



## PLANTATION AND THE PEOPLE OF DARJEELING – DISPARITY AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE REGION

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### **Abstract**

*The study of regional History has been expanding its horizon greatly in the recent years. In this respect exploration of man and environment relationship is a promising field for any social science researcher today. Over the last 160 years of the introduction of the plantation industry in Darjeeling region, many changes have taken place in the lifestyle of the migrant and the local labourers. The main purpose of the study is to explore their life and culture and also to learn how they adjusted themselves with the given environment with the changing scenario of the area. The study seeks to examine historically the socio-economic and political factors that reinforced the plantation labour in the Darjeeling hills.*

**Key Words:** *Plantation, Darjeeling, Labourers.*

### **Introduction**

The history of the development of the plantation industry in the Darjeeling district dates back to the early fifties of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the English entrepreneurs took lease of extensive land area on the mountain slopes of the Darjeeling Himalaya and started tea and cinchona plantation for commercial purpose. During the formative years of the introduction of the plantation industry the region was sparsely populated so labourers from various parts of India and her neighbouring countries were encouraged to settle in the fringe areas of the tea and cinchona gardens. As plantation was a labour intensive industry and the region was sparsely populated the Britishers started recruiting labourers from various parts of India like: Jharkhand, Bihar, Orissa, Santhal Parganas etc., and the neighbouring countries like Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim (as Sikkim was not a part of the Union of India at that time). Thus during the initial phase, the plantation industry of Darjeeling region was largely dependent on the migrant labourers whose migration was induced by the planters. Different groups of people were recruited from different provinces like the Munda and Gond from Bihar; Santhal, Tanti and Bhumij from Bengal and Bihar; Oraon from Bihar and Orissa; Goala from Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh; Lohar from Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh; and Khond from Andhra Pradesh. These migrant labourers easily agreed to settle permanently with their entire family in the newly establish plantation areas as indentured labourers. The employment of these indentured or slave labour ensured for the planters that the workers were bound to work on the plantation on whatever wage fixed by the planters. Apart from these different Adivasi (tribal) groups from Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh etc., many labourers belonging to various caste and community from Nepal and Sikkim along with few Bhutias and Tibetans also migrated into the plantation areas of Darjeeling region. As these migrant labourers came from different parts of India and the neighbouring countries, they made the plantation regions a meeting ground for various cultures, languages and ethnicity.

It is true that the rapid growth of Darjeeling can be traced back to the introduction of Plantation Industry (Tea and Cinchona) in the hills which was followed by the introduction of Railways (1881) and other Missionary activities like establishment of various educational institutions and other construction works. Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that the history of Darjeeling is incomplete without the study of history of the plantation Industry in this region. Because the development of plantation industry in the second half of the nineteenth century was an important chapter in the history of North Bengal in particular and the whole of India in general.

In the long run the introduction of the plantation industry not only affected the economy but also the cultural, social and political scenario of area. For example we can specifically mention that, in the political fields, as because the migrant plantation workers were the dominant community of Darjeeling district, so most of the people's representatives from the Panchayat to the Parliament are from the worker's group. In fact the entire political scenario was drastically altered. In the cultural field, we found the emergence of new dialect, known as 'Sadri' in the Terai area and some parts of the Darjeeling region. It is not a language but rather a *lingua-franca* of the different tribal groups. What is interesting is that this dialect is not found in their original homeland. On the other hand in the hill areas, *Nepali* language emerged as *lingua franca* between the labourers in the hill areas of Darjeeling region. And as a result their respective traditional dialect like Rai, Limbu, Subba, Lepcha, Newari etc lost their prominence in the plantation areas. But on a positive note, *Nepali* Language and literature has flourished immensely in the region. In regard to the society a new social group emerged known as *Madesia* and *Paharia*. As most of the migrant tribal workers were from the plains or *madesh* they were known as 'Madesia'. Although they appeared to be one homogeneous group, especially when compared to the *Nepali* workers who were known as 'Paharia'(meaning from hill areas, especially *Nepali* speaking people) in reality they were not a homogeneous group, but were divided into different tribes.



In addition to this the rigid caste hierarchy which used to prevail in the Nepali society started losing its predominance due to the common dwellings in the industrial environment. The traditional three tier Nepali caste hierarchy namely *Tagadhari Jat* (Caste), *Matwali Jat* (Caste) and the Untouchables started loosening its implication in the society. And a new concept like *Thulo jat* meaning higher or upper caste and *Sano jat* meaning lower or small caste started gaining its importance in the Nepali Society. It was sometimes also referred to as *Pani Chalne Jat* or a caste from whose hand water can be accepted and the *Pani Na Chalne jat* meaning caste from whom water cannot be accepted by the upper caste. The concept and practice like untouchability as such totally lost its place in the plantation society of Darjeeling region. Thus it would not be wrong to say that the kind of society that we have today in the Darjeeling region, without any caste prejudices, biases and practices like untouchability is one of the major contributions of the plantation industry which compelled the people from various caste and class to work in a common environment.

Besides socio-cultural changes in the hills, plantation industry indirectly helped in the overall development of the area. It would not be wrong to say that, it was only after the introduction of the plantation industry (tea and cinchona) that overall development of the region actually started. This was soon followed by the other major activities like introduction of Railways, construction of roads, ropeways, bridges etc and finally the establishment of missionary schools and colleges. Apart from these, earnings from plantation industry played a critical role in Britain's International Trade and capital flow relation and in the maintenance of the British Imperial System. Thus we can say that the development of Darjeeling in the nineteenth century was largely due to the introduction of the plantation industry in the region by the Britishers, though they were only interested in the profit rather than the growth and development of the area. However, the present scenario reflects a sad picture, plantation industry which was the very reason to have initiated the development and modernization process to Darjeeling is now lagging behind as underdeveloped and marginalized in the Darjeeling region. The wages of the tea garden labourers remains a meagre Rs 122.50 per day even after many efforts by the workers' union and political parties to increase the wages of the workers. It is high time that the state and the central government must arise from their slumber and give Darjeeling Tea, the area and the Tea Garden workers the due that they deserve.

Theoretically plantation industry of Darjeeling region is the mainstay of the economy in the hills and therefore promises to provide a rewarding way of life which provides to its workers a steady livelihood, housing, statutory benefits, allowance, incentives, crèches for infants of working mothers, children's education, integrated residential medical facilities for employees and their families and many more. But in reality this is not the case. The labourers, who are the heart and the soul of the plantation industry still do not have the basic facilities like housing, education, allowance, incentives, and medical facilities, which they deserve. Although these people have been living in the areas for more than hundred years they still do not have any documents of their land holdings. So, if any worker goes against the management, they have the right to throw them from their land holdings. In 1951 government of India had tried to take an initiative by passing the Plantation Labour Act in order to address the sufferings of the labourers, but it hardly had any effects on them. The Plantation Labour Act of 1951 lays down that plantation area must have primary schools, crèches, clean drinking water supply in the labour lines, recreational facilities for the workers etc. But unfortunately, most of these provisions are not enforced fully in any of the plantation areas of Darjeeling region, workers are still deprived of whatever little scope they have of improving their condition.

Plantation industry is really an issue of intensive study and research because the early entrepreneurs with the help of the labourers had developed the industry with many odds. But, the new generations of the planters were virtually disinterested in the Plantation. They were more interested in converting Tea Gardens and Cinchona gardens into Money Making Industry. It is high time now that both central and state governments have to work on the various issues of the plantation labourers and must provide at least basic requirements for them.

There is no documentary evidence to tell us about the exact condition of the labourers at the time of the introduction of the plantation industry in the Darjeeling region. However from the annual report of some of the tea estate from 1882-1911 we come to know that the Terai (foothills) and Darjeeling region was suffering from labour shortage during the initial years of plantation industry in these regions. The rate of mortality was very high. The living conditions were poor. The workers were not willing to work in the bad and unhygienic condition. Malaria, kala-ajar, dysentery etc., were very common diseases in these areas up to the period of Independence. Satyen Majumdar in his autobiography 'Amar Biplab Jiggasa' has pointed out that labourers in the plantation were badly treated but there were no organizations to ventilate their grievances. But at the same time, in Assam, Trade Unions actively started participating around 1920's. But in the Terai and Darjeeling region, labourers were completely cut off by the planters from mainstream life. It was said that only during the 'Haats' (weekly markets) they were permitted to have time for themselves but still they could not go beyond certain boundaries.



Besides, the planters always used to follow discriminatory policy towards the women. Despite forming half the labour force, women workers have remained marginalized in the functioning of the plantation industry from the time of its inception. In both tea and cinchona plantation sector women are confined mostly to the field work and never allowed to do official work and hold higher posts. In addition to it, up to the passing of the Remuneration Act in 1975, they were given less wages in comparison to the male labourers.

Although with the growth of trade unions, the condition of the workers had improved a lot, but as the days passed the situation of various tea and cinchona gardens remained the same. The condition of the labourers gradually became worse due to minimum wage payment, regular strikes, political movements (like the Gorkhaland movement of the 1980s and from 2007 onwards) and more than that many tea gardens being closed down along with the cinchona factory since 1999. As a result many people become jobless and they remain poor as before.

### Conclusion

The condition of the labourers never improved since the beginning of the plantation industry in the region. Although at present trade unions and various governmental and non-government organization are coming up to address the grievances of the workers but the ground realities related with the problems of the labourers remains the same. Labourers are the biggest force behind the running of the plantation industry. They have the potential for leadership which needs to be developed. Government must take an initiative in order to provide opportunities for them. This will not only improve their condition but will also give a great impetus to the plantation industry as a whole.

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