

CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Tea industry was the engine of growth in the British period. The development of the hill district of Darjeeling owes its origin to the tea industry. During the post-independence period the engine of growth slowed down. There was an all-prevailing stagnation in the tea industry. Due to this, the development of the whole area was stunted. The ills of present Darjeeling area is the result of stagnation of tea industry. The growth of unemployment, pressure on land and pauperisation of the rural masses can all be traced to the stagnation of the tea industry.

When the British started the tea industry, they made provisions for its expansion. But since independence the new owners, who replaced the British planters failed to achieve the use of surplus land. Out of total land area 43 percent is used directly for tea cultivation and as the new owners did not invest in the gardens, land remained unutilised and the acreage under cultivation remained stagnant since the British period. Consequently, the industry faced a problem of surplus labour force on the estate. Factors that have contributed to the creation of surplus labour are natural growth of population in labour families coupled with virtual stagnation in the area under cultivation.

The practice of the British management was to recruit labour from amongst the dependents of the labourers. Recruitment of labour from outside district was not necessary. In matters of recruitment for the supervisory and clerical posts, the local people were also given preference. But under new management since independence, supervisory staff, clerical staff and all managerial staff are brought more or less from

outside the district as a matter of policy. Consequently, the doors of employment had been closed for the Nepalis in the gardens.

One characteristic feature of the tea garden employment is that overwhelming proportion of the garden workers are employed in the fieldwork highlighting the agricultural character of tea plantations. Out of total workers employed 93 percent are field workers and 7 percent are other workers working in the factory or in other capacity. Prior to mechanisation, tea used to be prepared by hand and recruitment of labour for manufacturing operation was relatively high. In early days of tea plantation when the leaf was hand-rolled a man could work only 14-18 kilograms of withered leaf a day, but now a modern tea roller can roll 365-455 kilograms of withered leaf in 1 to 2 hours. Similarly, sorting machine have drastically cut down the labour time required for tea manufacturing.

Whatever may be the reason, the employment of labour in the tea gardens has drastically fallen in 1971 census in comparison to 1961 census. The total tea plantation labour according to 1971 census was 56990 indicating a fall of 7 percent in comparison to 1961 census. The fall in employment in the tea gardens is, however, not uniform.

Predominance of female labour amongst the workers is another distinctive feature in the tea gardens in the hill areas. At the time of recruitment of labour usually a whole family is recruited-including adults, adolescents and children. The wages of women and children are lower than those of the male workers.- Out of total workforce, the adult females constitute 58 percent; adolescents and children constituted 8 percent and adult males are only 34 percent. In the employment in tea gardens women labourers are preferred because they earn less than the male workers.

In 1974, there were nine sick gardens and thirty-eight 'economically weak' gardens. All the sick gardens belonged to the Indian sector of the tea industry. By the

sickness of the gardens nearly 2563 workers were directly affected with nearly 7537 dependents. Out of nine sick gardens only two had plantation area below 122 hectares which is considered to be minimum economic size of a garden in the hill areas. The rest were sick due to lack of proper investment and financial policy. The size of the garden is not necessarily the reason for the uneconomic nature of performance of the gardens. Out of 38 uneconomic gardens only 10 were below 122 hectares. (considered minimum optimum) But there were 15 other tea gardens which were below 122 hectares which were neither sick nor uneconomic. This shows that the size of the garden may not be necessary cause for the economic weakness.

Again the average yield is not the necessary reason for the economic weakness. It is revealed during the study that in Darjeeling and Jorebunglow, the weak gardens had higher yield than the average. It is in this context argued that one of the reasons for sickness of gardens is the change of management of tea gardens after independence.

To what extent has the change in the ownership pattern of tea companies been responsible for the widespread sickness that is today evident in Darjeeling's tea industry.

Since the fifties and the sixties with the abolishing of managing agency system and the enactment of Foreign Exchange Regulation Act, there has been a pronounced trend of foreign (mainly British) capital moving out of the Indian tea industry. Merchants and financiers who became the new owners of tea estates were primarily interested in quick profit even to the detriment of the health of the gardens has today been acknowledged in official documents.

The October 1979, Techno-Economic Survey of the Darjeeling Tea industry prepared by Tea Manufacturing and Marketing Consultants(TM & MC) Pvt. Ltd. under the auspices of Tea Board, noted that one of the major reasons for sickness in the

Darjeeling Tea industry was the “disinvestment by British Tea Companies and disposal of marginal units, to local traders who did not possess either managerial or technical skills and were in the main interested in short-term gains”.

An analysis of 27 selected rupee joint stock companies in the Darjeeling area, revealed that between 1940 and 1970, while the number of non-Indian directors declined from 112 to only 11, the number of Indian directors showed a corresponding increase from 6 to 85 in the period. However, of these Indian directors, the number of directors with merchant background shot up from only 2 in 1940 to 53 in 1965.

There is some evidence to show that the Indian owners of tea estates, by and large, tended to be no less exploitative than their foreign-counterparts. While most foreign tea companies rarely paid their shareholders dividends exceeding 20 percent per annum; some Indian tea companies were known to pay their shareholders dividends as high as 200 percent a year when the goings were good or nothing at all in bad years. The British owners interpret this in some circles as evidence of the “feudal” character of Indian tea garden owners as compared to the “more capitalistic” style of management followed.

In any case, from the thirties till the present day acreage and employment in tea industry have shown a declining trend. In the district of Darjeeling alone, there were more than 20,000 hectares under tea in 1938. But by 1979, acreage under tea had declined to barely 18,000 hectares in Darjeeling. Moreover, given the rising trend of “vacancy ratios” in tea gardens official sources have estimated that not more than 14,000 hectares are actually under tea in Darjeeling. About 5600 hectares under tea disappeared in the forty-year period –1939-40 to 1979-80. (27/8)

The tea industry is highly labour-intensive. It is well known that the industry's potential in providing employment per unit of arable land is far greater than the agricultural sector as a whole. It provides direct employment to about two and half lakh workers in the region with more than 50% of workers being women. Apart from this, the industry provides secondary employment to a large number of persons in chest manufacture, trading firms, transport establishments, warehouses, hotels, schools, hospitals, and agricultural input manufacturing units. The secondary employment generated is estimated to be almost the same as that of the primary employment.

The tea industry in the Darjeeling hill areas is in a serious crisis as it is confronted with a number of problems, which can be briefly stated as under:

1. Darjeeling yield has remained confined to around 550 Kg. per hectare for the last four decades.
2. With hardly any scope to take up new area for extension plantation, the increase in production of Darjeeling tea is possible only through increase in productivity.
3. Darjeeling topography controls the climate. 80% of total rain is accountable in four monsoon months i.e. June-September. Therefore, with the recession of monsoon, the district suffers from water stress; the higher elevation estates more than the lower ones. The temperature in Darjeeling varies both diurnally (within a day) and periodically on successive days. As tea plants have to continuously integrate their responses to temperature over time they find it difficult.
4. Low productivity and high cost of production are barely compensated by the high price of Darjeeling tea, that too only during the quality period. Therefore,

the main thrust of Darjeeling production is for the first and second flush crop. This economic compulsion is perhaps the principal limiting factor which causes other limiting factors.

5. To ensure a better price the industry has resorted to the finest type of plucking. There is also the temptation to low tipping and dipping of hands below the plucking table. This leads to a sharp drop in production.
6. A large proportion of tea bushes are more than fifty years old. At present only 7.15% of the area is of the age group of 0-20 years whereas 72.2% is more than 91 years old. Replanting should be taken up.
7. 90% of Darjeeling gardens have vacancy varying from 2% to 30%. Gardens have also been planted with wider spacing, which accommodate between 4494 and 11960 plants per hectare. With vacancies the plant population is further reduced. To have maximum plucking point density, the plant population should be around 14,000 to 16,000 bushes per hectare.
8. Unfortunately because of leaching losses and soil erosion, the fertility of soil in Darjeeling is on the decline. This is due to inadequate soil conservation in the past.
9. 60% of the tea bushes are China Hybrid type of which the shoot size is small and yield is low. These require to be replaced by clones developed from China Hybrid type that will maximise yield and quality.
10. The economic viability of any Darjeeling garden depends on price realisation. As first and second flush crop fetches better prices, more gardens tend to keep more and more tea under unpruned and follow 8-9 years pruning cycle. This causes damage to the bush structure and affects yield in the long run. A

pruning policy befitting to the particular section, considering the elevation aspect, susceptibility to pests and diseases, vulnerability to drought, labour availability of the garden, has to be formulated.

11. Owing to high rainfall and humidity generally the bush frames remain covered with lichen and moss, which penetrate the wood-harboured pests.
12. Weeds hold back yields. Manual weed control has to be improved.
13. High withering time is required for manufacture. Efforts should be made to reduce the withering time and save energy, while accomplishing the typical flavour characteristics.
14. The practice of processing green leaves of non Darjeeling origin such as Nepal etc. in the factories located in Darjeeling and passing it off as Darjeeling teas was reportedly creating a danger to the quality image of Darjeeling teas in both domestic and international markets.

Darjeeling tea will be obsolete in fifty years unless steps are taken immediately. The real problem is that some of the best brands of Chinese tea bushes were planted as early as 1863 and there has been precious little re-planting done. Despite the years of neglect, the old plants are still in fine fettle, but a time will come when these will wither away. England was one of the major markets for Darjeeling tea. The size of this market has dwindled. Consumption exists, but awareness is less. At present the world market is saturated. Darjeeling's annual tea production is between 10-11 million kilograms, whereas about 40 million kilograms of Darjeeling tea is sold worldwide. Where does the additional 30 million come from? Today exotic Darjeeling Tea is fighting for shelf space

in world markets with 'fake' Darjeeling tea from plantations in Sri Lanka and Kenya under brand names such as 'Lanka Darjeeling' and 'Hamburg Darjeeling'.

Tea Board of India made an ambitious effort to prevent the plagiarisation of Darjeeling Tea, which nearly came to nought. The reason being the Board had made it mandatory for all companies that market "Darjeeling Tea" to have the Tea Board's seal of approval and the Darjeeling logo on their packaging. Unfortunately, this was applicable only to those companies operating in India and did not prevent tea from other regions being sold globally as Darjeeling tea.

The following suggestions are put forward for the removal of problems being presently faced by Darjeeling tea gardens: -

1. Public limited companies and Private limited companies may work out necessary programme for extension planting within the grant on a priority basis.
2. An integrated development incentive scheme need be developed in order to boost up the long-term developmental activities namely, extension planting and replanting.
3. Tea estates may avail of Tea Board's Plantation Development Scheme for financial assistance extended in the form of long-term loan and subsidy.
4. Tea estates below and up to 200 hectares may go in for suitable infilling programme in order to reduce the percentage of vacancy and for the growth of yield rate.
5. Infilling programme may be given priority for the estates under Public Sector Undertaking and judicious approach will be required in respect of selection of

sectors to be infilled as almost 70% of the total planted area under all ownerships contained bushes above 70 years of age.

6. Low yielding estates should lay due stress for uprooting and replanting programme immediately or rejuvenation and infilling operation to fill up vacancies together with adoption of proper plucking round and pruning cycle schedules in order to improve the yield rate in future.
7. Rejuvenation and consolidation with inter row planting would be needed in the sections having wider spacing for augmentation of the bush density and productivity of tea.
8. Considering the sloppy topographical position, chemical control of weed in general is not recommended to combat topsoil erosion for tea estates producing Bio-Organic tea. Only judicious application of herbicides is suggested in cases where it is almost unavoidable.
9. In order to ensure substantial enhancement of the labour productivity, identification of unproductive job components, minimisation of idle time, optimum utilisation of resources, modernisation of equipment and motivational approach are to be adopted and Public Sector factories should attach top priority on it.
10. Considering the weak financial status of the Darjeeling tea industry the State Government may consider suitable concession in the rates of agricultural income Tax and Cess on green leaf as applied to Darjeeling teas. It is suggested that considering the poor economy, Darjeeling tea should be exempted from payment of Excise Duty.

11. Improvement of the basic infrastructure like roads, power supply and rural electrification project needs immediate attention by the State Government.

Historically, plantations were a product of colonialism. In the earlier years, planters spared no method to recruit people to work in the plantations. In addition to dangling a package of facilities, which were often, more imaginary than real, coercion and brute force were extensively used to bring labour to the workplace. Another source of labour supply was the villages affected by famines and slavery. The planter who was interested only in accumulating profit gave appallingly low wages to the workers and provided practically no facilities. Ill-fed, ill-housed and ill-treated, workers even died with nobody noticing their deaths. The workers were inextricably caught in the web of perpetual bondage. The planter-capitalist exploitation on the one side and the master-servant feudal relations on the other literally squeezed the workers for a long period. Their outlook began to change when the development of transport and communication facilities gradually improved. They could interact with the world outside. The seething discontent ultimately culminated in organised protests. The increasing labour protests in the plantations also drew considerable inspirations from the agrarian movements in the plains under the leadership of left wing political forces. Consequently, the government was forced to pass laws from time to time conceding some of the demands, such as repeal of earlier anti-labour legislations like Workmen's Breach of Contract Act (1925) and the abolition of the Indenture system of Labour (1915) etc. The Government had also taken some relatively progressive steps such as passing Workmen's Compensation Act (1923) and Trade Union Act (1926) and also set up various Committees and Commissions like Royal Commission on Labour (1929), the Labour Investigation Committee (1946) etc. Nevertheless, the situation did not improve to any appreciable extent till independence.

In fact, it was only in the post-independence period, and more specifically in 1951, that the Plantation Labour Act, the great watershed in the history of plantation labour was brought about with laudable objectives of providing certain welfare facilities for the workers. More than five decades have passed since the Act came into force- a sufficiently long period for effecting the desired improvements in the living conditions of plantation workers. While the Act has undoubtedly conferred certain benefits, the structural changes that had been taking place on the plantations, such as change in ownership pattern, governmental regulations and also the sweeping changes in the larger socio-economic system encompassing the plantations, call for a fresh look at the living conditions of plantation labourers. This helps to understand to what extent the planters have provided the necessary amenities contemplated in the Plantation Labour Act.

Trade unions have taken root in the tea gardens against tremendous opposition from the management and there is no denying that, over the years, they have played an important role in improving the conditions of the workers. But today's picture of the unions in the tea plantations emerges different from that of the past. Majority of union leaders are losing their credibility among the rank and file of their followers. This has been taking place for various reasons. The union leaders have taken very little interest in the various needs of the workers; having invariably emphasised the wage aspect alone. The increase in wages is naturally not sufficient to enable the worker to build a better house, repair his house properly, or enable him to have better medical facilities. There are aspects, which the trade unions, in whom the workers had placed their trust and hopes, should have taken up with zeal and commitment. The unions have failed to make the management implement the various provisions of the Plantation Labour Act, nor have they involved themselves in raising the social consciousness of the workers. Several of

the tea gardens in the Darjeeling hills default in the timely remittance of Provident Fund dues contributed by the workers. Yet the union leaders have not at any time taken up the matter with the management. Traditionally the Nepali labourers are not induced to saving. The unions could have tried to inculcate in their worker members, the positive side of thrift, moderate drinking, family planning etc.

The recent trend of multiplicity of unions has led to greater inter-union rivalry and the workers are caught in its vortex. At times, this has given rise to conflict situation being created for the sake of exhibiting the might of respective unions. Petty squabbles are blown up in the hope of roping in more members or for creating a new union itself. Sometimes, the management too is party to such situations as they favour particular union, which is already existent, or encourage creation of a new union in order to tilt the balance against the union, which they do not like.

Other interests guiding the modus operandi of the unions at the garden level cause further problems. A classic example of such situation is calling of strike by all trade unions in late January 1983 to protest against the delay in wage agreements. Calling a token strike at the end of January virtually amounted to workers donating a day's wage to the employers.

Thus, in the course of field study, it was revealed that some of the union leaders have played into the hands of tea garden management by corrupt practices. This has not escaped the notice of the workers either who are quite bitter about this breach of trust on the part of leaders. The younger generations of workers have started analysing the situation and have reservations about blindly toeing the line of the union leaders. If the union leaders continue to betray the tea garden workers, there are indications that the

workers would overthrow the existing trade unions and take over the responsibility of looking after their interests themselves.

The trade union leaders of the tea plantations are generally non-workers and usually middle-class people drawn from different walks of life like social workers, lawyers, teachers, political leaders etc. It cannot be denied that, if more workers could have been encouraged to accept trade union leadership, this crisis of confidence could have been minimised.

One is left to feel that the theory of workers' participation has not found any favour in the tea plantations—either with the management or with the unions. Management prefers to confine the participative role of workers to areas, which are related to increase in productivity and conflicts between workers and management. They are not keen to involve the workers in other issues of common interests. The trade unions, look upon the participative factor as an erosion of their own role and a threat to their power. In such a situation, unless the state defines the various aspects and areas where the workers can participate and make it mandatory on the management to recognise this new role of the workers, there is little hope of the participative theory succeeding in the tea plantations of the Darjeeling hills.

The picture which emerges is of the indifferent attitude of the managements of the tea companies towards the welfare of their workers; the laxity of the government in protecting the interests of the workers, and the lethargy of the trade unions in taking up in right earnest, the genuine cause of the workers. The resultant helplessness of the workers finds expression in a variety of potentially explosive situations. On looking at the total picture of industrial relations in the tea industry of Darjeeling hills, it is found that the gap between management and labour is fairly wide and may continue to widen. The

management will aim at maximisation of profits and minimisation of costs, in the pursuit of which the workers' interests get a back seat. In these circumstances, the trade unions and the government could effectively intervene in the protection of the legitimate rights of workers, thereby minimising the areas of conflict between labour and management. The government should pass laws carrying more stringent penalties and effectively enforce their implementation.

The current economic and political transformations also imply a different arena of operation. There is clearly the need for broader strategies. On the one hand, unions have to defend the interests of their members, interests that are becoming more and more heterogeneous as a result of a further widening of the gap in skills as well as of a differentiation in the nature of employment contracts (through casualisation). On the other hand, the interests of groups of working people outside the formal, waged sector are coming increasingly into the orbit of the trade unions; women workers, informal-sector workers, rural workers.

Strategies which recognise this differentiation in interests and constituencies will include the building of alliances with other groupings in civic society that articulate these concerns, including consumers, students and women's groups. They will also involve strategic alliances with training and research institutions that can provide the necessary depth of analysis to build viable and above all sustainable bridges. Such a multiple strategic approach would seem to make it possible for a new form of trade union to regain a meaningful position for workingmen and women.

The challenges faced by the trade union movement call for new approaches that may imply institutional renovations, new tasks, and even new ways of cooperation with other societal institutions. New roles for the trade union movement are naturally related

to the old traditions of protecting workers and better equipping people for work, and of struggling for wider emancipation and democratisation. However, given the fast structural changes taking place in labour markets, it appears that so far the trade union movement has been unable to assert itself with respect to both employment conditions and worsening power relations. Even allowing for the numerous problems experienced by trade union movements, including those of leadership and internal democratic functioning, it is clear that the overriding causes of their weakness lie in the changes that have occurred in the broader political and economic environment.

Labour and work formed, and still form, strategic variables as inputs in the various economic sectors. The cheapness of labour was of strategic importance in the early stages; at the present stage its human capital formation calls for close state monitoring. The rights of workers and the level of their earnings are strictly dictated by macro-economic policy making in which there is little scope for organised labour but to play a ceremonial role at the national level. At the enterprise level, management-labour relations are tightly defined by the dictates of competitiveness rather than direct social concern and responsibility for equity and workers' rights. At best, this is an unstable situation politically in the long run.

It took a long time for the labour relations dimensions of structural adjustment to be analysed. While it would be unfair to put the onus only on the trade union movement for this, it is legitimate to expect from it a solidly professional approach in the search for solutions. Only time will tell whether or not there will be scope to provide a viable new orientation to concepts such as industrial democracy and participative management. Trade unions in development are confronted with challenges as great as, if not greater than; the labour movement has faced since the early days of the industrial revolution.

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