

The legacy of Darjeeling Tea and the upcoming Challenges: A Comprehensive Study between Two Tea Gardens one closed and one open Tea Gardens in Darjeeling Hills

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Abstract

Tea is a very important and essential plantation crop in India. Bulk of the rural s in India is directly or indirectly associated with tea. According to D. Mitra in the year 2010, more than two million people earn their livelihood from ancillary activities associated with production, value addition and marketing of tea.” However, due to the rising competition in the world tea market, India has to face a major problem in Tea industry recently. On the basis of the above theoretical framework the present study is an attempt to examine and analyse the socio-economic conditions of the two old tea gardens of Darjeeling Hills. Both primary and secondary data have been used to complete the study.

Key Words: Tea Plantation, Socio-Economic Condition, Rural Livelihood, Discontentment, Capitalist Production

Introduction

Tea is a very important and essential plantation crop in India. Bulk of the population in India starts their day with the sip of tea. It has been widely consumed in every parts of the country. “It provides direct employment to more than a million people that too in remote and backward areas where almost no other economic activities exist. Besides, more than two million people earn their livelihood from ancillary activities associated with production, value addition and marketing of tea.” (Mitra, 2010). However, due to the rising competition in the world tea market, India has to face a major problem in Tea industry recently. Tea, in India is going towards downward trend. The demand is reducing and the prices have been falling worldwide because of an oversupply in production. Accordingly, world market prices of tea have been declined but the cost of production has increased steadily. It has also been observed that the growing competition from African countries and Sri Lanka together with the declining per capita consumption in Europe has contributed to the decline of Indian tea market. The international price decline and issues such as decreasing exports, sluggish rate of growth of domestic demand and higher cost of production have crippled the socio economic structure and have shaken the very foundation of the Indian tea industry. The impact of this crisis was massively felt in the tea garden areas of the district of Darjeeling in North Bengal. According to Dr. Vimal Khawas the important issues and problems faced by these tea gardens are 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 WTO regime, competition from the tea coming from Nepal, Sri Lanka and African countries.

Darjeeling brief Outlook

Ensnconced in the lap of the Mighty Kanchenjunga, Darjeeling district consists of four subdivisions, i.e. Sadar Darjeeling, Kalimpong subdivision (now district), Kurseong subdivision and Siliguri Sadar. Darjeeling including Kalimpong and Kurseong formed as Darjeeling Himalaya, whereas Siliguri is often regarded as the Terai and foothills of the district of Darjeeling Himalaya. It is well evident that Darjeeling is globally famous for tourism and for tea. It is further imperative to state that the finest tea produced in India is cultivated in Darjeeling Himalaya. The unique quality and flavour of Darjeeling Tea has won the most coveted place all over the world.

Labour Conditions in Tea Gardens of Darjeeling Hills

The tea gardens started by the Britishers and nourished and developed with the sweat and blood of the indigenous people still stands as the only industry in Darjeeling. According to Dr. Vimal Khawas, an academician from Darjeeling Hills “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”. It is estimated that more than twenty five per cent of the total population of the tea garden are directly or indirectly associated with tea gardens for their livelihood. Among the total workforce, “the percentage of female is higher than the male. Sixty per cent of women are engaged in tea gardens and the employment is on a family basis.” (Bomjan, D.S. 2008). From last so many decades, they are engaged for looking after and maintaining the tea bushes and also for producing the much-sought tea in the world market. Many of them belong to the third or fourth generation workers and the employment has traditionally been passed on from parent to child. In every Tea Garden people employ on permanent basis while during the peak season of plucking of tea some are engaged as seasonal labourers which lasts from March to November. These seasonal labourers are employed only for certain period depending on the quantity of tea. These seasonal labourers are given their wages on the basis of the quantity of leaves plucked by them in a day. These workers are largely dependent on the plantation management for their basic needs like food, water, shelter; and also education, health and sanitation.

These workers are paid very nominally for eight hours work. As per the agreement held in July 2005 between the Government of West Bengal, the owners of the Tea Estates and the representatives of workers, It has been stated that the labourers should be provided with free accommodation, subsidised cereal ration, free medical benefits. Moreover, as per the Labour Act it is necessary for each skilled labour to get Rs. 206 per day for maintaining and running their family. However, in reality the labourers are far away from all these benefits. Hence the tea garden labourers are exploited from all possible ways. There is an urgent need of legislation and enactment to protect the interest and right of the workers. Apart from that the employees of the tea gardens of Darjeeling Hills are being deprived of the benefit of the hill compensatory allowances. Similarly, their needs and requirements has become a subject of easy neglect. These Tea Gardens of Darjeeling Hills are the sole industry surviving more than one and half century. The age of the most tea bushes are within the range of century or more than century.

Introduction of the Tea Estates

The selected tea estates are Dhootriah Tea Estate and Pussimbang Tea Estate.

Dhootriah Tea Estate- An Orthodox Tea

Dhootriah Tea Estate is one of the oldest tea gardens in the district of Darjeeling. It was started perhaps in 1859 by the Britishers. This Tea Garden covers around 444 hectares of area. It is one of the largest tea estates comprising itself with other four tea gardens such as Balasun Tea Garden, Samrick Tea Garden and Miling Tea Garden and Tongsong Tea Garden.

The village is connects with Darjeeling town and other places of the district through its metal road. The village has electricity supply. All the tea gardens adjoining with this tea garden enjoy the electricity supply. But this Dhootriah Tea Garden is shut down from last 10 years.

The tea garden has two primary schools, one junior high school, one Madhyamik Shiksha Kendra (MSK) and one Sishu Shiksha Kendra (SSK). Even to attend junior high school in However, there is no any secondary or higher secondary school. So, for secondary and Higher Secondary education students have to travel to Ghum and Sonada which is about 14 and 16 kilometres away from the tea garden. There are two private nursery schools in the region; the village has a very pathetic public health facilities. The nearest Primary Health Centre is situated in Sonada which is around 16 kilometer from the region. Dhootriah Tea Garden falls under Dhootriah Kallej Valley Gram Panchayat whose office is located in Dhootriah itself.

The tea manufactured in this tea garden is inorganic and orthodox tea which is not of a very superior quality. As a consequence, tea produced in this garden finds very difficult in fetching a good market price. When the garden was open, the labourers were used to get an amount of Rs. 135.00 per day as against the demand of Rs. 322 jointly made by the Trade Unions of Darjeeling and Doars. They also get weekly ration of rice and wheat both at 50 paisa per kg. Every child below the age of 18 years, dependent on the parents working in the tea gardens are entitled to receive weekly ration of half kilogram rice and one kilogram wheat. They also get a litre of kerosene at Rs.18 in once a month. There is a provision of stipend from the Tea Board for the education of the children of tea garden labourer but due to the ignorance of the workers, such benefits tend to be overlooked. Every facilities such as House building materials to be granted by the management, materials for repairing the house, Umbrellas, raincoats, gum boots etc have not received the people of this area from last several years due to the shutdown of the garden. The Tea Garden was also abandoned or shut down several times in its previous days. But, now it is permanently shut down and there is almost no hope to restart this garden again.

Pussimbang Tea Estate – Bio-organic Tea

Pussimbang Tea Estate is also one of the oldest tea garden of Darjeeling Hills. The total land of the garden is stretching over an area of 201.19 hectares.

This garden is located in 9 kilometers away from Ghum and 16 kilometer away from Darjeeling town. It is connected with Darjeeling Sadar and other places via Ghum Sukhia highways. But the condition of the road of this garden is degrading with every passing year and the management as well as the local administration turning a blind eye to it. The tea garden has a good supply of electricity.

The village is vested with two primary schools and one junior high school. However, for secondary and higher secondary education, local students of this village have to go to Ghoom and Sukhia which are around 6 kilometres and 8 kilometres away respectively. The village has two private nursery schools. This tea garden has a dispensary for providing better health facilities to the local villagers. Accordingly, permanent health staffs have been recruited in the dispensary. One nurse, two midwives and a compounder who visits on a weekly basis are available in the dispensary all the times. Only for major ailments, the villagers go to Darjeeling town hospital. There is a provision of providing ambulance by the management to the patient whenever he/she has to be transported to hospitals in Darjeeling.

This tea garden is falls under the Ghoom Khasmahal Busty Gram Panchayat and the office is located in Ghoom-Bhanjyang which is about 6 kilometres away from the tea garden. The inhabitants of Pussimbang Tea Estate are much educated than the inhabitants of other tea gardens in Darjeeling. Similarly, it has also been noticed that the inhabitants of Pussimbang are financially stronger than the inhabitants of Dhootriah. Accordingly, while in Dhootriah Tea Estate about 90% of the total population working in the tea garden, Pussimbang on the other hand has only about 70% of population engaged in the tea garden. It has also been found that 428 labourers are engaged in the field while there are 15 labourers working in the factory.

Further, Pussimbang Tea Estate has very limited political influence as compare to Dhootriah Tea Estate. It has a very congenial and systematic work environment. There is a kind of sincere and fair recruitment and promotion process for employees in this garden. As a consequence, even a labourer once plucking tea leaves has the opportunity to be promoted to the post of Assistant Manager through sheer hard work and on the basis of seniority.

This tea garden has produced an organic flavoured tea and hence has been able to capture even international markets. Presently, this garden is running by Lohya Group of Company and working very smoothly. The tea produced in this tea garden is exported to Germany and Japan. However, the labourers are working in a very nominal wage. This Tea garden has no history of being shut down or abandoned.

Socio-Economic Conditions of Garden Labourers

Health Issues

Health is considered to be the most important secondary need of a human society after the elementary needs like food, shelter and clothing. On the basis of the study it has been found that there is an acute discontentment in regard to public health in both tea estates. Public Health Centres (PHCs) and Sub Centres (SCs) are not available in both the gardens. Doctor visit is not available in both the gardens. However, one midwife in Dhootriah and two midwives and one nurse in Pussimabang are available in both tea gardens. In case of severe illness the people of Pussimbang Tea Estate either visit Primary Health Centre (PHC) situated in Sukhia Pokhari which is 9 km. away from garden or directly visit District Hospital Darjeeling which is 16 km away from the garden. Accordingly, in case serious illness the people of Dhootriah either visit Primary Health Centre (PHC) Sonada which is 16 km away from the garden or directly go to District Hospital which is 20 km away from the garden.

It has been observed that the people of these tea gardens are largely dependent on local healers for all healthcare emergencies. These people mostly believe in supernatural powers and they have strong feeling that different deities and sprits are responsible for the causation of different diseases. They further asserted that spirits of dead ancestors plays an important role in ensuring good health, prosperity and protection of the community. Traditional faith healing practice is prevalent in both the tea estates.

Employment

It has also been noticed that apart from the inhabitants engaged in tea production, some have migrated to other towns and cities in search of better opportunities. Some of them are working outside Darjeeling such as Siliguri, Kolkata and even far cities like Goa and Bangalore. The study also found that few educated ones have had the opportunity to work as school teachers, lecturers in government colleges and engineers. Moreover, a considerable number of males in both tea gardens are engaged in the Military and Para Military forces.

Maximum numbers of households keep livestock assets like cows, goats and poultry. Few houses possess vehicles which they use as share taxis to ferry people from the tea gardens to Ghum and Darjeeling town.

Sources of Income

For majority of the inhabitants of both the tea gardens the source of income is the tea gardens. The daily wages of the labourers are very low. Therefore, some draw their income by cattle and poultry rearing, others do so by running shops selling the basic necessities. As stated earlier, a few households also draw their income by ferrying passengers from the tea gardens to Darjeeling and back to the tea gardens. Few fortunate souls draw theirs from government purse.

Levels of Educational Attainment

After having spoken to 120 respondents (60 from Pussimbang Tea Garden and 60 from Dhootriah Tea Garden), the levels of education have been worked out in terms of various stages of educational attainment, namely, elementary, secondary, higher secondary and further higher studies in the sample tea gardens.

Note: Total sample population in Pussimbang – 335 (Males=183; Females= 152)

Total sample population in Dhootriah – 420 (Males= 196; Females= 224)

Levels of Education in Pussimbang and Dhootriah Tea Tea Estates

Pussimbang Tea Garden	Illiterate		Elementary		Secondary		Higher Secondary		Higher Studies	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
	60.39	66.88	95.16	51.68	69.54	47.18	58.56	28.88	29.28	16.72
Dhootriah Tea Garden	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
	74.48	125.44	105.84	152.32	78.4	71.68	74.48	64.96	23.52	44.8

Note: 20.13 per cent of the total male sample population of Pussimbang Tea Garden are male children below 3 years and, 19.76 per cent of the total female sample population are female children below 3 years. Similarly, in Dhootriah Tea Garden 27.44 percent are male children below the age of 3 and 42.56 percent are female children below the age of 3 years.

The above table shows that 66.88 percent of the female population in Pussimbang is illiterate whereas in Dhootriah the female illiteracy is as high as 125.44 per cent. Male illiteracy is as high as 74.48 percent and 60.39 percent in Dhootriah and Pussimbang Tea Estates respectively. Similarly, in Dhootriah, the percentage of males having elementary education is 105.84 percent and that of females is 152.32 percent. Pussimbang has 95.16 percent of males having elementary education and 41.68 percent women having elementary education. Accordingly, in Dhootriah tea garden out of the sample population, the male population with secondary education is about 78.4 per cent while the female population is 71.68 per cent. It goes down to 74.48 per cent and 64.96 per cent for males and females respectively when it comes to higher secondary education. Further, in Pussimbang tea garden 58.56 percent of males out of the total sample population have had higher secondary education and 69.54 percent have had secondary education. Among the females 47.18 percent have had secondary education while 28.88 per cent have had higher secondary education. Lastly, in Dhootriah the percentage of males out of the total sample population who have studied up to graduation is 23.52 per cent while in Pussimbang the percentage of males out of the total sample population is 29.8 per cent. There are few persons both male and female in both the tea gardens having postgraduate degrees. A few of them in Pussimbang and only one person in Dhootriah is pursuing researches. These few have had the privilege of working as school teachers, Lecturers in government colleges.

With the improvement in communication system and also with the opening up of more opportunities to generate more income, many of the sample households have a dream and determination to encourage and send their children to go outside Darjeeling for educational purposes.

Provision of Water and Sources of Fuel:

Both the selected tea estates suffer from acute shortage of drinking water especially during the months of April and May. The inhabitants get their water from the natural springs that tend to almost dry up during the summer months. But during the monsoons the flow of water rises and thus the problem of water shortage during the rainy season are solved. In times of acute shortage the river Balasun flowing about a kilometre and half away from Dhootriah Tea Estate and about half kilometre away from Pussimbang plays the role of the major source of water. Few households have got together to arrange the provision of running water in their houses. There are no provisions for sanitation and women workers have no access to toilets when they are in the gardens for plucking. The major source of fuel still happens to be firewood with kerosene following closely. LPG has made way into the tea gardens but the difficulty to procure it and its high rate make it almost impossible for households with the meagre salary they earn. 60 percent of the tea garden labour households still depend only on firewood as the main source of fuel. About 37 per cent of households use both firewood and kerosene. Only 12 per cent of the households use firewood, kerosene and LPG. During winters when the weather turns extremely cold, most households use coal to keep themselves warm. A couple of households both in Dhootriah and Pussimbang Tea Estates also use electric rice cookers.

In Dhootriah Tea Garden, majority of the households use firewood and kerosene for the purpose of cooking. While there were few houses that could afford both kerosene and LPG. In order to fetch firewood they have to walk at least a distance of one kilometre to reach the forest from where they can collect dry and broken twigs and branches.

The situation in Pussimbang Tea Estate with respect to the sources of fuel is similar to the one in Dhootriah Tea Estate. However in respect to using LPG, there were more households in Pussimbang Tea Estate compared to Dhootriah Tea Estate who did so. Most households have to walk a minimum distance of one kilometre to collect firewood. There were no reports on any sample households using dried cow dung as sources of fuel as they used to in the earlier days.

Electricity

As stated in the previous paragraphs, both the selected tea estates enjoy the privilege of current supply. And since the power supply is usually undisturbed, all the houses with exceptions of one or two households in both the sample tea gardens possess television sets, VCD players, CD players etc. Households who have other source of income other than working in the tea garden also have refrigerators

Awareness Level

A considerable number of the sample population of the selected tea gardens are not highly educated and even illiterate as a consequence they are not aware of so many government schemes, modern educational facilities, health care and sanitation. Hence, it is only through education and awareness campaigns that this mass of people can be brought out from their ignorance.

Conclusion

On the basis of the above discussion it is revealed that the socio-economic conditions of tea garden labourers in Darjeeling Hills are getting more pathetic day by day. Particularly, in the case of Dhootriah tea estate, the garden has closed from more than a decade now. The local people of this garden are facing very acute problem for the fulfilment of basic needs like foods, cloths and shelter. A sizable number of people are migrating towards big cities in search of the better livelihood. These existing situations in the tea garden areas of Darjeeling Hills have created a great discontentment among the large sections of rural masses in Darjeeling. With the rapid growth of globalization and liberalization and the accompanying market challenges and other associated forces, garden labourers are the major sufferers. The socio-

economic condition of the workers has turned from bad to worse while the owners of these Tea Gardens are looking for alternative business instead of tea business. As a consequence, tea gardens in Darjeeling Hills are in a very worrisome condition.

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