

Emergence of Bengali Entrepreneurship : A Case Study of the Tea Plantation Industry in Darjeeling Hill

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Tea-Plantation is a large scale, capital intensive and highly specialized commercial enterprise. Entrepreneurship is an integral part of this field¹. Socio-economic research in this area however is very scanty and largely lacking in theoretical base and empirical evidence. In this commercial field, I have chosen tea plantation because this is the oldest and biggest investment sector in North-Eastern India. The Bengalis are the single largest Indian investors undertaking entrepreneurship in tea plantations in largest growing districts of Bengal that is Jalpaiguri Dooars, Darjeeling Terai and Hill area and also side by side over a large tract of Surma Valley in lower Assam².

However, before I proceed any further I would like to answer two relevant questions as to why I have chose Darjeeling hill area excepting other tea plantation areas of North Bengal. Further why it is only highlighted on the Bengali community rather than the European community who played a great role in laying the foundations of tea in Darjeeling Hill? The answer of my first question is that no research work as yet has been done on the Bengali Entrepreneurship in the tea plantation industry in the proposed area. Secondly, from time to time we read or hear a lot about the European tea planters but there were also Bengali entrepreneurs who played a significant role in the 1800s and 1900s long before independence. These two factors actually provoked me to make a study in this field.

The ownership and control of the plantation industry in hill were enjoyed by two communities - the Bengalis and the Europeans. The Bengalis appeared on the scene some time later³. They succeeded in taming and clearing the jungles, a remarkable feat in it. What is even more outstanding is that few of them had even seen a tea bush and there were neither publications nor a research association there to guide them. The story of the Bengali entrepreneurs, those men of great character and resources, reads almost like a make believe adventure tale⁴. It was a mystery of how those magnificent men carried the colossal machines 20ft high and 10 ft wide. There were no roads at all and set them up in the tea factories. In addition, food was scare and difficult to obtain. A trip to Darjeeling from a tea garden involved a long pony ride. A late night at the Planters club meant a 10 or 15 mile walk, impossible in the pouring rain⁵.

By 1856 development had been advanced from the experimental to a commercial stage. In 1856 the Alubari garden was opened in Kurseong and the Darjeeling tea company and another garden by the Darjeeling Mortgage Bank on the Leborg Spur. In 1859 Dhutaria garden was started by Mr. Brougham and in between 1860-64 several gardens were established at Ging, Takdah, Phubsering by the Darjeeling Tea company and at Takvar and Badamtam by the Leborg Tea Company. The gardens now known as Makaibari, Pandam,

Steinthal were also opened in this period. There had been rapid development in the hill as the stability of the soil and climate became apparent⁶. In this phenomenon, the Bengalis appeared slowly but with steadiness. In 1874, the numbers of gardens in hill were 174⁷. The number of Indian-owned gardens were only five of which three belonged to Pal Choudhury family of Ranaghat(Dist. Nadia), Banarjee family of Dacca, Maharajadhiraja Bahadur of Burdwan and last two were run by a Nepali contractor and by a joint company named "Hindu Tea Company"⁸.

Maharajadhiraja Bahadur of Burdwan, a distinguished property owner in the town and district acquired huge properties in the stations of Darjeeling and Kurseong in 1850⁹. He used to travel up from Burdwan via purnea, Bhagalpur and Titaliya by palanquin and with a large retinue. Additions were made by him to the properties originally purchased in Darjeeling and Kurseong were about 1,600 acres in extent and consists of forests, tea gardens, agricultural lands, residential houses and so on¹⁰. However, today the garden exists no more.

Of the two outside families which set up tea plantation with help of the closed group shareholders from among their family members, the Pal-Chaudhury and Banarjee family ranked first¹¹. Trade and money-lending were their major sources of income. In many cases, profits from business were invested in purchasing Zamindari rights. The process had been started before the Battle of Plassey when a number of people of such trading communities acted as banias or agents and middlemen for the East India Company's servants and British free merchants and played a vital role in British private trade transactions. With the development of agency houses by the end of the 18th century, they were confined to a more restricted role¹². But in the meantime many of them had established themselves as influential traders and landowners of substance. Thus towards the end of 19th century, we find a number of well-to-do traders, money-lenders, Zaminders who emerged as newly trading communities¹³. Mobility through trade particularly silk and salt trade, they earned huge fortune and these became two major sources of individual mobility. For instances, the affluences of Pal Chaudhury came from salt trade. Later they expanded their economic activities to other areas but most notable thing was their interest in purchasing Zamindari estates, sub- in feudatory tenures and revenue farming rights¹⁴. However, apart from these magnates, there were also other lesser families who had money through various kinds of trade and invested in purchasing cultivable lands and combined with it the lucrative trade of money lending¹⁵.

The pal chaudhury family had started tea plantations in hill in the year of 1876. The venture was started with the suitable leadership of late Naffer ch. pal chaudhury who was an indigo planter by profession. He bought some tea estates from British planters under his possession¹⁶. For example we can mention the name of Jogomaya T. E. Land for this estate was at first obtained by Mr. William Bells from Govt. of India in 1860¹⁷. Later Mr. Naffer ch. bought it from Mr. Belles in 1864. The Pal Chaudhury family had other two estates like Radharani in Dooars and Krishnakali in Assam. These three tea estates were conducted by the Radharani Tea and Estates Pvt. Ltd., P.O.- Maheshganj, Nadia¹⁸. In 1960's the ownership of these estates' has been transferred to the Sinha family of Nadia, an aristocrat landlord family. According to their name, there is a road in Kolkata named Lord Sinha road. The Jogomaya tea estate was under the family till March 2010. Now it is being conducted by

Mr. Sujit Bhattacharya. The present ownership status of Krishnakali estate in Assam and Radharani Tea Estate in Dooars are also the same. These two are now being conducted by the Garg Tea Co., a non-Bengali firm.

The second biggest achievement of Naffer ch. pal chadhury was the Mohurgaong and Gulma T.E. At first it was divided into two parts under two separate administrators of two estates. One was Mohargaong tea estate and the other was Gulma Tea Company. The first one was taken by Mr. Naffer Chandra and Bipra das, his son from Mr. Lewis Prince Delves Broughten, Administrator General of Bengal and also the administrator of the T.e. on the 4th sep. 1895. It was almost a partnership firm. The Gulma tea estate was taken by Mr. Amiya Paul Chaudhury, son of Mr. Bipra Das pal Chaudhury on 28th June, 1930 from Gulma Tea Company. In the year 1930 this two tea estates were merged into one and since then this tea estate came to be known as Mohargaong Gulma tea estate²⁰. Late Mrs. ILA Pal Chaudhury, daughter of Amiya pal Chaudhury was an elected M.P. from Krishnagar, Nadia for Congress party. The present Managing Director of this tea estate is Mrs. Nayan Tara Pal Chaudhury²¹.

Mr. Bipra Das Pal Chaudhury was the first Indian having qualified as engineer from the Manchester University in England²². As soon as the Hill Cart road was ready in 1869, he came to visit the Darjeeling hill. He became highly impressed in seeing the British tea planters starting so many tea plantations in such a healthy climate. Being a cultured and educated man, he desired to devote his life and make his career as tea planter²³. Since then he began to live in Darjeeling hill and soon organized instant tea, first in Gayabari with Chinese seeds and secured some indigenous Assam seeds from Ananda Mohan Bose, his close friend who had a plantation in Monai tea estate of Assam. The Assam seeds were planted in Mohargaong Gulma near Sukna where it was growing very fast²⁴. The name Gayabari meant the cultivation of dry land seeds, which was the staple food of Lepchas and they called the grains "Ghaiya". Bipradas during his stay in Hill found that the plants of tea required longer time to grow and produced less tea in the higher altitudes than in the lower hills. He visited the small experimental plantation of Mr. James White in Sibring (single T.E.) near Khaprail (Champta T.E.). Finally he took a large area of land from Jamansing Busnet "Pattader" of cart road fame. In the process he transferred the land grant in his name, below Cart road at an altitude of 1500 to 3000 feet from sea level. He thought that the production of tea in this altitude should be most suitable from the 15th mile to the 23rd mile of the hill cart road that is from Chubbatti to Gayabari²⁵. At the same time, he made his application to the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling for a land grant near Sukna at the foothills. Since the only tea garden planted by "Babu" or Zaminder of Maheshganj was Gayabari, the hill people called the garden "Babu Kanan". The name of Gayabari is still current among the local people. However, at present the ownership of this T.E. is possessed under a non-Bengali Tea Company. The last Managing Director of this garden was late Mr. Amitava Pal Chaudhury.

Apart from his tea planter life, Bipra Das played a vital role in promoting cultural environment in Darjeeling Hill. He was a member of Brahma Samaj in the hills. He was a devoted friend of Keshab Ch. Sen and Pratap Ch. Majumder. Both of them were great

teachers of Brahma Samaj who visited the ridge of Tindharia. A Brahma Samaj temple was established by the efforts of BiproDas and with the help of Motilal Haldar and Girish Ch. Guha in Kurseong. His close friend Asutosh Chaudhury (Justice Sir Asutosh) built a house alongside of BiproDas's residence in Tindharia ridge. Poet Rabindra Nath Tagore was casual visitor to this place , as he was closely related to Justice Sir Asutosh. Bipro Das had his only son-in law Mr U. N. Roy who was given a house at Gayabari. This property was later acquired by Mr. Amiya Pal Chaudhury. He is said to have built a beautiful mansion on the plot and the descendants still enjoy it as their summer residence. Mr. Janaki Nath Bose , the father of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose had come to the neighbourhood at the instance of Bipro Das. Mr. Janaki Nath preferred to have his house in the ridge of Gidhapahar about a mile up the approach road from Gayabari. The marvelous scenery witnessed from the house of Mr. Bose is hardly seen from any other place in the hills. However , in this house Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose was confined as a political leader²⁶.

After the Pal chaudhury family, the next important Bengali entrepreneur in Darjeeling hill was the Banarjee family of Kolkata. In early days , they were the aristocratic zaminder family of Dacca. Their entrepreneurial activity was started in hill under the able leadership of late Mr. G.C. Banarjee. He was a young polyglot who took up the job as translator and scribe with the East India Company²⁷. He left his home (Boral ,South 24 Parganas) at the age of 16 and travelled to North Bengal on horseback, leaving behind his family and fortunes. He was at odds with his elder brother (the family patriarch) regarding his educational and professional career. So he decided to take the “ bull by the horns “ and forge a name for himself in North Bengal. In 1857 he became involved with a deserter from the British imperial army Captain Samler and together they got into plantations²⁸. Tarapada Banarjee, son of G.C. Banarjee took over the reins of the family which had been developed singlehandedly by his father. In 1859 the Makaibari Tea Estate, the first tea factory commissioned in the Darjeeling district was closed in 1933. Makaibari literally means “Maize Land” and is strategically located in Kurseong , the land of the white orchid. It is located at an altitude of 4500 feet above the sea level. The Banarjee has been associated with the tea estate since 1860's. In 1933 , the tea estate was owned by Tarapada Banarjee . After his death , his son Pasupati Banarjee took the reins. At present , Mr. swaraj Banarjee , commonly known as Raja Banarjee is the Managing Director of this tea estate and has been in the family ever since²⁹. Unfortunately , all precise records of how the Banarjee family before Independence managed the tea estate were lost when the Darjeeling tea Factory was destroyed by fire at the end of 1962. Anyhow , this is the first tea estate of the Darjeeling to market Darjeeling greens, oolongs and silver tips. It also provides excellent accommodation facilities to its guests.

Next important tea estate of the Banarjee family in Darjeeling hill was Happy Valley tea estate. It was established in the year 1854 by David Wilson, an Englishman who named the garden according to his name as Wilson Tea Estate and by 1860 had started cultivation of tea. In 1903, this tea estate was taken by an Indian named Mr. Tarapada Banarjee, an aristocrat from Hooghly . T.P. Banarjee bought the tea estate and merged another tea estate and gave the name Happy Valley Tea Estate³⁰. After his death, his son Mr. Amiya Kumar

Banarjee took over the Happy Valley and Vah-Tukvar, while Pashunath another son of T.P.Banarjee took over the reins at Makaibari. Amiya Kumar was an M.A., first class in English from Calcutta University and Pashupati Nath was a graduate (B.A.) from Scottish Church College of Calcutta University. After the demise of Amiya Banarjee, his three sons namely Manik, Falguni and Tridev took the charge of management. Tridev Banarjee has completed his education, both in Darjeeling Govt. School and College while his other two brothers did in Calcutta. Arun Banarjee, grandson of Sir Shyamapada Banarjee, a renowned Congress leader and Bengali film actor Victor Banarjee are closed with this family as well³¹.

Wilson was the brand name of tea produced in their garden. The superscription "Happy Valley Gives Happiness" levelled on the tea packets gives a glimpse of the charmness of the brand. They have opened up an outlet for selling pet dogs in Calcutta. Mr. Siv Sankar Pasari, owner of the Remington Type- Writer Company; Mrs. Gauri Dey, owner of Enco Plywood Company; A Toss and Company were the financer of this tea estate. They had a very good museum where a number of visitors used to visit off and on. Tridev Banarjee himself maintained a beautiful library consisted of very rare and precious books. He also developed a habit of reading books sitting on a Tiger's skin. In every year, gun-washer men used to come their Bungalows for washing their private guns. During the Gorkhaland movement, these were surrendered to Indian Govt. However, the ownership of this tea estate has been transferred from this family to the Bansal group in 2008. The last Bengali director of this tea estate was Drona Banarjee, daughter of Tridev Banarjee³².

Another Bengali tea planter in Darjeeling hill was Kamal Krishna Haldar from Barrackpur. He was the first Tahasildar manager of Maharajadhiraja Bahadur Mahatab Chand of Burdwan in Darjeeling hill. He came to the hill in 1850 with Maharajadhiraja and managed to acquire small beats of land from Lepchas and build huge property for Burdwan Raj Estate in the district. Kamal Haldar later planted Kamalpur Tea Estate near Bagdogra in Terai region and till 1960's the garden was under the family³³. In 1967 the ownership of this garden was transferred to Mr. Badal Bhattacharya, Managing Director of Kiron Chandra tea estate. They later sold the garden to Mr. Jayanti Prasad Agarwalla in the year of 1976³⁴.

Another tea estate still running under a Bengali entrepreneur is Mission Hill Tea Estate, p.o. -Fagu, Mirik. It was initially a British garden. Later on, Parswanath Ghatak, a Zaminder by profession owned it. After his death, his son Taranath Ghatak took its rein. He was the pioneer director of several tea companies in Jalpaiguri town. He was well connected with m/s Good Will Tea Co. Ltd. He was a sound lawyer; in his later life he devoted himself entirely to the industry and of reconstructing the Jalpaiguri Banking and Tradition Corporation, the oldest Banking enterprise of the town. He joined Indian Tea Planters Association (ITPA) and served the association as its Vice Chairman in the year of 1960³⁵. His demise created a void to run the estate and thus the ownership has been transferred to S. Agarwalla of Kolkata. In 1979-80 the ownership was further transferred to Mr. Nilmoni Roy of Mal Bazar, dist- jalpaiguri. He has a petrol pump in Caltex road of this town³⁶. Parswanath Ghatak had another garden in Alipurduar named Srinathpur Tea Estate. Now it is being run by Mrs. Agnimitra Dey Sarkar, wife of late Paritosh Sarkar who bought it in the year of 1997.

Thus we may say that in spite of many difficulties faced by the pioneer Bengali tea planters in Darjeeling hill mainly the constant liability of landslides resulting from heavy rainfall, their garden properties continued to progress rapidly in their single minded aim. But since independence, the frequent changes in the ownership of the tea plantation industry in Darjeeling hill has severely affected the industry as well. The profit-oriented outlook of the new comers especially the Marwaris has resulted in the increase of crop at a low cost but the quality of tea has deteriorated to a large extent. Strikes, lock-out has become a regular feature in the gardens. They systematically stripped off the gardens of their assets, drained the surplus and siphoned it off to their industries situated in Bombay, Delhi or Rajasthan. The commercial approach of quick back return of the new traders has been the fundamental spot of weakness in the tea industry in Darjeeling hill.

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