently abandoned by the managements had to pass through difficult situations and economic hardships. Although, there were no reports of starvation deaths or suicide cases, there were copious instances when the labour households experienced a near starvation situation. Gradually, however, the abandoned labourers learned to adapt to the situation and sought other alternative livelihood patterns. Agriculture and allied activity including livestock, agriculture labour, and other forms of economic activities became the backbone of their economy. Further, in case of Peshok the abandoned garden labourers also maintain their garden through informal committees and hence supplement their livelihood.

In fact, there are three to five tea gardens in the region that are always closed/locked up at a given point of time. These gardens are different from the abandoned gardens as they begin functioning after sometime. It is not that the same garden keeps closing and opening repeatedly. Any tea estate may be locked up at any point of time if the management feels that the garden needs to be locked up. According to the trade union leaders, "the management of a particular tea garden/estate does this simply to pressurise the workers to work and not bargain. This is one of the cruel techniques of the management to control the garden labourers from raising their rightful voice." This frequent closure/lock up syndrome of the tea estates is a very serious concern in the context of the socio-economic health of the garden labourers. While the gardens are locked up the labourers are reportedly not paid their wages and the associated entitlements are not given.

Livestock constitutes the major household asset across the villages. Ownership of vehicles including two wheelers is a rare phenomenon across the rural spaces of the region. In recent times, television is gradually penetrating rural Darjeeling Hills. Tea garden villages are not exceptions in this respect, but the proportion of the households having television varies from village to village depending on the economic health of the village. This also applies to the maintenance of bank accounts. The average income of the households across the garden villages are not very impressive with a major chunk shared by household expenditure, leaving a reasonably reduced amount for saving.

⁴⁴ The management feels that labourers keep demanding more wages and benefits which is beyond the capacity of the management to provide.

4.5 Housing and Sanitation Situation

Housing

Over 27 per cent of the houses among the surveyed labour households are *kutcha* in nature. About 59 per cent of the houses are *semi-pucca* and only 6 per cent are *pucca*. Across the sample villages the figures are as follows: there are 39 per cent *kutcha* houses in Ambiok, about 14 per cent in Teesta Valley and 29 per cent in Peshok Tea Garden. With respect to *semi-pucca* houses the figures are about 59 per cent in Ambiok, over 80 per cent in Teesta Valley and 60 per cent in Peshok. There are only 2 per cent of the sample households with *pucca* houses in Ambiok, 6 per cent in Teesta Valley and 11 per cent in Peshok. According to the tea garden labourers of Ambiok and Teesta Valley, the management has totally stopped constructing new houses or repairing the old houses for the last couple of years.

Table 4.12 Nature of House

Tea Estate	Kutcha	Pucca	Semi-Pucca
Ambiok	39.2	2.0	58.8
Teesta Valley	13.7	5.9	80.4
Peshok	28.9	11.1	60.0
Average	27.3	6.3	66.4

Sanitation

Considerable proportions of the labour households do not have toilet/latrine facilities and still use open fields for defecation in Darjeeling Hills. Such a situation leads to numerous health complexities. Worm infestation is one such case. The proportion of households practising open field defecation in tea gardens under study comes to 26 per cent, while 74 per cent of the labour households do possess toilets either locally made or an eastern type of latrine. Across the tea garden villages, Ambiok has the figure of over 29 per cent, Teesta Valley about 18 per cent and Peshok 31 per cent⁴⁵ practising open field defecation.

⁴⁵ Peshok, although an abandoned tea garden has done relatively better in recent times as compared to many functional tea estates in the context of economic conditions of the garden labourers. Peshok, however, shares a good proportion of households practising open field defecation. This is to a large extent because of the location of the village near a dense reserved forest and partly due to the people's economic conditions.

Table 4.13 Basic Sanitation

Tea Estate	Open Field Defecation	Eastern/Local Latrine
Ambiok	29.4	70.6
Teesta Valley	17.6	82.4
Peshok	31.1	68.9
Average	26.0	74.0

Domestic and Drinking Water

Natural springs serve as a major source of domestic and drinking water across the hill villages. This is reflected by the sample tea garden villages in Darjeeling Hills. The average figure for those labour households dependent entirely on natural springs is 59 per cent, while those availing themselves of tap water comes to 41 per cent only. This proportion varies across the studied villages depending upon the availability, proximity and economic health of the labour households. In Ambiok about 59 per cent of the labour households directly depend on natural springs for domestic and drinking purposes. While in the case of Teesta Valley the figure is a massive 96 per cent directly depending on natural springs. There are about 41 per cent of the households in Ambiok and only about 4 per cent in Teesta Valley availing themselves of tap water which is brought to the houses through private pipelines by the labourers themselves. The management has not attempted any water provision to the labour households so far, not to mention safe drinking water.

In case of Peshok over 22 per cent of the abandoned labour households depend directly on natural springs with about 78 per cent availing themselves of tap water facility. Mention should however be made here that in Peshok, in most of the cases, tap water is provided by the Forest Department after charging a sum of Rs. 20 every month. The labourers have to walk a considerable distance to collect tap water from a common location. Water brought to the houses through private pipelines by labourers is quite rare.

Table 4.14 Sources of Drinking Water and Fuel

Tea Estate	Sources of Drinking Water			Sources of Fuel		
	Tap	Spring	Fuel-wood	Fuelwood and Kerosene	Fuelwood and Gas	Fuelwood, Kerosene and Gas
Ambiok	41.2	58.8	88.2	11.8	-	-
Teesta Valley	3.9	96.1	31.4	39.2	19.6	9.8
Peshok	77.7	22.2	71.1	20.0	8.9	-
Average	40.9	59.0	63.6	23.7	14.3	-

There are 45 per cent of the labour households that walk between 0-0.5 kms, over 29 per cent that travel 0.5-1 kms and about 25 per cent that travel more than 1 km to fetch water for both domestic and drinking purposes. In case of Ambiok, about 53 per cent of the labour households bring water from a distance of 0-0.5 kms, while more than 27 per cent have to travel between 0.5-1 km for the same. There are about 19 per cent of the labour households that travel more than one kilometre to fetch water in Ambiok Tea Garden. In Teesta Valley there are over 35 per cent of the labour households that bring water from a distance of 0-0.5 kilometres, while more than 29 per cent have to travel between 0.5-1 kilometres for water. Over 36 per cent of the labour households walk more than 1 km to fetch water in Teesta Valley. In case of Peshok about 47 per cent of the labour households bring water from a distance of 0-0.5 kms and more than 31 per cent have to travel between 0.5-1 kilometres for water. There are 22 per cent of the labour households that travel more than 1 km to fetch water in Peshok.

Sources of Fuel

Firewood still happens to be the most important source of fuel across the tea gardens followed by kerosene. While fuelwood is used for cooking purposes, kerosene is mainly used for the lighting of houses during the night where there is no electricity. It is also used for cooking in many cases. In recent times, LPG is slowly making its way into the rural areas of Darjeeling Hills. Tea gardens cannot be an exception. On an average, about 64 per cent of the tea garden labour households still use firewood as the only source of fuel. There are about 24 per cent of households that use both fuelwood and kerosene, while only 14 per cent use all the fuelwood, kerosene and gas.

Table 4.15 Distance of the Source

Tea Estate	Distance of the Source (Water)				Distance of the Source (Fuelwood)			
	0-0.5 kms	0.5-1 kms	1-2 kms	> 2 kms	0-0.5 kms	0.5-1 kms	1-2 kms	> 2 kms
Ambiok	52.9	27.5	13.7	5.9	17.6	29.4	2.0	51.0
Teesta Valley	35.3	29.4	17.6	17.7	25.5	15.7	3.9	54.9
Peshok	46.7	31.1	2.2	20.0	17.8	48.9	4.4	28.9
Average	45.0	29.3	11.2	14.5	20.3	31.3	3.4	44.9

Across the tea garden villages, over 88 per cent of the households in Ambiok depend solely on fuelwood, while about 12 per cent of the labour households

use both fuelwood and kerosene for cooking purposes. Amblok does not have electricity and kerosene is the only source of lighting the houses followed by candles. About 18 per cent of the households travel 0-0.5 kilometres to fetch fuelwood, while 29 per cent walk between 0.5-1 km for wood. A large proportion, consisting of 53 per cent labour households, travel more than 1 kilometre to fetch fuelwood. For kerosene, there is a PDS shop in the village from where it is bought by the labourers.

In Teesta Valley only over 31 per cent households solely depend on firewood. More than 39 per cent of the households are dependent both on fuelwood and kerosene, while about 20 per cent use fuelwood, and LPG and about 10 per cent use a combination of all three. More than 25 per cent of the households travel 0-0.5 kilometres to fetch their fuelwood, while about 16 per cent walk between 0.5-1 kilometres for the same. A major chunk, consisting of about 59 per cent labour households, travel more than 1 kilometre to fetch fuelwood.

The situation with respect to the sources of fuel in Peshok is somewhat the same as in Teesta Valley, in spite of the fact that it is an abandoned garden. In this connection, 71 per cent of the sample households use fuelwood for cooking, while 20 per cent use both fuelwood and kerosene. About 9 per cent of the households also use a combination of fuelwood, kerosene and LPG for the purpose. There are 20 per cent of the households who travel 0-0.5 kilometres to fetch fuelwood, while about 49 per cent walk between 0.5-1 kilometres for the wood. Over 33 per cent labour households, travel more than 1 kilometre to fetch fuelwood.

Discussion

A large proportion of the garden labourers still reside in *kutchha* and semi-pucca houses. Open field defecation is still widely practised in the area making the labourers vulnerable to numerous health complexities, notably worm infestation. The situation is similar with regard to safe drinking water and clean fuel. Most of the labour households still depend directly on natural springs as there is no provision for domestic and drinking water. Further, firewood still remains the only major source of fuel in the area. Traditionally, the garden management used to provide subsidised firewood and kerosene to the garden labourers. This facility has, however, been stopped in many of the tea gardens, while in many gardens the quantity has drastically been reduced. The labourers, particularly women, have to walk a considerable distance to fetch water and fuelwood. The gradual degradation of rural ecology has increased the burden

as the labourers have to travel a greater distance in this connection and the situation is worsening with time.

The management often violates the principle of adequate and decent housing and sanitation outlined in the Plantation Act 1951 to the labourers under the pretext of one or other reasons. Further, the Act itself has become outdated in the recent context and needs a thorough revision.

Demands of the Labourers

Amblok Tea Garden (very sick)	Teesta Valley Tea Garden (sick)	Peshok Tea Garden (abandoned)
<p>1. Daily wage should be increased to Rs. 80; Diwali bonus needs to be revised; gratuity needs to be granted in time; arrears need to be cleared immediately.</p> <p>2. Medical facilities need to be improved drastically.</p> <p>3. They require good quality rations; provision of safe drinking water; proper footpaths across the garden; adequate fuelwood; proper housing, house repair, and toilets in every house; and supply of electricity in every household of the village.</p> <p>4. The management should start welfare programmes for the labourers.</p>	<p>1. Wages and other benefits need to be increased; the company should pay a package of Rs. 3000 to the labourers besides the benefits; arrears need to be cleared immediately.</p> <p>2. Raincoats to be issued every year.</p> <p>3. Proper medical facilities should be ensured in the PHC of the garden; the PHC should have its own ambulance.</p> <p>4. The management should ensure proper housing, house repair and toilet facilities; safe drinking water needs to be provided by the management to all the labour households.</p> <p>5. The casual workers should not be debarred from the medical and other facilities granted to the regular workers.</p>	<p>1. All the pending benefits should be cleared immediately.</p> <p>2. The garden should be reopened, with more facilities than there were before the closure and abandonment of the garden.</p> <p>3. If the reopening of the garden is not possible, some other small-scale industries should be started in the area.</p>

Factors Behind Present Socio-Economic Situation Across the Tea Gardens in Darjeeling Hills

The overall health of the tea gardens in Darjeeling Hills and the associated socio-economic conditions of the resident tea garden labourers therein, as noted in the preceding sections of the paper, cannot be attributed to a single factor. A series of factors and counter factors have played their interlinked roles over the years in this connection. Some of the major contributing factors that have acted and reacted and ultimately paved the way to the present situation of Darjeeling Tea, tea gardens and the garden labourers are briefly listed below. There is a need to debate, discuss and conduct a more systematic research on these factors, often historic in nature, in order to understand the crux of the problems characterising Darjeeling Tea and the garden workers and address the same in the near future.

5.1 Globalisation and Liberalisation

Tea produced in the Darjeeling Hills is said to have special characteristics⁴⁶ and has for long been known to the trade and the public in India and abroad as Darjeeling Tea. Over the years it has acquired a high domestic and international reputation. Hence, any member of the trade or public in India or abroad ordering Darjeeling Tea or seeing tea advertised or offered for sale as Darjeeling Tea will expect the tea so ordered, advertised or offered for sale to be the tea cultivated, grown and produced in the Darjeeling Hills and having the aforesaid special characteristics.

In a liberalised world market almost 40 million kgs are sold as 'Darjeeling Tea' although the total production of Darjeeling Tea is less than 10 million kgs. Most of these teas come from Sri Lanka and Kenya. Some of the fake tea is called Lanka Darjeeling or Hamburg Darjeeling but most of the time it is called Pure Darjeeling⁴⁷. Further, Japan, a largely orthodox tea-growing area, has already discovered the chemical constituents present in the Darjeeling variety, though industry watchers

⁴⁶ Due to the unique and complex combination of agro-climatic conditions prevailing in the region such tea has a distinctive and naturally occurring quality and flavour which has won the patronage and recognition of discerning consumers all over the world (Tea Board of India).

⁴⁷ www.darjeelingnews.net

say that this will not enable them to grow the true Darjeeling variety. Such a situation has led to deterioration of the international reputation of Darjeeling Tea in recent times. There have been cases when pure Darjeeling Tea has not found its place in the international market for fear of fake supply. This has surely impacted the Tea Companies and the Tea Garden Workers in the region.

In an effort to stop this market and sustain its Intellectual Property Rights, the Darjeeling logo⁴⁸ was created as early as in 1983⁴⁹ and registered in UK, USA, Canada, Japan, Egypt and under Madrid, covering eight countries. Further a Certification Trade Mark Scheme for Darjeeling Tea was launched in 2000 in view of several complaints coming from across the world with regard to fake Darjeeling Tea supplied in the international market and its long-term impact back home. However, Darjeeling Tea is still not recognised by WTO as a Geographical Indicator. Article 23 of TRIPS gives good protection to wines and spirits currently (as in July 2004), but not for other products⁵⁰.

In the meantime, we have no other options but to protect Darjeeling Tea through the Darjeeling logo and Certification Mark. We, however, need to keep debating on the protection of Darjeeling Tea in the liberalised global market and seek to negotiate its place at the WTO meetings. The point is not only to protect Darjeeling Tea but the workers that are engaged in its production as well.

5.2 Age of the Tea Bushes

As highlighted in the preceding sections the age of the tea bushes has been the major cause of concern across the tea gardens of the country. Tea gardens in Darjeeling Hills occupy the foremost position in this connection as most of the tea bushes are over 100 years old. Consultation with the labourers, tea experts and trade union leaders bring forth the following measures that the tea companies/governments need to take in the near future to save Darjeeling Tea and the socio-economic health of garden workers.

⁴⁸ The Darjeeling logo is a property of the Tea Board of India. It is a symbol that verifies that the packet / caddy, etc contains 100 per cent pure Darjeeling, unblended with teas from any other growth.

⁴⁹ However, in 1998, World Wide Watch agency Compu Mark was appointed to monitor conflicting marks. Instances of attempted registration were found, some of which were challenged through opposition and cancellations and sometimes negotiations. Of the 15 instances, 5 have been successfully concluded in countries such as Japan, Sri Lanka, Russia, etc. Six oppositions were unsuccessful and 4 are still pending decision. Use by BULGARI, Switzerland of the legend "Darjeeling Tea fragrance for men" agreed to be withdrawn pursuant to legal notice and negotiations.

⁵⁰ *Trade & Environment Database (TED) Journal, Intellectual Property Rights of Darjeeling Tea in the Age of Globalisation and World Trade*, Number 752, American University, July 2004,

- All the old tea bushes need to be uprooted in a phased manner and replantation needs to be carried out.
- All the tea gardens need to practise bio-organic farming in the long run so as to attract the buyers with a healthy, chemical free Darjeeling Tea. This is also important in view of safeguarding the health of the workers and their family members, regional environment and the prevailing sanitary and phyto-sanitary standards under WTO.
- Promote and encourage the 'Small Organic Tea Growers' across the villages in order to supplement the falling production of tea and generate sustainable income among the garden workers.

There have been repeated suggestions from the trade unions, researchers, tea experts, Tea Board of India and others to replant the old tea bushes in Darjeeling Hills. However, tea companies have over the years turned a deaf ear to this grave issue for fear of losing their profit. Replantation of tea bushes is a tedious job. Further, once an old tea bush is replanted it takes at least five years to reach a stage when green tea leaves can be plucked. It is this gap of five years that the tea companies fear most, as they do not get money for a period of five years but have to pay their workers and invest a huge amount in the replantation venture.

5.3 The Issue of Multiplication

The problem of 'multiplication' is a serious concern across all the tea gardens located in Darjeeling Hills. The term multiplication refers to the ever increasing number of population in tea gardens. As noted earlier, workers across the tea gardens are mainly migrant labourers from Nepal. Initially, they were encouraged by the British to come over to the area in order to bring to term the virgin forested lands often steep in nature and physically challenging. However, in later years there were lots of push factors from Nepal and pull factors from their Indian counterparts. Hence, over the years the population across the tea estates grew geometrically. One of the major concerns with respect to increasing chaos across the tea gardens is that there has been no provision to send back the retired labourers from the gardens and those households that are not working in the garden.

On the other hand, the area under tea gardens has, however, remained constant or increase very gradually over the years. The management has little or no

interest to provide alternative livelihood strategies to over 60 per cent of the population who do not work in the tea gardens but only reside there. The growing population across the tea gardens in Darjeeling Hills has inflicted a tremendous pressure on the society, economy and rural ecology in the region.

5.4 Monoculture and Exhaustion of Soil Nutrients

Another important issue that has directly affected the production and yield of tea leaves and has a bearing on the overall socio-economic health of the workers of the gardens has been the monoculture and the subsequent exhaustion of soil nutrients. Tea experts believe the soils in plantation areas are depleted of nutrients and we cannot have healthy tea bushes on sick soil. This is the result of the monoculture of tea plantations over a considerably long period of time of over 100 years. Monoculture has also seriously affected the bio-diversity of Darjeeling Hills. It has progressively weakened the genetic strength of tea bushes and other associated plants.

The complexity of raising yield essentially lies in the soil. All plantation soils are depleted of minerals and nutrients. Re-mineralisation is not easy or very expensive either but it requires a scientific approach. It is not merely the presence of N, P, K, etc but we also need manganese, magnesium, boron, selenium, cobalt, and zinc trace minerals to re-mineralise the soil. Further, we need pesticides to protect the tea bushes from the pests that attack plantations just as a sick human body needs antibiotics.

5.5 Impact of Gorkhaland Agitation

The movement unleashed by the Nepali-speaking inhabitants of Darjeeling Hills under the leadership of Subash Ghising for the separate State of Gorkhaland shook the State of West Bengal in the 1980s. The present socio-economic situation across the tea plantations and other areas of Darjeeling has many traces of the Gorkhaland agitation. The impact of the Gorkhaland agitation in the context of the tea gardens and the socio-economic health of the garden labourers can be debated at two levels.

First, all the tea gardens hitherto functioning normally were negatively impacted by the agitation often violent in nature. There were several instances when the top management officials, managers of the gardens/estates, owners of the tea gardens fled never to return. As a result, management of the tea gardens in Darjeeling suffered acutely, so much so that it could never achieve its pre-agitation level. The same was true of the gardens owned by the state or central government agencies.

Secondly, the impact of agitation on the work culture of the garden labourers has been tremendous. Although this part of the story has never been highlighted it becomes pertinent to debate on this issue in order to understand the crux of the present socio-economic conditions of the garden labourers in the region. Traditionally, garden labourers have been known for their hard work, punctuality, sincerity, work efficiency and respect for the management principles. The Gorkha Land Agitation severely eroded such culture and gave way to the culture of violence and disrespect to the management among the labourers. There are ample instances when the labourers have sought violence, thrashed the managers, and not adhered to the principle of the management in the region in the post-agitation period. Today a typical garden labourer would not hesitate to enter the manager's chamber and thrash him severely if he is dissatisfied with the workings of the management instead of settling his grievances through legal channels.

5.6 Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) and Darjeeling Tea Industry

DGHC has been the director and guardian of development initiatives in Darjeeling Hills since its establishment in July 1988. Ironically, however, out of the three important Ts⁵¹, for which Darjeeling is famous for, tea and timber (forest) are not under the direct control of DGHC thus leaving only tourism under its fold. In case of forests, management of protected forests and unclassified forests are within the executive power of DGHC, while reserved forests are under the direct control of the state's forest department. With regard to tea, tea estates are mainly controlled by private companies under the umbrella of the government and a few are under the direct control of the state and central government agencies. Such a situation leaves DGHC with very little or no scope to play a role in monitoring and directing the functioning and management of the tea gardens.

5.7 The Plantation Labour Act, 1951

The Plantation Labour Act, 1951 is a Central Government Act. It was formulated with a view to improve the living and working conditions of the workers and the associated people across the gardens. The preamble to this Act aims at providing for the welfare of labour and regulating the conditions of work in plantations. The Government of West Bengal framed rules in 1956 to implement the provisions of this Act.

⁵¹ Tea, Tourism, and Timber (forest).

This Act, however, is featured with several pitfalls. Empirical evidence highlights the fact that most of the provisions under the act are virtually violated and flouted by the management and there is no room to punish the culprit. For instance, only the permanent workers (that constitute less than 30 per cent of the population of the garden) are privileged to avail themselves of the benefits like housing, drinking water, children's education, health facilities, subsidised rations, clothing, PF and such other benefits as per the Plantation Act. However, the gardens have very little or no provisions for drinking water facilities, housing, latrines, medical provisions, electricity and education even to the permanent workers not to mention the casuals. Further, according to the Act, the management must build a permanent house for 8 per cent of the permanent workers every year and gradually sort out their housing problems. Most of the tea gardens are still, however, faced with severe housing problems where labourers live in *kutch*a and semi-pucca houses with zero sanitary facilities.

The Act, moreover, needs a thorough revision in the context of new market complexities and emerging socio-political behaviour. According to the Labour Commissioner, Darjeeling, this Act has become outdated and does not contribute to the welfare of garden labourers. For instance, if a labourer complains to the Labour Commissioner's office that the management has not provided him or her with the latrine and if the notification is issued to the management in this regard the management would prefer to pay a fine of Rs. 500 instead of constructing a new latrine for the complaining labourer in the stipulated time. The point is, there is a provision in the Act that if a labourer complains to the Labour Commissioner's office in the above context a notification is issued by the office to a particular garden management either to construct a new latrine within a stipulated time period or pay a fine of Rs. 500 in lieu of that. Since, paying the fine of Rs. 500 is much cheaper to the management it opts for it depriving the labour. There are many such temporal issues that the Act carries with it that have not been corrected across the spectrum of time.

5.8 The Colonial Set-up

Tea gardens, and for that matter all the plantations, still operate in the context of the old colonial relationship of masters and the slaves. The basic philosophy is to control the market and totally squeeze the primary producer. As indicated earlier, a feature of the early development of the tea plantation system of Darjeeling was the importation of the labour force from outside the region. This imported labour force was settled on plantation lands and permanency of

employment was almost by definition. The spaces in the plantation were meticulously charted by a hierarchy of master-subject personages. Such a set-up ensured that the socio-economic needs of the resident garden society were the responsibility of the plantation systems. Moreover, 80 per cent of the garden managers are constituted by outsiders and all the garden owners are outsiders that have further strengthened the master-slave relationship over the years.

5.9 Dependency Syndrome

The master-slave relationship with the passage of time developed a dependent mind-set into the psyche of the resident garden labourers. Workers across the tea gardens began to increasingly depend on the management for everything. They would get their salary⁵² every Friday irrespective of how they performed. Moreover, tea managements on their part never introduced any alternative livelihood strategies to the garden labourers in order to cope with the possible livelihood threats inflicted by various internal and external forces in future times. As a result, with the gradual onset of globalisation and liberalisation and the accompanying market challenges and other associated forces, garden labourers were the major sufferers, while the owners of tea companies and their top officials secretly bypassed the negative impacts on labourers through manipulations. Hence, tea gardens closed/abandoned, companies abandoned and the socio-economic situations of the garden labourers went from bad to worse but the owners and upper level officials never suffered; they were rich and are still rich.

With the consequent sickness and closure/abandonment of the gardens the dependency cushion that the plantation system provided them all these years was suddenly withdrawn. For the first time in their lives, the resident garden workers were left to fend for themselves. They were not prepared to face the new situation in which they were thrown into. It demanded an independent decision-making mind-set and newer skills that would allow them to take control of their destiny. Unfortunately their mind-sets were still in a dependency mode and this created havoc with their way of life, creating massive socio-economic problems in all walks of life and famine swept through many of the tea garden societies⁵³.

⁵² Some money, however, was deducted if the minimum threshold was not met.

⁵³ Oral Testimony from Darjeeling, West Bengal, India. Collected by Neel Kamal Chettri. <http://www.panossouthasia.org/resources/publications/env4all/annex.pdf>

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Mr. Vimal Khawas, Associate Fellow, Council for Social Development and Doctoral Student, Political Geography Division, Centre for International Politics, Organisation and Disarmament, School of International Studies, JNU, New Delhi, has been trained as a geographer with specialisation in agriculture geography at Post Graduate level from the Centre for the Study of Regional Development, JNU, New Delhi. He is also professionally trained as a development planner with specialisation in Urban and Regional Planning and Development from the School of Planning, Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology, Ahmedabad, Gujarat.

Mr. Khawas has worked in the area of agriculture development (with special emphasis on the role of women); watershed management; human development/ security; environment and associated resource bases; and urban, rural, and regional development issues. He is a member of the Global Mountain Forum and a regular contributor to the international debates, discourses and e-conferences of mountain development issues across the globe with particular emphasis on Indian Himalayas. He has contributed research and popular articles to national journals, magazines, web sites, and news dailies besides editing both research and popular write-ups. He was a managing editor of *Hills and Mountain Today*, a bimonthly journal published by Hills and Mountain Forum (HMF), New Delhi and currently is a member of the editorial committee of *Social Change*, a peer reviewed multidisciplinary quarterly journal published by the Council for Social Development from New Delhi. Vimal Khawas has a special inclination to work on issues pertaining to environment and development dynamics of Indian Himalayas.