

Role of Tea Plantation Industry in Human Resource Development in Darjeeling Hills

Kishan Harijan is the Assistant Professor in the Department of History, Salesian College, Sonada. He has published articles in *Darjeeling Times* and reviewed books for *Salesian Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*. His area of research interest is Trade and Commerce in Darjeeling.

Abstract

Harijan takes a historical look at the emergence of tea industry in Darjeeling district and analyzes its current problems with a view to retaining the erstwhile glory of Darjeeling tea. Being a labour intensive industry, he proposes that its potential for human resource development is rich, especially by enabling the upcoming generation of tea garden population in moving on and even in sharing in the ownership of the gardens.

Keywords: Plantation, Labourers, Tea Brokers, Degradation

Introduction

Tea Industry is not only the mainstay of the hill people of Darjeeling but also the backbone of the hill economy. By 1904, Indian tea exports overtook China's position and the supremacy she wrested from China, as the world's leading exporter of tea remained unchallenged until recently. Most of the tea bushes on attaining an age of more than hundred years are still producing tea with Muscatel Flavour and Exquisite Bouquet, lies the importance of Tea Plantation Industry in Darjeeling Hills. However, the production of this staple industry is on the verge of gradual decline if some remedial measures are not taken at the proper time for the maintenance and improvement of Human Resource Development (HRM). No place across the world could produce same taste and the quality of tea as Darjeeling tea possess. Therefore, this article is about the genesis and development of tea plantation industry in Darjeeling Hills and some aspects regarding its prospects for Human Resource Development. The problems faced by tea plantation workers come under special scrutiny in this article given the perspective that their amicable resolution is part and parcel of the Human Resource Development in the region.

The development of the tea industry in India was closely associated with the growth of the western market for tea, and the colonial era in the East, which encouraged and in fact supported the tea plantations with foreign capital and enterprise.¹The tea industry employs over 40% of the working population in the hills and tea industry thus provides for over 50% of the population of the hills. Nearly 80% are employed as

1 P.J. Victor SJ, Prabhat Pradhan, Devika S. Lama and Aniruddha Das (Eds.), *Discursive Hills: Studies in History, Polity and Economy*, Darjeeling, St Joseph's Publication, 2007, p. 101

casual labourers and only 20% in the permanent category with 50% of these labourers being women. Even the climate of Darjeeling Hills blessed by the nature for plantation, attracted labourers seeking sustenance.²

Role of Plantation in Darjeeling Hills:

Environmental conditions play a vital role in conditioning the livelihood and economy of the people in Darjeeling Hills. The topography, climatic variations, soil condition have all influenced human occupancy. Tea could possibly be grown in Britain or the United States, but the cool climate would produce a small crop, and labour costs would make the product prohibitively expensive. The idea has been suggested, and still appears in some hopeful seed catalogues! Robert Fortune had suggested growing tea in England back in the 1840s. He wrote:

Those persons in England who possess tea-plants, and who cultivate them for pleasure, should always bear in mind that, even in the tea districts of China, this shrub will not succeed when planted in low wet land; and this is doubtless one of the reasons why so few persons succeed in growing it in this country. It ought always to be planted on a warm sloping bank, in order to give it a fair chance of success. If some warm spots of this kind in the South of England or Ireland were selected, who knows but our cottagers might be able to grow their own tea? At all events they might have the fragrant herb to look upon.³

Darjeeling Himalaya has only over 13% cultivable land in proportion to its total geographical area. The geographical location and the prevailing land revenue system created congenial condition for the introduction of plantation economy. The tea plantation industry is not only an enterprise yielding monetary benefits, but also it satiates our eyes with their natural beauty. The British encouraged the boom of plantation industry in North Bengal not only for economic bonanza but also enhancement and beautification of the place with the elixir of greenery. Even Tourism, most promising industry in Darjeeling attracts large number of tourists from all over the country as well as from abroad. Tourism as an industry is no doubt a part of the socio-economic development of any nation but from the point of view of sustainable development, both plantation and tourism should yield prosperity.

Tea is the permanent crop of a tea bush which has an economic life span varying from 50 to 80 years approximately. With great variations depending upon the location, soil, type of plant and a large number of other factors, this crop thrives best in the Darjeeling Hills. When the British acquired Darjeeling in 1835 there were about 100 local inhabitants, mostly Lepchas, living in 20 huts around a Buddhist monastery on Observatory hill. By 1872, the population rose to 94,712 comprising mostly of migrant labour from Eastern Nepal. Therefore, the major reason was the development of

2 Kishan Harijan, "History of Tea Plantation", *Darjeeling Times*, Darjeeling, August, 2009, p. 21.

3 Serena Hardy, *The Tea Book*, Surrey (England), Whittet Books, 1979, p. 18.

plantation that attracted much labour force in the hills. Further, the demand for labour greatly increased along with the extension of tea gardens.⁴

Tea plantation was started in 1841 in Darjeeling, when the first tea experimental nursery was raised by Dr. Campbell in Jalapahar, then shifted to Lebong in 1845. The first tea garden began in Upper Takvar in 1852 which was raised by Captain Masson and Mr. Treustler.⁵ In the year 1910, the total area under tea lease was 123, 853 acres in Darjeeling of which 51, 281 acres were under tea. The area under tea rose to a maximum in 1943 when it was 63,227 acres: In that year the total area under lease was 165,680 acres.

The foothills of north-eastern part of Himalayas are popularly known as *Terai* which include Jalpaiguri sub-division and its surrounding areas of Darjeeling district. From Darjeeling tea cultivation began to spread over to Terai in 1862 under the initiative of the British planters. After annexation of Terai, experimental plantation started in 1862 and the first tea garden in the area was Champta near Khaprail by Mr. James White. By 1901 there were 32 tea gardens in Terai with an area of 7,900 acres tea.⁶ Commercial tea plantation in Darjeeling dates back about 150 years under the British colony and today forms the major socio-economic backbone of the local population. Today (2007) there are 85 Tea gardens with 72 operational Tea factories in Darjeeling district producing about 10 million kilograms of Tea annually. Tea sales bring revenue of about '150 crores of which 70% is spent within the District for various commodities. There are about 50,000 permanent workers in the Tea Industry and about 2,00,000 dependents who depend on their income. The primary revenue of Darjeeling population is still dependent on the Tea Industry.

Development of Tea Plantations in Darjeeling⁷:

Period Year	No.of Gardens	Area under cultivation in Ha	Tea Production (approx.) in kgs
1866	39	3900	194,850
1870	56	4300	765,000
1874	113	7400	1,767,560
1885	175	15156	4,090,634
1895	186	19170	5,271,518
1905	148	19928	5,601,362
1960		18605	10,130,000
1970	72	18500	8,833,000
1994		20200	10,403,000
2004	87	19000	9,500,000

4 *Ibid.* p. 237.

5 Tushar Kanti Ghosh, *Tea Gardens of West Bengal*, Delhi, B. R. Publication, 1987, p. 27.

6 Cf., P.J. Victor, *et al*, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 220.

In 1866, there were 39 tea gardens covering 3900 hectares of land under tea. In 1874, there were 113 tea estates covering 7,400 hectares of land under tea. By 1905 there were 148 tea estates comprising approximately 19,928 hectares. Presently there are 87 tea gardens covering about 19,000 hectares of land producing about 10 million kgs of Tea annually. The above table reveals the development of plantation, though, the production of tea decreases in the second half of the twentieth Century.

Though Indians consume a large quantity of tea, the high quality tea is exported abroad bringing in vital foreign exchange. For instance, Castleton tea garden from Darjeeling has set a record-breaking price of US \$ 290 per kg in 1992. Darjeeling Himalaya has been producing finest quality tea in the world fetching the highest price.⁸

Labourers play a significant role in enhancing overall productivity in the tea industry, as they are involved at every stage of production starting from nursery development to the final preparation of tea packets. The penetration of colonial capitalism in India led to the growth of a wage-earning industrial labour force divided into several segments and a variety of labour practices in the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. Women mostly plucked leaves whereas the males were engaged in pruning, cutting, tenuring and all kinds of factory works.

The Calcutta Tea Brokers Association was formed about in 1879. After nine years Calcutta Tea Traders Association was established which virtually framed the rules for auction of tea in Calcutta. Tea brokers are a guide to the trade starting from the nursery of plant seedlings to disposal and accounting of the produce of the plantation. Tea Brokers maintain a team of well-trained highly experienced and technically qualified staff that are to help the Industry in its every sphere. Their services are utilized by all concerned with tea - the producers, the exporters and Internal Buyers, Tea Board and the Government. Even the consumers International Tea Promoters, research and experimental centers are benefited by their information and advice. However, brokers are not permitted to undertake any Tea Agency Business.⁹

The plantation labour force had several distinctive socio-economic traits by virtue of the demands made upon it by the plantation system. From the very inception, the tea *Bachabari* (nursery) play a prominent role. An appropriate location of nurseries and a constant and expert supervision would enhance a probability of getting maximum number of healthy bushes. Unlike forest resources, tea industry stands good possibility of being looked after more carefully by both the labourers and the managements. Tea bushes would not readily tempt the local inhabitants as their basic fuels.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁹ S. Karotemprel and B. Dutta Roy (Eds.), *Tea Garden Labourers of North-East India*, Shillong, Vendrame Institute, 1990, p. 304.

Effects

From the economic point of view, the great importance of tea gardens is that it opened up hitherto waste tracts and provided employment for a large number of labourers. Broadly speaking, growth of plantations has brought about a process of commercialization of agricultural activities, which has not, however, largely extended itself beyond the plantations. One may observe the co-existence of commercialized plantation sector along with non-plantation sector which is characterized by primitive farming methods. The establishment of the railways (1881) in Darjeeling, and building of good roads for tea transport so to show that the efforts of exploitation of virgin lands for tea were successful and beneficial to the local people as well.¹⁰

Apparently, the British system of land management was successful because out of the wild, the British grew tea in this part of India and the rate of exploitation of tea was so successful that it did not take long time to oust China from the world market of tea, and to bring British India to the most prominent place.¹¹

Problems

When technological change occurs, the quality of capital improves and the amount available to each worker usually increases. From the very inception, the tea industry in the hills, having labour intensive character, had limited scope towards applying and absorbing any drastic technological changes. Further, the industry is full of unskilled labourers. Besides, the seasonal employment and the perennial unemployment is a big persistent problem in the tea gardens of Darjeeling. Although, the North Bengal plantation labour force came to be endowed with certain economic and social characteristics with regard to the mode of payment the pattern of work organization and work discipline imposed on them.

One of the most critical problems faced by Darjeeling hill tea industry presently is the onslaught of labour supply. Further, the draining of the labour force has caused damage to the subsistence economy. This has not only upset the whole economic structure but has also led to huge health and unemployment problems.

The Plantation Labour Act, 1951 was formulated with a view to improve the living and working conditions of the people in the gardens since in the early days the people had to bear every kind of hardships. The Preamble to this Act aims at providing for the welfare of labour and to regulate the conditions of work in plantations.¹² However, the provisions contained in it were partly implemented only from April 1954. Despite

10 L.S.S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers*, Darjeeling, New Delhi, Logos Press, (Reprinted) 1999, p. 17.

11 Edmund Mitchell, *Thacker's Guide Book to Darjeeling and its Neighbourhood*, Calcutta, 1891, p. 120.

12 R.L. Sarkar, Mahendra P. Lama (Eds.), *The Eastern Himalayas: Environment and Economy, Darjeeling*, Indian Institute of Hill Economy, 1986, p. 520.

the independence of India, the management of the tea gardens continued with certain colonial habits of running the gardens.¹³

Tea is a profitable industry and within it, Darjeeling Tea is the best performer. Yet, the real producer, the worker, lives in conditions that are in marked contrast to the industry's turnover. The state of deprivation and exploitation has been perpetuated for three to four generations now. Even then the workers are neither allowed nor encouraged to have their participation in the affairs of the sale of tea produced by them. (Cf. Rohin D'Souza, "Rural Development through Rural Tourism," *Editor's note*). From the annual report of some tea estates from 1882-1911, we come to know that Terai Tea estate was suffering from labour shortage. The workers were reluctant to work in bad unhygienic conditions: malaria, black-water-fever, cholera, dysentery were very common features of the area. The Rege Commission observed in 1944 that the workers had no organization at all.

As per Report contained in Techno-Economic Survey of Darjeeling Tea Industry by National Council of Applied Economics and Research, New Delhi, it is mentioned that there was arrangement of subsidy from Tea Board for uprooting the old bushes and carrying out replantation. But no massive uprooting of the old bushes or replantation is discernible throughout the length and breadth of the hill gardens. Thus, the mindset of the tea industry management is clearly concerned not for the health of Tea bushes and workers but getting maximum crops for earning profit.¹⁴

Though it was a fact that more than hundred years ago Soureni and Fuaguri (Phuguri) tea gardens were owned by local entrepreneurs uptill 1987, the tillers of the soil of tea garden of Darjeeling were not able to hold over three per cent of the full-fledged managerial posts even in 1987, among the registered tea gardens of Darjeeling hills. The average productivity (of tea) has been shown as low in case of Darjeeling hills because of estimation being inclusive of the performance of sick and already closed gardens.

They (the workers) get Rupees Forty Eight and Forty Paise for eight hours work as per the industry wise agreement held in the month of July 2005 in Kolkata between the Government of West Bengal, the owners of Tea Gardens and the representatives of workers. But as per the then available price index it was necessary for each worker to get at least Rupees Eighty Eight per day for maintaining and supporting three to four members per family. As at the same time several decades junior tea gardens of Kerala, Tamilnadu and Sikkim were paying to their workers ₹ 66.70, ₹ 74.62 and ₹ 85 corresponding as daily wages. Thus, the workers of the Tea Gardens of Darjeeling that produce the Finest Tea in the World has been treated as an assortment of easy

13 D.S. Bomjan, *Darjeeling-Dooars: People and Place under Bengal's Neo-Colonial Rule*, Darjeeling, Bikash Jana Sahitya Kendra, 2008, p. 103.

14 *Ibid.* pp. 12-13.

targets for exploitation.¹⁵ There is Legislation and Enactment also for the safeguard and protection of the interest and right of the workers. However, the implementation of the provisions for the benefit and welfare of the workers is minimum. At times, the employees of the tea gardens of Darjeeling have been deprived even of the benefit of the hill compensatory allowance. The foreign buyers of Darjeeling Tea are reported to have been contributing some amount in addition to the cost of the tea exclusively for the welfare of the workers who prepare matchless flavored teas. But the workers continue to gain little.¹⁶

The management of the Tea Gardens from its inception to the departure of the British, regarded themselves as absolute masters. During the British days isolation from the mainland especially the urban towns such as Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Kurseong and Siliguri enabled the planters to barricade the plantation. To maintain this provision, even a para-military force known as North Bengal Mounted Rifles was kept in the plantation. By doing so, the workers were barricaded within the jurisdiction of the plantation alone.¹⁷

The tea produced by the plantations is mostly sold in Tea Auction Centers in Calcutta (81%) and to a minor extent at Siliguri. The balance is sold directly overseas and locally by the gardens. While some tea gardens sell 100% their produce through auctions, it varies to as low as 40%. Some small plantations successfully sell 100% of their sales directly. Many tea companies sell tea in packets in retail stores and exclusively packet it for their clients locally and internationally but have a limited market. The annual production of Tea is 40% in spring, (1st and 2nd Flush) 50% in rainy and 10% in autumn seasons.¹⁸

Harmony in labour relations is an essential pre-requisite for the prosperity and efficiency of the Tea industry which is one of the largest employers of labour. Normally the best evidence as to the relationship between the employers and their labourers is found from the record of the strikes. Trade Unions are indispensable part of an industry. Without providing for their sound constitution and working there could be no relationship of the two wings of an industry. As the bargaining strength of labour is poor, it had to rely on government for its protection until its own organization is in a position to deal on a par with managements. Transport system is primitive. In the gardens the labourers remained completely isolated from the nationalist movements. Surprisingly, there was no organized labour movement before independence.

As we know that, the previous legislations of the Plantation Labour Act did not do much for the workers. Hence, the Shramik Sangh, a Trade Union wing of All India Gorkha League and Mazdoor Union of the Communist Party of India, jointly submitted

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ R.L. Sarkar, Mahendra P. Lama, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹⁸ P. J. Victor, *et al*, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

a charter of Demand on 8th May 1955 to the owners of tea gardens and the government. The major demands contained in the charter of Demands were: i) the wages for the workers of Darjeeling Tea Gardens at par with the Dooars Tea Garden Workers; ii) bonus on the basis of profit; iii) amendment in the provision of the standing order; iv) abolition of the order of eviction of the workers on flimsy pretext at the whims of the management, etc¹⁹. Nonetheless, the ecological constraints, inadequate work force and low primitive technology do not allow the local hill labourers to have adequate income to meet their necessities.

Assessment

With the spread of English education in India, the Indian entrepreneurs gradually came forward and the British government could not resist their claim for equal advantage with the British tea planters. The Indian tea gardens were considered by the British planters and colonialists as 'the duck that laid golden eggs'. The Master received the lion's share, on the contrary, the plantation workers were left with nothing except the sustenance wage. In general, the stagnation of the tea industry has led to stagnation in the hill region particularly of rural areas in the tea-blocks where people do not have any alternative means of livelihood. Selective location of the tea industry exerted a strong economic pull on migrant labour to settle in the west of the district. Opening of new estates created employment opportunities which were largely responsible for traditionally high population densities in the western hills. Stiff global competition, bad management and lack of adequate investment in the tea sector complicated the situation, resulting in gradual development of an economic crisis in the hills. Over the first half of the present century, the tea industry showed consistent performance with rising outputs and profits, with a large part of the latter being ploughed back for further development of the industry. However, with the end of expansion of acreage under tea, new employment opportunities in this sector dwindled and the stagnation and sickness of tea-estates that followed rendered a sizeable number of plantation workers jobless.

Continuance in such trends will lead to more and more hill tea estates becoming sick in the near future. In general, the stagnation of the tea industry has led to stagnation in the hill region, particularly of rural areas in the tea-blocks where people do not have any alternative means of livelihood. Further, traditional agriculture in the hills cannot generate the level of surplus necessary for economic development. Cultivators, moreover, cannot secure remunerative prices for what surplus they produce because of isolation of the rural economy from urban centres and the resulting inaccessibility of urban markets.²⁰

Nonetheless, In order to facilitate easier movement of visitors and tea produced in the gardens of Darjeeling Hills a Toy Train track and a road were constructed

19 D.S. Bomjan, *op. cit.* p. 103.

20 *Ibid*, p. 173.

connecting Darjeeling with the plains of Bengal. The completion of the Toy Train track and the road really increased the flow of tourists into this area.²¹ Thus, we can say that tea plantation industry fostered the growth of Tourism through the development of Transport system.

With regard to the plantation industry, human resource plays a vital role and the interests of the labourers are to be safeguarded. There should be cordial relations between the management and the workers. Further, adequate economic incentives can be encouraged by setting up of more and more technical, health and educational institutions for the toiling class and of course the motivation to adopt newer technologies. A rise in large-scale mechanized processing, highly technical research, organized professional management system, and utilization of resident labour force in this essentially labour-intensive agro-industrial production can also help overcome the dilemmas of this industry.²²

Conclusion

As we have seen thus far, North Bengal (Darjeeling) has one of the oldest established Tea plantations in the world, dating back 150 years and has gained worldwide reputation. Tea industry forms the source for direct revenue distribution among a sizeable segment of the population. The growth of the Tea industry means large-scale land-use for tea growing which in turn requires more population to cultivate and manage the plantations. The tea industry employs over 40% of the working population in the hills and tea industry thus provides for over 50% of the population of the hills. With the development of Tea plantations, small hillside towns have developed into tourist resorts and can with planned infrastructure, provide better livelihood. Tourism and Trade that are other sources of local income have also developed due to Tea Industry.

However, stiff global competition, lackadaisical management and lack of adequate investment in the tea sector have complicated the situation, resulting in the gradual development of an economic crisis in the hills. This labour-intensive agro-industrial, export-oriented enterprise, which has made India, 'the tea garden of the world, should be based on a sound, national and growth-oriented land management policy which ushers an industrial democracy and takes into consideration not only the needs of the immediate future but rather a long term view into the century ahead.

Given the key role that workers play, Human Resource Development in tea plantation industry ought to be better considered from the perspective of their welfare as the most significant route to the integral development of the people of Darjeeling. Such a perspective is therefore paramount in safeguarding not only the ecology of the region but rather to retain 'Tea Crown', once earned across the world.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 225.

²² Cf. R.L. Sarkar, *op. cit.*, p. 463.