

# Status of tea garden labourers in eastern Himalaya: a case of Darjeeling tea industry

Vimal Khawas<sup>\*</sup>

*Among the teas cultivated in India, the most celebrated one comes from Darjeeling Himalaya. The best of India's prized Darjeeling Tea is considered the world's finest tea. The region has been cultivating and producing tea since the last 150 years. The complex geo-environmental and agro-climatic conditions in the region lend to the tea grown in the area a distinct quality. However, in recent times, the industry is fraught with several problems. This paper attempts to explore the social and economic situations of tea garden labourers in Darjeeling Hills. It brings forth the plights of garden labourers in the region that produces the finest quality tea in the world. The paper deals upon the negligence and highhandedness of tea management towards the social and economic development of garden labourers. The basic aim of this paper is to highlight the conditions of tea garden labourers in Darjeeling Hills in the context of wide spread crisis in Tea Industry Sector in the country and its consequent impact on the laborers. It lists down the factors responsible in this connection and calls for a more robust debate, discussion and systematic research on these factors in order to understand the crux of the problems characterising Tea industry in Darjeeling and save once booming sector from degenerating into oblivion.*

*Key Words: Darjeeling Himalaya, Tea, India, Labour, Socio-economic condition*

---

\*

The author is Associate Fellow, Central University of Sikkim, Tadong, Gangtok, Sikkim [Email: vimalkhawas@gmail.com].

This paper is a product of the study 'Socio-Economic Conditions of Resident Tea Garden Labourers in Darjeeling Hills- A Pilot Study', sponsored by Council for Social Development, New Delhi during 2005-06. The author acknowledges the support and guidance given by Prof. Muchkund Dubey, and Dr. N.J. Kurian, President and Director of the Council, respectively, during the entire period of study. The author is grateful to the faculty members for their constructive comments at different points of time and to the Council for Social Development for providing all necessary logistic support needed for the study.

Darjeeling is the northernmost district of the state of West Bengal in India. It is located on the lap of the Himalaya. The district comprises four subdivisions namely, Sadar Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Kurseong and Siliguri. Darjeeling Himalaya, strictly speaking, consists only of the first three subdivisions of the district and forms a significant part of Eastern Himalayan System. The fourth subdivision Siliguri is mainly characterised by the *tarai* portion and foothills of the district. The district is bounded by state of Sikkim in the north, Nepal in the west and Bhutan on the northeast. The exquisite scenic grandeur and invigorating climate in the area have earned the place the title of ‘Queen of the Hill Stations’

## **1. Darjeeling Tea Industry: An Introduction**

Among the teas cultivated in India, the most celebrated one comes from Darjeeling Himalaya. 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 1.5 century. The tea produced in the region and having special characteristics has for long been known across the globe as ‘Darjeeling Tea’ (Kumar, R. and Vasundhara Nair, {undated}). It is important to note that Darjeeling Tea is grown and produced only in the hilly areas of Darjeeling district. According to the Tea Board of India – ‘Darjeeling Tea’ means:

- Tea which has been cultivated, grown, produced, manufactured and processed in tea gardens in the hilly areas of Sardar Sub-Division, only hilly areas of Kalimpong subdivision comprising of 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 Subtigiuri 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.

### *1.1 Historical Profile*

The then superintendent of Darjeeling, Dr. Campbell and Major Crommelin are said to have first introduced tea in Darjeeling Himalaya during the period of 1840-50 on experimental basis out of

the seeds imported from China. According to the available 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 sufficient number of workers to plant, tend, pluck and finally manufacture the produce. Hence, 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 tea gardens producing a total crop of 21,000 kg of tea. In 1870, the number of gardens increased to 56 to produce about 71,000 kg 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.

### *1.2 Geographical Distribution*

The total area of Darjeeling Hills comes to 2417 sq. km. of which about 40 percent is estimated to be under forest, 40 percent under *khasmahal* and municipalities, 2 percent under cinchona plantations and 18 percent under tea plantation. Majority of the tea gardens are located in Sadar Darjeeling and Kurseong sub-divisions. 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. There are in general 87 registered gardens producing Darjeeling Tea in Darjeeling Hills spreading across the geographical area of 20,200 hectares out of the total 114 tea gardens located in the district of Darjeeling. They comprise about 5 per cent of the total area under tea plantation in the country.

### *1.3 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, the UK, the 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 million (Kumar, R. and Vasundhara Nair, {undated}). However, there has been a continuous decline in the total production of tea and per hectare yield of Darjeeling Tea in the last couple of decades. There was time during 1960s and 1970s when Darjeeling Himalaya used to produce over 15 million kgs of tea. The figure went down during the 1990s. The decline has been drastic since the mid 1990s. Today the region produces less than 9 million kg of tea. One of the main reasons of the falling production is attributed to the declining yield of tealeaves in the area. Further, there have been indications in recent times that the price of Darjeeling Tea has been falling down in the global market due to stiff competitions from the countries like Kenya, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Japan and South East Asian Countries.

## 2. Statement of the Problem

The global tea market is dwindling due to various inescapable forces. Consequently, tea industry in the country along with garden workers, particularly labourers, has been negatively impacted. Darjeeling Tea Industry has not been an exception in this respect. There has been frequent reporting in the leading news dailies<sup>1</sup> that tea industry in Darjeeling Hills suffers from more than one problem. Sickness, closure and abandonment of tea gardens; issues with respect to crop yield, total production and degrading tea quality; wage, education, health and livelihood issues of the labourers; frequent violence and strikes across tea gardens; issues of intellectual property rights under WTO<sup>2</sup> regime, competition from the tea coming from Nepal, Sri Lanka, African countries etc. are some of the major problems faced by Darjeeling Tea Industry in recent times.

**TABLE 1 STATUS OF TEA ESTATES IN DARJEELING HILLS AS IN OCTOBER 2005**

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

Source: Based on the discussion with Mr. KB Subba, Convenor, Darjeeling Hill Tea Coordination Committee.

In the last one decade, a number of studies have been carried out in view of the tea industry crisis in the country and its consequent impact on the garden labourers. In West Bengal, two studies were conducted in 2002-03. One by Centre for Education and Communication, New Delhi and the other by West Bengal Network on the Right to Food and Work. These studies, however, focused only on the tea gardens/estates and associated labour issues of Terai and Dooars regions of North Bengal. Tea estates in Darjeeling Hills have been untouched by the mainstream researchers and research institutes in view of the region's volatile political situation and its remote geographical location from prime locations of the country.

## 3. Materials and Methods

### 3.1 Objectives of the Study

- To examine the social situations including education, health, and housing & sanitation of the garden labourers,

<sup>1</sup> Mainly, *The Statesman and The Telegraph*: North Bengal and Sikkim edition.

<sup>2</sup> See American University, 2004, Intellectual Property Rights of Darjeeling Tea in the age of globalization and world trade, *Trade & Environment Database (TED) Journal*, Number 752, July, <http://www.american.edu/TED/darjeeling.htm>

- To understand the economic conditions – livelihood pattern, income, alternative skills (if any) - of the garden labourers.

### *3.2 Methods Adopted*

This study was carried out with the help of following methodological techniques.

First of all, three tea gardens (estates) were selected. This was done after a detailed discussion with trade union leaders in the area and officials of the Darjeeling Tea Association. Keeping in view the complexities<sup>3</sup> characterising tea gardens/estates in mind we selected one abandoned tea garden, one very sick tea garden and the one that is also sick but doing relatively better as compared to most of the sick tea gardens. Selection of sample tea gardens was done purely on the basis of our discussion with trade union leaders. Fifty households were picked up with the help of simple random sampling method from the selected villages<sup>4</sup> and primary survey was conducted with the help of structured questionnaire.

Secondly, apart from 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 estates<sup>5</sup>.

---

<sup>3</sup> Discussion with trade union leaders brought to light that all tea gardens/estates in the region were sick, although they had not been declared officially, while a number of gardens had been abandoned in the last one-decade. Further, it was also revealed that closure and reopening of gardens were regular phenomena in recent times.

Hence, if a Happy Valley Tea Garden was closed down/locked up during the time of field investigation of this study there was possibility that the garden would reopen by the end of year and again closed down/locked up during the spring of next year. There is a difference between ‘closed down’ tea garden and ‘abandoned’ tea garden, in that, the former takes place either during the lean season (corresponding roughly to November-March) when there is no plucking of tea leaves or when the tea estate is not functioning well due to economic, political or environmental factors. It totally depends on the company controlling the garden and hence is not official. On the other hand, the government abandons a garden officially if it is closed down for several months or is running in loss. Therefore, at a given point of time there are three categories to tea gardens in Darjeeling: 1) functional tea garden; 2) closed down/locked up tea gardens and 3) abandoned tea estates.

<sup>4</sup> Rural settlements in mountain areas are small and scattered over spaces. Darjeeling Himalaya is not an exception in this regard. Two types of rural settlements are generally found in the area. The first type of settlements are the scattered agricultural villages and the second one include clustered hamlets located at the centre of tea gardens/estates. In majority of the villages the total population does not exceed 5000 souls. According to the Census of India one tea estate/garden is equivalent to one revenue village.

<sup>5</sup> Abandoned tea garden was excluded

Further, we also attempted to document the views and counterinterviews of the local experts, NGOs, and activists to understand the socio-economic situations and associated dynamics of tea garden labourers and managements in Darjeeling hills.

Lastly, focus group discussion with labourers was another important primary source that enriched us with the information pertaining to their conditions and response of the management.

### 3.3 Sample Garden Villages

As indicated in the preceding paragraph case study of three tea garden villages bearing different functional status was attempted as part of this study. The studied garden villages include Ambiok Tea Estate (TE), Teesta Valley TE and Peshok TE. Ambiok TE was one of the severely sick tea gardens in the region as per the discussion with the relevant resource persons in the region while Teesta Valley TE, although not functioning in the way it should normally, is relatively better functioning as compared to most of the sick gardens. 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 deserted labourers themselves since quite some time now.

**TABLE 2 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

\*Calculated from the data as provided by the Census of India, 2001

### 3.4 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. Fieldwork of the study was carried out in the second half of October 2005. Data tabulation, data editing, and data analysis were done during the month of November and the first half of December 2005. The paper was prepared between second half of December 2005 and January 2006.

### 3.5 Limitation of the Study

This is a pilot level study that attempts to survey the socio-economic issues of tea garden labourers in Darjeeling Hills. One of the major limitations of the study is that it takes only three tea 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 be used with

caution. A much larger and extensive study is required in order to explore the issues that have marred Darjeeling Tea Industry and consequently impacted the garden labour force in the region

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### *4.1 Rural Infrastructure*

Traditionally, tea estates in Darjeeling Hills and the villages therein have had the privilege of road communication unlike other ordinary villages scattered across spaces of the region. The transportation of tea from the factory of respective tea estates required road network. Hence the British constructed roads and connected all tea estates with the mainstream road network. In the process garden labourers had the opportunity to avail this facility. However, as of today majority of the roads constructed by colonial rulers are in utter bad shape. The ruling establishment in the area has little or no interest to maintain roadways, not to talk of their up-gradation. The respective management of the gardens takes care of only those parts of the roads which fall within its functional jurisdiction while the rest of the stretch-s has to be looked after by the state government or Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC).

The situation of electricity supply varies across tea estates. During the British period, there was no electricity supply in the region. The supply of electricity is a relatively recent phenomenon in the region. Even at present, less than 50 percent 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 white colour officials are provided with electricity depriving the labourers.

The responsibility of providing basic health facilities falls with the management of respective tea estates as per the Plantation Act, 1951. However, majority of tea estates do not have their own health centres and other health facilities like ambulance. The occasionally functional health centres or dispensaries across tea estates lack, most of the time, basic medical facilities required by the garden labourers.

Of late, primary education does not fall within the direct responsibility of tea management. The responsibility has been transferred to the DGHC till upper primary level while the Government of West Bengal looks after the secondary and higher secondary institutes. Interestingly, majority of tea estate/garden villages are featured with fairly good number of government primary and upper primary schools compared to other agricultural villages. Further, private schools are gradually making their ways across spaces of tea garden villages in the last 10-15 years.

**TABLE 3 ELECTRICITY SUPPLY TO GARDEN VILLAGES**

Tea Estates	Electricity Supply (%)
Teesta Valley TE	100.0
Peshok TE	50.0
Ambiok TE	0.0

**TABLE 4 HEALTH CENTRES**

Tea Estates	Health Centre	Remarks
Teesta Valley TE	Primary Health Centre	Partly operational
Peshok TE	Nil	-
Ambiok TE	Dispensary	Almost non operational

**TABLE 5 BASIC EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS**

Tea Estates/Number of Schools	Primary	Upper Primary / Secondary	Private (English) Schools*
Teesta Valley TE	3	1	3
Peshok TE	1	1	4
Ambiok TE	1	1	0
Average Number of Schools per Village	2	1	2

\* Private English Schools were operating mostly at primary level

#### *4.2 Levels of Educational Attainment*

Looking at literacy rates across the tea estates one tends to come to a rather good conclusion with regard to educational attainment in the area. However, as one dissects the literacy into various formal levels of educational attainments a rather deplorable picture emerges altogether. As noted in the relevant table represented by sample villages, over 55 per cent of populations among labour households have studied only up to elementary levels. The figure goes on declining as we move ahead in the ladder of education. Less than 15 percent have studied up to secondary level while less than 2 percent have attended higher secondary. There are negligible proportions of population who have studied 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/vocational and professional educations are yet to make their ways into rural Darjeeling Hills. Further, a fairly noticeable gender gap still persists across various 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 region in the state of West Bengal, as highlighted by various mainstream studies.

**TABLE 6 LEVELS OF EDUCATION**

Tea Estate	Illiterate			Elementary			Secondary			Higher Secondary		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Ambiok	29.1	23.7	34.5	52.9	50.0	55.8	15.9	21.9	9.7	0.4	0.9	0.0
Teesta Valley	26.7	16.7	37.5	57.8	62.5	52.7	11.2	14.2	8.0	2.6	4.2	0.9
Peshok	26.9	19.4	33.9	54.7	64.1	45.9	14.6	13.6	15.6	1.9	1.0	2.8
Average	27.6	19.9	35.3	55.1	58.9	51.4	13.9	16.6	11.1	1.6	2.0	1.2

**TABLE 7 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	18.0	15.3	20.8	88.6	94.7	84.0	11.4	5.3	16.0
Teesta Valley	18.7	18.9	18.4	88.9	95.8	81.1	11.1	4.2	19.1
Peshok	15.7	15.7	15.7	91.4	94.1	88.9	8.6	5.9	11.1
Average	17.5	16.7	18.3	89.7	94.9	84.6	10.4	5.1	15.4

### 4.3 Status of Health

Health is a dynamic situation that needs considerable amount of time and expertise to capture its varied aspects. In this study we did not go into the details of health complexities characterising the area. We have only documented the major diseases suffered by garden labourers and other members of labour households and their response in this connection. Almost 6 percent the total sample population suffered from one or the other health problems in the last one year. About 98 percent of the sufferers consulted doctors or some medicinal practitioner in this connection. Traditional ethno-spiritual faith healing is also prevalent in the area.

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

In case of health situations of labour households it is the responsibility of tea management. Tea companies and other legal custodians of tea gardens/estates 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 (see Table 9) are the results of the improper health planning and medical facilities in the area. Although people across the garden villages are quite aware of medical advice to be taken in recent times, poor accessibility of health centres often proves to be costly. Moreover, tea

management in the pretext of falling production, productivity and market value of Darjeeling tea, in recent times, has withdrawn many of the health entitlements hitherto provided to the labourers.

**TABLE 8 HEALTH PROBLEMS AND RESPONSE OF THE LABOURERS**

Tea Estate	Health Problem in the last one year			Medical advice taken
	Total	Male	Female	Total
Ambiok	6.2	4.8	7.5	93.3
Teesta Valley	4.6	4.7	4.4	100.0
Peshok	6.7	8.3	5.2	100.0
Average	5.8	6.0	5.7	97.8

**TABLE 9 MAJOR HEALTH PROBLEMS**

Ambiok	Teesta Valley	Peshok
Lever jaundice	Lever jaundice	Lever jaundice
Mental problem	Paralysis	Tuberculosis
Typhoid	Heart	Gastric
Paralysis	Gland TB	Malaria
Heart	Asthma	Sugar
Asthma		Heart
Pressure		Pressure
Stone		
Blindness		

#### *4.4 Economic Condition*

The economic activity and the nature of work across tea gardens in Darjeeling Hills have been gradually diversifying with time. This is to a large extent the result of degrading state of affairs of tea gardens followed by rising population and their increasing economic aspirations. The fact that major chunk of garden populations are outside the economic responsibility of tea management demands that garden population opt for some other economic pastures. Further, tea labourers who are directly associated with the gardens are also not quite satisfied with the paltry economic entitlements provided to them. To make the situation worse many of the traditional socio-economic entitlements previously provided to the garden labourers have been withdrawn by managements across teas estates in Darjeeling Hills in recent times under the pretext of ill health of tea industry. Majority of garden labourers are not satisfied with prevailing wage structure and want a serious revision of the same in view of increasing market inflation in present times<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> The management, on the other hand, feels that although labourers keep on demanding for more wages and other entitlements it is beyond their capacity to comply with all their demands.

The closed down gardens that were subsequently abandoned had to pass through difficult situations and economic hardships. Although, there were no reports on 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 in the situation and sought for other alternative livelihood pastures. 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 evolved informal committee and sub-committees to maintain their garden and hence supplemented their alternative livelihood options.

Mention should be made here that there are at least 3 to 5 tea gardens in the region that are always closed down/locked up at a given point of time. These gardens are different from abandoned gardens as they start functioning after sometime. It is not that the same garden keeps on closing and opening every time. Any tea estate may be locked up at any point of time if the company management feels the garden needs to be locked up. According to 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 garden labourers from raising their rightful voice'. The frequent *closure/lock up syndrome* of tea estates is a serious concern in the context of the socio-economic health of the garden labourers. While the gardens are locked up labourers are reportedly not paid their wages and other associated entitlements.

Livestock constitutes major household asset across tea garden/estate villages. Ownership of vehicles including two wheelers is a rare phenomenon in 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 households having television varies from village to village depending upon the economic health of the same. Similar is the case with regard to maintenance of bank accounts. The average income of labour households across garden villages are not very impressive with a major chunk shared by household expenditure, leaving reasonably less amount for saving.

**TABLE 10 NATURE OF WORK ACROSS TEA GARDEN VILLAGES**

Tea Estate		Tea Labour	House Hold	Agri/L_stock	Pvt* Work	Other Works **	Student	Unemployed ***	Other Dependant	Total Dependant
Ambiok (functioning)	Total	35.3	13.5	2.9	2.5	0.8	24.6	9.4	11.1	20.5
	Male	44.4	1.6	1.6	4.8	1.6	23.4	10.5	12.1	22.6
	Female	25.8	25.8	4.2	0.0	0.0	25.8	8.3	10.0	18.3
Teesta Valley (functioning)	Total	28.2	9.1	11.6	2.5	5.0	28.6	4.6	10.4	14.9
	Male	15.8	5.5	16.5	4.7	5.5	31.5	4.7	11.8	16.5
	Female	42.1	13.2	6.1	0.0	0.0	25.4	4.4	8.8	13.2
Average	Total	31.7	11.3	7.2	2.5	2.9	26.6	7.0	10.7	17.7
	Male	30.1	3.6	9.1	4.8	5.5	27.4	7.6	12.0	19.6
	Female	34.0	19.5	5.2	0.0	0.0	25.6	6.4	9.4	15.8
Peshok (Abandoned)	Total	-	15.3	26.0	5.4	14.8	22.4	7.2	9.0	16.1
	Male	-	2.8	26.9	9.3	24.1	24.1	5.6	7.4	13.0
	Female	-	27.0	25.2	1.7	6.1	20.9	8.7	10.4	19.1

\*Private workers include to those individuals who are teaching in private schools, working in small firms, giving tuitions etc.

\*\*This category includes those people, who work outside their village mainly in army, as security guards, government service, as agriculture labourers or other labourers and local politicians.

\*\*\* The share of unemployed population might be considerably higher than what is reflected in the table. All the respondents besides regular garden labourers and those with government service reported to be looking for a more lucrative job and that there were engaged in agriculture, livestock, household chores, private works or other forms labour activity as they had no other economic options. They however, did not identify themselves as unemployed.

**TABLE 11 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 12 ENTITLEMENTS TO THE LABOURERS: AMBIOK TEA GARDEN**

Category of Entitlement	According to Management	According to Labourers	Remarks
Provident Fund	Yes	Yes	-
Diwali Bonus	Yes	Yes	8.33% of annual income
Gratuity/Arrear	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.
Ration	Yes	Yes	2 kg rice, 4 kg <i>atta</i> (wheat flour) per 15 days, no dependency granted
Fire Wood	Yes	No	Stopped
Kerosene	Yes	Yes	Earlier, 3 litre per labour head in 15 days. It was later reduced to 1 litre, now only 0.5 litre is given.
Umbrella	Yes	No	Stopped
Rain Coat	Yes	No	Stopped
Slipper	Yes	No	Stopped
Blanket	Yes	No	Stopped

Tea	Yes	Yes	250 grams per labour head in 15 days
-----	-----	-----	--------------------------------------

**TABLE 13 ENTITLEMENTS TO THE LABOURERS IN TEESTA VALLEY TEA GARDEN**

Category of Entitlement	According to Management	According to Labourers	Remarks
Provident Fund	Yes	Yes	-
Diwali Bonus	Yes	Yes	8.33% of annual income
Gratuity/Arrear	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. Benefits are only valid to the regular workers not casuals.
Ration	Yes	Yes	1 kg rice, 2.3 kg wheat and 0.5 kg rice, 0.7 kg <i>atta</i> per week as dependency per child until s/he attains 18 years
Fire Wood	Yes	Yes	19 Maund / year per labour (1 maund = 40 kg)
Kerosene	Yes	Yes	2 litre per labour head in a month.
Umbrella	Yes	Yes	Supplied Annually
Rain Coat	Yes	Yes	Supplied once in 3 years
Slipper/shoe	Yes	Yes	Rs. 49/- granted to a labourer annually
Blanket:	Yes	No	Stopped since last four years
Tea	Yes	Yes	400 grams per labour head in a month

**TABLE 14 HOUSEHOLD ASSETS**

Tea Estate	Live Stock	Vehicle	Television	Bank Account
Ambiok	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 15 AVERAGE LIVESTOCK PER HOUSEHOLD**

Tea Estate	Cow	Goat	Pig
Ambiok	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

**TABLE 16 AVERAGE HOUSEHOLD INCOME AND EXPENDITURE (Rs.)**

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

#### 4.5 Housing and Sanitation Situation

A large proportion of garden labourers still reside in *kutchra* and *semi-pucca* houses. Open field defecation is still widely practiced in the area making them vulnerable to numerous health complexities, notably worm infestation. Similar is the situation with regard to safe drinking water and clean fuel.

Majority of 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, garden management used to provide subsidised firewood and kerosene to garden labourers. This facility has, however, been stopped in many of the tea gardens while in several gardens the quantity have drastically been reduced. The labourers, particularly women, have to walk a considerable distance to fetch water and fuel wood. The gradual degradation of rural ecology has increased the burden as the labourers have to travel increased distance in this connection and the situation is worsening with time. The management often violets the principle of adequate and decent housing and sanitation outlined in 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 through revision.

**TABLE 17 NATURE OF HOUSE (%)**

Tea Estate	Kutchra	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

**TABLE 18 BASIC SANITATION SITUATIONS (%)**

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

**TABLE 19 SOURCES OF DRINKING WATER AND FUEL (%)**

Tea Estate	Sources of Drinking Water		Sources of Fuel			
	Tap	Spring	Fuel Wood	Fuel wood and Kerosene	Fuel wood and LPG	Fuel wood, Kerosene and LPG
Ambiok	41.2	58.8	88.2	11.8	0.0	0.0
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	0.0
Average	40.9	59.0	63.6	23.7	14.3	-

**TABLE 20 DISTANCE OF THE SOURCES (%)**

Tea Estate	Water				Fuel wood			
	0-0.5 km	0.5-1 km	1-2 km	> 2 km	0-0.5 km	0.5-1 km	1-2 km	> 2 km
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

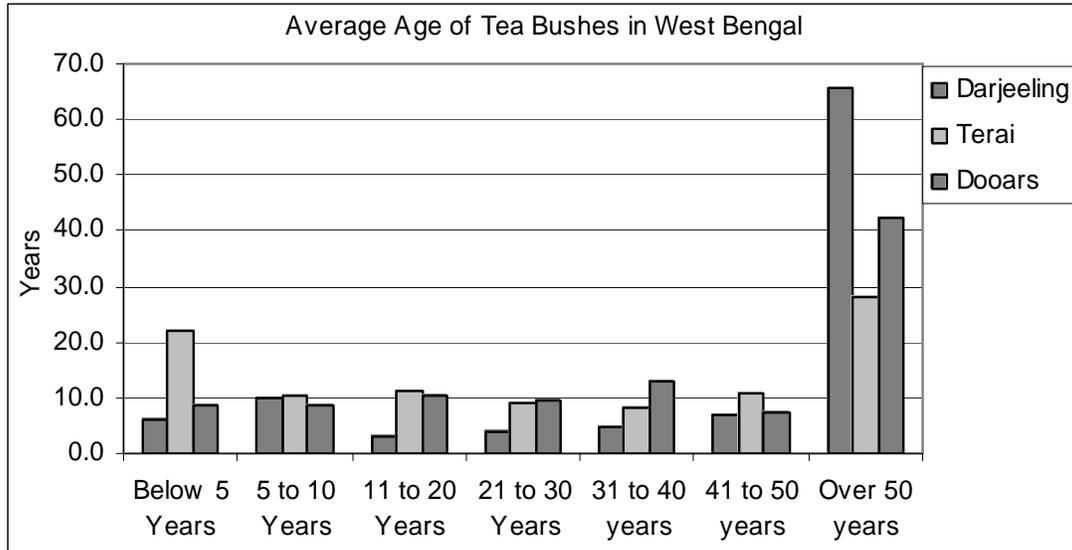
## 5. General Conclusions

The overall health of the tea industry in Darjeeling Hills and the associated socio-economic health of the labourers cannot be attributed to a single factor; a series of factors and counter factors have played their interlinked roles over the years.

First, in a liberalised world market about 50 million kg is sold as 'Darjeeling Tea' although the total production of the same is less than nine million kg (Khawas, Vimal 2006: 50). Most of these teas come from Sri Lanka, Kenya and even Nepal of late. Some of the fake stuff is called Lanka Darjeeling or Hamburg Darjeeling but most of the time it is called Pure Darjeeling Tea. Further, Japan, a largely orthodox tea-growing country, has already discovered the chemical constituents of the Darjeeling variety. In all, such a situation has led to a degradation of the international reputation of Darjeeling Tea. In an effort to stop this market and sustain its intellectual property rights, the Darjeeling logo was created as early as 1983 and registered in the UK, the US, Canada, Japan, Egypt and Spain. A Certification Trade Mark Scheme for Darjeeling Tea was also launched in 2000 to stop this market and sustain its Intellectual Property Rights. However, Darjeeling tea is still not recognised by World Trade Organisation (WTO) as a Geographical Indicator.

Second, a majority of the tea bushes in Darjeeling Hills are well passed their prime. About 66 per cent of the shrubs are over 50 years out of which more that 50 per cent have been there for over 100 years. Further, there are bushes that are over 140 years old! According to a recent study by the Tea Board of India, only eight per cent of the old bushes have been uprooted and new ones planted in their place. This has seriously impacted the productivity of the tea gardens. The yield of Darjeeling Tea, in recent times, is less than 550 kg per hectare, far below the national average of over 1,750 kg per hectare. There have been repeated suggestions from researchers, tea experts, trade unions, the Tea Board of India and others to systematically replant the old bushes. However, tea companies have over the years turned a deaf ear to the plea for fear of losing their profits. Re-plantation is a tedious job. Besides, when replanted, it takes at least five years to reach a stage when leaves can be plucked. It is this gap of five years that companies fear most

because they have to pay workers and invest huge amount in re-plantation venture, without getting any money in return. There have been suggestions that all tea garden practise organic farming so that they can attract buyers.



Third, ‘multiplication’ or increase in population in the tea gardens has become a major cause for worry. Most plantation workers are migrants from Nepal who were initially encouraged by the British to cross over in order to bring to terms the physically challenging virgin forested lands. Later, of course, certain push factors in Nepal and pull factors on the Indian side caused the population to grow exponentially. Moreover, there is no provision of sending back retired labourers and those persons who are not working in the gardens. Further, the area covered by the plantations has remained constant or has increased only marginally over the years. About 60 per cent of the population is in no way involved with working in the gardens and this has inflicted tremendous pressure on the region’s economy and ecology.

Fourth, monoculture – and the subsequent exhaustion of soil nutrients – has severely affected the health and yield of gardens. Experts believe soil in plantation areas do not have enough nutrients and health tea bushes cannot grow on sick soil. The practice has further affected the bio-diversity of the Darjeeling Hills and has progressively weakened the genetic strength of tea bushes and associated biota. It may be noted that re-mineralisation is not very expensive but requires a scientific approach.

Fifth, the historic movement for Gorkhaland unleashed in the 1980s by the Nepali-speaking inhabitants of Darjeeling Hills has also impacted the health of the tea estates. All plantations hitherto functioning normally were negatively impacted by the agitation that often turned violent in nature. There are umpteen instances when management officials and owners fled away never to return. The situation became worse in gardens owned by state or Central government agencies. Also, the impact of the agitation on the labourers' work culture has been tremendous. Traditionally, the workers have been known for their hard work, punctuality, sincerity, efficiency and respect for management principles. The Gorkhaland agitation, however, has enormously eroded such culture.

The 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 Ts (tea, timber, and tourism) for which Darjeeling is famous for, tea and timber are not under the direct control of the DGHC. In case of forest, management of protected and un-classed forests are within the executive power of the DGHC while reserved forests are under the direct control of the state forest department. With regard to tea, estates are mostly controlled by private companies under the umbrella of the government and few are under direct control of the state and central government agencies. Such a situation leaves the DGHC with very little or no role in monitoring the tea gardens.

Sixth, the Plantation Labour Act, 1951, was formulated with a view to improve the living and working conditions of the workers and associated persons in the gardens. The Act, however, is featured with several pitfalls. Empirical evidence shows that the management violates most of the provisions. Moreover, there is no room for punishing the culprit. Tea estates have very poor or no provisions for drinking water facilities, housing, latrines, health care, electricity and education even for the permanent workers. Further, the Act needs a through revision in the context of the changing social, economic and political scenario.

Last, but not the least, tea estates still operate in the colonial master-slave mode. The goal is to control the market and as much as possible squeeze the primary producer. The equation with the passage of time developed a mind-set of dependency in the psyche of the garden labourers; workers began to increasingly depend on the management for everything. They would get their salary every Friday irrespective of how they performed. 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 company owners and top officials secretly by-passed the negative impacts through manipulations. Tea gardens closed down or

were abandoned, and the socio-economic condition of the workers turned from bad to worse but the owners and upper-level officials never suffered.

There is a need to debate, discuss and conduct a systematic research on these factors in order to understand the crux of the problems characterising the Darjeeling Tea industry. And with time and effort from all quarters, perhaps the once booming sector can be saved from degenerating into oblivion.

## REFERENCES

American University. 2004. 'Intellectual Property Rights of Darjeeling Tea in the age of globalization and world trade', *Trade and Environment Database (TED) Journal*. No. 752. July. (Downloaded from: <http://www.american.edu/TED/darjeeling.htm>).

Bhutia, Y. 1991. 'Natural Environment and Changing Socio-economic setup in Darjeeling Himalaya', unpublished M.Phil dissertation. New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru University.

Biswas, S. 1987. 'Rural Development in the Hill Areas: A study of two villages in Kalimpong', Occasional Paper-3. Darjeeling: Centre for Himalayan Studies (North Bengal University).

Census of India. 2001. *Primary Census Abstract*. West Bengal.

Centre for Education and Communication (CEC). 2003. 'Tea Plantations of West Bengal in Crisis', Research Report. New Delhi: CEC.

Fareedi, M. and P.D. Lepcha. (undated). 'Area and Issue Profile of Darjeeling and Sikkim', study report. Darjeeling.

Joshi, S.C. 1984. *Rural Development in the Himalaya - Problems and Prospects*. Nainital: Gyanodaya Prakashan:

Kumar, R. and Vasundhara Nair. (undated). 'Darjeeling Tea- Challenges in the Protection and Enforcement of Intellectual Property Rights', <http://teaap2.indiateaportal.com/forms/darjeelingtea.pdf> (Accessed: December 16, 2005)

Khawas, Vimal. 2006. 'Not brewing right: Tea in the Darjeeling hills is losing its flavour', *Down to Earth*, August 15. p 50.

Rao, Niranjana C. 2003. 'Geographical Indications in the Indian Context: A Case Study of Darjeeling Tea', ICRIER Working Paper No 11. September.

Rao, K.S. and K.G, Saxena.1994. *Sustainable Development and Rehabilitation of the Degraded Village Lands in Himalaya*. Dehra Dun: Bishen Singh Mahendra Pal Singh.

Singh, T.V. and J. Kaur. (Eds.). 1985. *Integrated Mountain Development*. New Delhi: Himalayan Books.