

Darjeeling Tea - The People Forgotten

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Nestling in the foothills of the mighty Himalayas lies Darjeeling, the northern most district of West Bengal. It is bordered by Bhutan in the east, Nepal in the west and Sikkim in the north. Darjeeling is also known as the “Queen of the Hills” and is famous for the three “T”s - Tea, Timber and Tourism.

Tea is grown in altitudes ranging from 600 to 2000 metres above mean sea level. The cool and moist climate, the soil, the rainfall and the sloping terrain, all combine to give Darjeeling Tea its unique “Muscatel Flavour” and “Exquisite Bouquet”. The combination of natural factors gives Darjeeling Tea its unique distinction not found anywhere else in the world. Thus it is much sought after and highly valued in the affluent Western and Japanese market. 80% of the total produce is exported every year. The industry provides employment directly and indirectly to about 50% of the population in the district. 50% of the directly employed workers are women.

Between 1840 and 1850, Dr. Campbell (Superintendent of Darjeeling) in Darjeeling and Major Cromellin at Lebong opened experimental nurseries. 1856 witnessed the development of tea industry on an extensive scale. By 1905, nearly 79 square miles were under cultivation. Tea plantations in the Darjeeling Hills are restricted to Darjeeling and Kurseong sub-divisions only. Kalimpong sub-division was left out as it already had agricultural holdings and reserve forests.

Today, Darjeeling has 65 gardens covering 20 000 hectares and employs 39 800 people. (Special Issue, Plantation Workers in W.B., Labour Gazette 1994). Darjeeling was one of the places where labour supply at the initial stages was not a problem. Nepalese people immigrated because of the economic condition in Nepal and formed ready made labour for growing plantations. In the early stages, Chinese were also brought for their expertise.

A tea plantation can be described as a capitalist institution operated with wage labour whose ownership may assume any three forms: foreign control via transnational corporations; indigenous ownership (either in public or private sector); or a joint venture comprising of foreign and national interests.

But ownership pattern is of no significance when it comes to wages or working conditions. The labour is kept at a quasi-subsistence level.

Each tea garden has a group of permanent employees who form just 20-25% of the total population in the garden. They are the only ones who can avail of the benefits under the Plantation Labour Act, 1951. 89% of this permanent labour force is daily rated wage earners also known as ‘numbered workers’. 50% of the daily rated workers are women.

Today, in most gardens it is the third or fourth generation of labourers who are employed. They are completely dependent on the tea plantation for their livelihood and have no other means of existence. Their entire lives are spent in the gardens as they are housed within the estate.

The payment of wages in tea plantations in hill areas are based on piece rates - the "hazira" and "ticca". The "hazira" is the daily wage paid to each worker on completion of a particular task which has been allocated for the day. The wage rate is Rs. 26:00 per day, but daily rated workers engaged in certain jobs other than plucking get additional compensation over and above the daily wages at the rate of Rs. 1:20 for garden jobs and Rs. 1:50 for factory work according to the Plantation Labour Act, 1951. The latter two categories have been lumped into one and they get Rs. 29:00 per day. "Ticca" refers to overtime work as well as to extra plantation work given in contract. Each worker usually support five to seven family members with his/her wage.

During the plucking season, March to November extra labour is needed. Since leaf growth is not continuous but comes in flushes extra labour is needed for about six months a year. The management employees seasonal labours, usually women from the garden. They are also known as "biga" workers. Their wage is based on quantity of green leaves they pluck. They get Rs. 3:00 per kg at the beginning of the season but the rate goes down as the season proceeds to Rs. 1:50 per kg of leaf plucked. The average quantity of tea stipulated per day is 8.5 kg but it can go as high as 50 kg. The permanent daily rated workers are also used for plucking. They get their usually Rs. 26:00 for 8.5 kg of tea plucking but anything above it is "ticca" which is paid at the going rate.

Seasonal unemployment and perennial unemployment is a very big problem in the tea gardens.

Over the years, Darjeeling tea has acquired the reputation of being the "Champagne of tea". Record prices of Rs. 20,000 per kg have been fetched by the best Darjeeling tea.

"It is true that after the break-up of the U.S.S.R. who was the major importer of cheaper tea(50% of Indian tea export) the trend has been plain teas being sold below cost, medium teas struggling to break even but good teas making handsome profits. Good quality C.T.C. have domestic demand and tippy good quality orthodox teas their traditional markets in Germany, the Continent and Japan. In 1994 the returns for good quality tea were most pronounced for Darjeeling whose remuneration exceeded 'record levels' of 1993." (Tea Market Annual Report, 1994, J. Thomas and Co. Calcutta).

Business Standard, March 1995, "The industry showed excellent results with positive growth rates in all financial indicators. While net sales increased by around 42.8%, gross profit went up by 25.7%. On the other hand, profits before and after tax rose by 33% and 39.7% respectively in 1993-94, Brooke Bond Lipton India, Tata Tea, Jayshree Tea and McLeod Russel were among the best performers."

Frontline, July 15, 1994, "The cost of production in the northern gardens is about Rs. 45 per Kg. The cost is estimated by a committee consisting of representatives of growers, nationalised banks and the tea board."

The consolidated price average for Darjeeling in the year 1994 was RS. 97.70.(Tea Market Annual Report 1994, J. Thomas & Co. Calcutta)

This shows that tea is a profitable venture with Darjeeling Tea being extremely profitable.

In the early days of the tea industry, the large labour force was exposed to hardships of every description. Low wages, inadequate housing, scarcity of drinking water, virtual absence of medical and sanitary arrangements reduced them to sub-human stature. Therefore, the necessity for suitable legislation on plantation was felt with a view to formulating a social policy towards a vast labour population seeking to ameliorate their living and working conditions. This led to the formulation of the Plantation Labour Act, 1951 which is a Central Government Enactment. The preamble to this Act aims at providing for the welfare of labour and to regulate the conditions of work in the plantations. To implement the provisions of this Act, West Bengal State Rules were framed in 1956. A suitable organisational set up was established to enforce various provisions of this Act and Rules.

Empirical findings show that every provision of this Act is violated and flouted. At times certain provisions are partially fulfilled, or when the management fails to honour the provisions, puts up stumbling blocks to those willing to help. The gardens have no proper drinking water facilities and latrines are non-existent. Medical facilities and crèches are a far cry from the provisions of the enactment. For education, gardens rely on the Government Primary Schools whose delivery are quite contrary to its intention. High Schools are mostly in the urban areas reducing the number of High School going students and colleges are out of reach for the majority. This condition is conducive for the management as education means awareness and demand of one's rights. Also education means the acquisition of new skills and the movement of labour to better work environment which goes against the very principle of the workings of a garden, namely, an isolated large labour force who is solely dependant on the garden for survival. Houses for 8% of the permanent workers must be built every year and even after more than 40 years of the enactment most gardens have not provided proper housing for all permanent workers, whose numbers have hardly increased appreciably over the years. Houses lack latrines and sanitary provisions are pitiable. Electricity is yet to make an appearance in most gardens. Subsidised food meant for worker and dependant, have been reduced to worker alone in some gardens. Facilities for protection from weather is partially fulfilled. Workmen spray toxic pesticides regularly without any protection, training and knowledge of consequences and nature of work. Since the benefits due to them are not provided for the real wage diminishes forcing the worker to concentrate and prioritise the needs to what is essential for survival. In this situation, the daily wage of Rs.. 26.00/Rs.. 29.00 is not enough to meet the basic needs. In today's context of prices of essentials spiralling upwards and value of money going down it means that the real wage of the worker is diminishing. If the Act is properly implemented it would mean that the worker would not have to pay for the basic needs from his/her own pocket, but this is not so. So, where is there possibility for the worker to think of education for the children, health and hygiene, proper medical facilities and shelter ? The worker is fighting an eternal battle against hunger where victory means a proper meal and defeat an empty stomach. This is done with no other reason but to maximise profits as tea being a labour intensive industry after

the initial capital investment the labour bill is the largest. Cutting this bill naturally means profits shooting up for the owner.

Tea is a profitable industry and within it Darjeeling Tea is the best performer. Yet, the real producer, the worker, lives in conditions that is in marked contrast to the industry's turnover. The worker is treated like just a cog in a giant wheel, a cost of production. The position of the worker in the industry is largely undermined and the work highly under valued. The state of deprivation and exploitation has been perpetuated for three to four generations now. The problem emerges out of the capitalistic mode of production of the industry where there is a large disparity between the owner and the worker and between prices and costs. The owner goes to great lengths to maximise profit and one of the fall outs is the deprivation and exploitation of the worker. Provisions of what is due to the worker in terms of the entitlements of the Act will still leave a large surplus for the owner but the willingness to part with it is lacking. While millions of people enjoy their cup of tea and enormous profits are raked in, the people who really put their hands into its production remain anonymous, forgotten, unsung heroes and scum of the earth. Thus, enactment of legislation, provision of organisational set up to see its implementation is not enough to guarantee the well-being of the worker, it requires will.

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