



Unorganised Labour in the Organised Sector: A study of Darjeeling Tea Plantations

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ABSTRACT

The Tea Plantations in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal is a world-renowned tea producing region in India. It is also the primary source of livelihood specially for the people in this region. This paper provides the real image of the Tea Gardens in the Darjeeling Hills. The Tea Industry is believed to have a distinct work activity as an Organised Sector Industry. The paper projects their livelihood which is a distinct labouring activity. It explicates their significant issues of the past and has tried to perceive how they are at the present moment. It is an account of the Century old British era economy that still operates and their Unorganised condition. Thus, this article is a noteworthy effort to show how the Organised Sector has Unorganised labour arrangement. It shows common situation of the workers and their everyday life. Most prominently their situation in this pandemic is an example of the worker and employer relationship of apathy.

Keywords: Darjeeling, Chongtong Tea Garden, Labour, Trade Unions.

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Introduction

A tea enthusiast surely would know about Darjeeling Tea. It is a Tea producing region in West Bengal, India. Today the name Darjeeling is itself a Geographical Indication G.I. for the world-renowned tea. Therefore, the consumer Market space very well know the quality of tea produced in Darjeeling Tea gardens. But barely the actual Darjeeling Tea consumers know how the Tea Gardens operate. As it is fully run by registered Private Companies it is an element of the Organised Sector of economy. The company is registered by the government and have to follow its rules and regulations and specially they are entitled to benefits by Acts such as the *Factories Act*, *Minimum Wages Act*, *Payment of Gratuity Act* etc. While there are plenty of standards and arrangements in an Organised Sector prescribed by the Government rules. However, one would be curious to know that does the Tea Garden provide these benefits? It's a question here of what, how and why. It is also important to glance into the everyday lives of the individuals connected to this Organized Industry. Presently there may be discrete policies and certifications linked to the tea business (companies) and market practices. Therefore, here is the case of Chong tong Tea Garden and other Tea Estates of the Darjeeling District in general.

Tea Gardens location

The Tea Gardens of the Darjeeling district is covered by numerous rich flora and fauna. The District of Darjeeling lies in the northern region of West Bengal. It is surrounded by the international boundaries with Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. Geographically it lies between '26°31' and 27°13' north latitude, '87°59' and 88°53' east longitude.' [1] The Tea Plantations are also located at an altitude of above 2000 meters higher than the mean sea level. The unique natural environment prevailing in Darjeeling is the reason that it has a typical flavour in the Tea leaves. 'The Darjeeling district in West Bengal is one of the major tea-producing regions in the world. Of its 87 tea plantations about 50% are certified as organic (or in the process of conversion) and 30% are Fair Trade.' [2] In the total 87 Tea gardens at present there are various Certifications and Brands like the J.A.S *Japanese Agriculture Standards*, U.S.D.A *United States Department of Agriculture*, *Indian Organic*, *Rainforest Alliance*, *Ethical Tea partnership*, *Fair Trade* etc. which have promoted the Tea around the world. But the reality is some are closed now and some are in the way to get abandoned. Today tea gardens also hold the detrimental demographic phenomenon of huge out-migration. 'Many tea estates were closed. These circumstances have compelled or encouraged plantation workers, especially males, to find employment outside the tea plantation sector. A survey conducted in the Darjeeling district in 2007 revealed that 69% of the family members of sample worker households worked outside the plantation sector.' [3] Most of the out-migrants are of male and female youths in search of better opportunities to the major Indian cities and abroad. Here the apparent rationale is the rise in

¹Das.N.K, World Wide Symposium on Geographical Indication, Tea Board of India, 2003, pg. 3.

²Rie Makita, Fair Trade Certification: The Case of Tea Plantation Workers in India, Development Policy Review, 2012 ,30(1):18-107

³ Ibid

aspirations of the younger generations. Earlier administration of the region an autonomous body the previous D.G.H.C *Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council* and the latter *G.T.A Gorkhaland Territorial Administration* have laid no solution.

Geographic Distribution

Chongtong Tea Garden is at the moment managed under the banner of *Darjeeling Organic Tea Private Limited*. Chongtong Tea Garden is located 13 kms away from Darjeeling Town. Its geographical location is '27.0602° north 88.1998° east.'^[4] It has three divisions *Salbari* (Upper division), *Chyasi* (Middle division) and *Sirisy Tar* (Lower Division). According to 2011 Census, '*Chongtong Tea Garden* has total of 1,340 households. Total workers are 2,516 where the 1,620 are main workers. The total population is 5,802 out of which 2,876 (49.56 %) were males and 2,926 (50.43%) were females. There were 471 total children of age group 0-6 out of which 235 (50%) are boys and 236 (50%) are girls. There are 4,098 (70.63%) literates and 1,704 (29.36%) illiterates. While there are 143 (2.46%) Scheduled Caste populations and 1,884 (32.47%) is Scheduled Tribe population.'^[5] Chongtong Tea Garden has been spread into a total of 12 wards.

Their everyday life

Initially a British individual had started and later the ownership went to several learned Indian wealthy businessmen family individuals. If we see the Chongtong tea garden history it dates back to 64 years before the Independence of India. It is said that Sir James T. established Chongtong Tea Garden in the year 1882-1883. It was run till the year 1954 and later the ownership was shifted to several others. It is said it was much later owned by Pradeep Kumar Daga who managed till 1979. Eventually the proprietorship was passed to Chiryamar and then to Jhunjhunwala families. Well along in the year 1983 it was again bought by Ajit Kumar Agarwal who managed till 2006, later it was sold to Sunil Kumar Bansal and Amit Bansal in the year 2007.

The Tea Gardens life may be observed to be simple, women plucking tea and men working in the factory. But their stressed life in a stringent directorial supervision of the managers and upper hierarchy individuals is actually more a demoralizing space. Apart of that their families have their own struggles. Their social realities reflect their hardship and clogged social and political spaces they live in. In general, the usual chores for female labourers begin at 8:00 am in the morning where they initiate plucking tea leaves at garden slopes in groups, while by 12:00 pm they get lunch break and they re-join at 1:00 pm and work till 4:00 pm in the evening. The women labourers are directed to pluck leaves in quota and get paid extra if they pluck additional quantity. The only little time they get to share their ideas is their lunch break where they all sit together and gossip. Their gossips are full of their everyday life issues their struggle, poverties etc. In several occasions they were found conversing of their past i.e., during the separate state movements and the number of hardships they had to face. In similar daily activity in *Badamtam, Marybong, Liza Hill Tea gardens* most of the workers were concerned about their wages, gratuity which is unpaid. They expressed their bitter experience with the employer and the Company. But in *Makaibari Tea Garden* women were found discussing on how the new idea of home-stays, self-help groups have opened up spaces to earn. Most importantly in Chongtong and other estates labour families are concerned about their children and the out-migration to the cities. In general, there is seen the usual trilogies between the *Management, Labour unions and Government* doing tripartite meetings and negotiations which seems yet unsettled.

Labour or Workers

One worker from the family is obliged to work or else they are said to be evicted. If we reread the history of the Labour recruitment they were recruited by the '*Sardari System*'^[6]. History says they migrated and settled with their families in the plantations. The question is who are the workers? Is it just women as we find it looks more of gender centric? 'In Darjeeling, by contrast, workers were not forcibly conscripted. Instead, owners recruited them, mostly from Nepal, with some monetary compensation, but the bulk of their incentive was nonmonetary and included housing in what were called "labour lines." From the plantation system's inception here, labourers regularly maintained and invested cash in their houses, and this was central to the continued viability of tea and to the survival of thousands of marginalized people'.^[7] Today the tea industry having an image of a Formal or Organized Industry actually is reliant on the Unorganized labour. Their sense of insecurity is reflected in the gate-meetings and political party involvements. Which is unfair and the worker's social security is still in limbo.

However, they were recruited by Chiefs or the Sardars who were then influential individuals. 'Sardars often recruited men, women, and children from their own natal villages and ethnic groups.' Therefore, the recruiter was responsible for bringing his own kinsmen. 'In the year 1839 Dakman Rai brought thousands of Labourers from Nepal and Sikkim.'^[8] It

⁴ <https://geohack.toolforge.org>

⁵ Census of India, Directorate of Census Operations West Bengal, District Census Handbook, Darjiling, 2011

⁶ Chief system, Chief or Sardar who would be in-charge of the recruitment.

⁷ Sarah Besky, Fixity: On the inheritance and maintenance of tea plantation houses in Darjeeling, India, Journal of American ethnological society, Brown University, Volume 44 Number 4 November 2017, pg. 619

⁸ Sharma Khemraj, *The Himalayan Plantation Workers*, N.L Publishers

was better place with trouble-free atmosphere for them to work. Their Cultural traits survived in a peaceful environment then. One can imagine that how it was possible to have better wages and permanency. While the Casual and 'Badly workers'[9] are here today. Today there are fewer permanent workers and equal half are Casual workers equally paid but are not given equal facilities like to the Permanent workers. The Badli workers who specially work in case of their family members retire. Casual workers are those who work in flush seasons. Casual workers are paid after one or two weeks while Permanent workers are paid after a month. Tea gardens have their own hierarchical positions and tasks. As benefits and services like the *gratuity, bonus, paid leave* on festivals, *sick leave, annual leave, casual leave* and *leave with travel allowances* are provided to staffs and sub staffs who are permanent only.

It can be found that the workforce statistics changes with time. In the latest Outlook report, there was generally 60,000 permanent workers and 15,000-20,000 Casual Workers in Darjeeling Hills only. While in Chongtongtea garden during 2006-2007 there were 1252 workers. Currently ChongtongTea Garden has 399 Male and 677 female i.e., 1078 total permanent workers. While there are 21 casual workers and 91 retired workers. In an Organized sector like the Tea Industry no workers get the benefits of Social Security. It has the *Plantation Labour Act of 1951* but those guidelines also do not get contented with the reality. Few things they are provided with are *firewoods, gumboots, raincoats* etc. in kind. But the question is do all workers meet the requirements to get these? It has come to know that a worker gets, if one is permanent or else has to be management friendly. As such the social security of the worker or labour has become an ambiguous overdue to the Tea Garden. It is believed that success of the enterprises is relational to the amount of benefits the workers is given. According to the *Tea Board Survey* in 2015, West Bengal has 241144 Permanent workers while 26172 Temporary workers. In general, 75% of the Women workers pluck tea leaves. While remaining 25% are engaged in the tea processing units who are also males. Therefore, the proper statistics on workers status is also a gap of inquiry.

Worker Unions and Politics in general

Trade Unions and Political parties share intricate liaisons in the tea gardens. That depends on the liabilities they share in the Tea Industry. So, politicization is an undeniable phenomenon in Tea Gardens. In the past during 1980's the violent agitation for a separate state of *Gorkhaland* shook the gardens. In 2007 the same demand emerged and again recently during the year 2017 it was revived. There was an indefinite strike of 104 days. Without question it had a miserable impact on the Tea Estates.

In Chongtong the hopes of the workers are on the Trade Unions. It is found that the workers hold the representatives accountable and expect sincere agreements in their favor. During the *Gorkhaland movement* in the year 2017 ChongtongTea Garden was the first garden to reopen. Ironically the costliest Tea is Darjeeling tea and the labour get the lowest wage lower than the State Minimum wage parameters. The reality is there are several political parties but it is uncanny that only few regional political parties have controlled the Gardens in the past. Looking at the Worker Trade Unions in Chongtong and in other gardens in general they are affiliated to various political parties. In the past and present there were unions like H.P.W.U, *Himalayan Plantation Workers Union* affiliated to G.N.L.F, *Gorkha National Liberation Front*, D.T.D.P.L.W.U, *Darjeeling Terai Dooars Plantation Labour Union*, affiliated to G.J.M.M, *Gorkha Jana Mukti Morcha*, D.T.D.C.K.M.U, *Darjeeling Terai Dooars Chiya Kaman Mazdoor Union* affiliated to C.P.R.M, *Communist Party of Revolutionary Marxists*. There are many other Trade Unions affiliated to C.I.T.U, *Centre of Indian Trade Unions*, U.T.U.C, *United Trade Union Congress*, I.N.T.U.C, *Indian National Trade Union Congress* etc. To recognize the Trade Unions efforts in the workers lives one can see instances like how *Singla Tea Garden* situated 15 kms from Darjeeling which has around 600 workers, a suspension of work was ordered. The reason was due to an assault on the Assistant Manager by a worker. But in different occasion a decade ago in *Chongtong Tea Garden* on 26th February 2006 all of a sudden works came to a halt following 12 hours strike. It was a protest on the suicidal death of a tea worker. A worker had committed suicide by hanging himself from a ceiling on the road side tea weighing shade. Again, lately the workers of the *Happy valley tea estate* are on strike. The workers are demanding to be paid immediately. On April 2012 in another incident there was lockdown for regular three years in *Kanchaan tea estate* formerly known as *Rungeet tea estate* 6 kms from Darjeeling. The reason was again an assault on the Manager three years ago. But the reason for assaults and justification to the incident has never been in favour of the workers. But the workers staged demonstrations to demand change of management as the work was suspended for almost three years. While the Political party Trade Union played a crucial role. In another case in the year 2015, 22nd October three Tea gardens i.e., *Dhooteria* (Sonada), *Kalej Valley* (Ghoom) and *Peshok* (Rongli-Rongliot) were closed due to its dwindling situation and belonged to *Alchemist Group of Companies*. In general, all these gardens are still today suffering its outcome. Any garden worker to get the benefits, they are compelled to come in terms with the management. While Unions act as the third-party negotiator. The Trade Unions voice the workers demand like for *wages, provident fund, gratuity, arrear, rations* and other benefits. It was found the Political stakeholders are also fighting for the land rights or '*parjapatta*'[10] in the land they were born. In reality 'all the tea estates are permanently owned by the West Bengal Government, and leased out to companies on a

⁹ Workers who start working after his/her family members retire

¹⁰ Parjapatta is the land rights documents in nepali language.

fixed-rent basis for a minimum of 30 years and a maximum of 99 years, renewable after expiry of the lease. These leases can be transferred or sold.’[11] In many occasions the worker grievances are timely resolved while larger problems like the Labour rights relating to the Social Security is still in indeterminate state. Leaders in the past like *Deo Prakash Rai* from *Tukvar tea estate*, *Dawa Lama* from *Chongtong tea estate* who were the M.L.As, *Member of Legislative Assembly* and *Ratna Bahadur Rai* from *Rungmook tea estate*, *S.Lepcha* from *Singtam tea estate* who were M.Ps, *Member of Parliament* are still remembered. But yet the workers effort is yet to be valued at the level of national interest. However, the Union and Workers are relentlessly assertive in determination to bare decent results.

Protection of their rights in the garden

Since the beginning various laws have passed to protect the labour. The other laws covering the Plantations workers are the *Plantation Labour Act of 1951*, *Employees Provident Funds Act 1952*, *Payment of Gratuity Act 1972*, *Equal Remuneration Act 1976* etc. But ‘among the legislations affecting plantation workers, the most important is the *Plantation Labour Act of 1951*. This is the only act that sought to raise the living standards of plantation workers. It contains several provisions related to housing conditions, health and hygiene, education, and social welfare.’[12] In West Bengal Minimum wages for the Tea Garden Workers is still an overdue. The *Minimum Wages Act 1948* is implemented as *West Bengal Minimum Wages Act of 1951* in *agricultural, brick, brick factory, bakery, wheat grinding, saw mill* etc.

Although the wages today are increased for the Tea labourers to Rs 172 whereas the prescribed minimum wages of even an ‘Unskilled agricultural workers without food in West Bengal is Rs 245.’[13] In a recent Synopsis on the Tea Gardens give approx. figures of ‘1,86,559 families reside in the tea estates of Hill, Terai and Dooars areas of North Bengal.’[14] The Tea Industry supposed to be the formal private sector in West Bengal is totally an under-organised Informal Sector in nature. The wages for ‘*Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act*, *MGNREGA* is Rs 191 per day.’[15] The administrative glitch in implementing Central Schemes is that states are State Government land leased by Private Companies therefore it is difficult to execute land-based Panchayat schemes as its rejected due to garden being private Company owned coolie lines. The Schemes such as the *Indira Awas Yojana I.A.Y.*, *Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana P.M.G.S.Y.*, *Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yojana J.G.S.Y* which was merged with *Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yonana S.G.R.Y.*, *Pradhan Mantri Gramodya Yojana P.M.G.Y* etc. are not endorsed in the gardens. The Management and Company’s rejection in spite of State concern has formed uncertainties for the Workers. While the Wage which they have been demanding a minimum wage of Rs 239 is settled to Rs 172 which is still unconvinced in the gardens. The Collective bargaining has had very less outcome. The last such collective accord was reached on February 21st 2015 with the formation of the minimum wage advisory committee. The committee was given the mandate of recommending a minimum wage which went fruitless for more than three years. Only in the year 2018 after the three-day successful strike in tea plantations the government proposed to increase the daily wage from Rs 150 to Rs 172. In many cases the administrations like the G.T.A and the Principal Secretary have empathized the labours on their rights.

Comotions of the past in the garden

Indirectly the Ethnic Movement have conveyed the workers demand in the past. Their limited freedom and Manager proscribed settings of the garden is the main root cause of their occasional gate meetings. In West Bengal the indenture system was not prevalent earlier and once it started the worker was not free and they were bonded with low wages. Their living conditions were very poor. A tea plantation worker is half paid than the other Industry like the textile workers.

The bonus rates in Darjeeling are comparatively little higher than Terai-Dooars gardens. But their piteous lives are hidden reality to the outer world and class of people who rejoice the flavor. The help that can be seen is through the Cooperatives, Self-Help Groups, State Government Schemes and Development Boards etc. to an extent. But how many have received and in what are the parameters are unknown. While ‘in contemporary Darjeeling, it is tea workers themselves not plantation owners or the ITA who must work to bring houses up to this standard, or any standard, of livability and inheritability’[16]. It’s the civic society and collective efforts from different local NGOs, *Non-governmental organizations* and the Cooperatives extend help in the gardens. We can name ‘*Sanjukta Vikash Co-operative (SVC)* formed in the year 1996 with support of Darjeeling Ladenla Road, DLR Prerna in Darjeeling Hills. While the State government is also helping them with free subsidized rations which is a relief. Since the year 2014 State have extended financial assistance through F.A.W.L.O.I, *Financial Assistance to Worker of Locke out*

¹¹ Tarit Kumar Datta, V. Darjeeling tea, India by Indian Institute of Management Calcutta

¹² Bhowmik Sharit K. ‘Ethnicity and Isolation: Marginalization of Tea Plantation Workers’, Indiana University Press, Vol.4, No2 2011 pg.242

¹³ Government of West Bengal, Office of the Labour Commissioner, Statistics Section, Kolkatta dated 30/01/2019

¹⁴ Synopsis on Survey of Tea Gardens conducted by Regional Labour Office under jurisdiction of Joint Labour Commissioner, North Bengal Zone.2013

¹⁵ Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India

¹⁶ Sarah Besky, Fixity: On the inheritance and maintenance of tea plantation houses in Darjeeling, India, Journal of American ethnological society, Brown University, Volume 44 Number 4 November 2017

Industries scheme. But the grant was also withdrawn when the gardens opened. However, there are plenty of commotions that the tea gardens are currently going through.

Conclusion

It is indeed a tiresome life experiences that a Tea Garden worker goes through their lives. The brand hoarding with happy women plucking tea leaves is a fallacy. Their socio-economic conditions are enough to comprehend how they are. In general, the Tea estates as organized sector is overall a misconception. While only few Tea gardens have been a model in keeping the workers contented. The workers are also obliged to respond to their superiors in line. The Political mayhem due to the Statehood movement greatly affected the Tea gardens. Their unorganized work arrangement is a big breach in the industry. The delays in payments and the lack of Social Security measures have manifold their protests. The only solution is to restructure the policies and plans. If equal opinion of the worker is taken it can fortify the Companies output and production. The departing human resource management is an ambiguity in the Tea Estates. While at the upper echelon proprietors and their partner agencies have to rethink on owner liabilities. If it brings more transparency like the fair-trade application, it would benefit workers too. The International labour standards given by the I.L.O *International Labour Organisation* is yet to congregate by the industry. Therefore, Tea gardens today are operating in anticipation to cognize in the presence of labour and the power holders.