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# Micro-Entrepreneurial Issues and Challenges of Darjeeling Hills: An Inquiry

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**Abstract:** *The study provides an understanding of sociological challenges concerning micro-entrepreneurial activities in Darjeeling hills. Historically, micro-entrepreneurship has played a dynamic role in contributing to economic growth, environmental sustainability, and employment generation in different parts of the country. More specifically, it plays a key role in the region where large industries are not viable due to geographical constraints, as it becomes an essential driving force in promoting regional balance, reducing disparities between plains and hills, and preserving the traditional material culture of the diverse ethnic groups and tribes of different regions. Based on fieldwork conducted in different areas, including rural and urban areas of the Darjeeling hills between June and December 2022 through some ethnographic insight. The findings point out that the hills micro entrepreneurs faced several challenges and restrictions, resulting in inadequate opportunities to flourish despite the environment of entrepreneurship that emerged in this neoliberal digital era.*

**Keywords:** Micro entrepreneurship, challenges, experiences, land rights, Darjeeling Hills.

### ***Introduction***

Micro-entrepreneurship has traditionally been significant in promoting economic development, environmental sustainability, generating employment opportunities, and safeguarding the material cultures of different ethnic groups. As an alternative, it acts as a major driving force in creating regional balance by reducing disparities between urban and rural, or plains and hills; it is especially pertinent in regions in which huge industries are not viable

owing to geographical obstacles. Thus, entrepreneurship is one of the key drivers of economic growth. Entrepreneurial development has been a key to the economic growth of any country around the world for the last four decades. While, the definition of “micro entrepreneur(ship)” refers to those who run enterprises with a limited number of employees. To be more specific, these types of entrepreneurship typically employs fewer than ten people because they prefer to keep their businesses small to ensure that the entire entrepreneurial process can be managed without the help of others. Ghose (2017) explained that the infrastructure, financial, marketing, regulatory, technological, lack of proper documentation, exchange rates, etc. are some multi-dimensional challenges experienced by Indian micro-entrepreneurship in the last thirty years. As a result, other countries’ competitors have taken more benefits from export subsidies than the Indian MSME. The micro-entrepreneurship has potential for poverty reduction and national economic development, but in developing countries, it is used only as a tool for poverty reduction strategies (Haghighi 2016). The study of manufacturing micro-entrepreneurs who fulfil the demands of the local market, is more vital in such a circumstance to identify the challenging issues they have to overcome to survive. All of them fall under the regulations of the government’s Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSME) sector.

This study aims to underscore the sociological challenges that exist in micro-manufacturing entrepreneurship practises in the Darjeeling Hills (including Kalimpong Hills). The intensive fieldwork conducted in different areas including rural and urban areas of Darjeeling hills between June and December 2022. A snowball sampling has been used to select the thirty respondents who have been engaged for at least a decade in this entrepreneurial field. The ethnographic inquiry has been adopted to gather the data and to gain insights into the micro-entrepreneurs’ life experiences, challenges and issues concerning entrepreneurial practices.

### ***Emergence of Micro Entrepreneurial Activities in the Darjeeling Hills***

The number of literature inquiries debating the operation of the Darjeeling Hills Station, which consider it a colonial military outpost, sanatorium, leisure place, or new location for commercial trading and entrepreneurial activities hub for the trans-Himalayan nations. However, the roots of micro entrepreneurial and trading activities in the Darjeeling hills emerged with the establishment of the East India Company’s colony and their transformative initiatives on the regional economy for the commodification

and capitalisation of tea, timber, and tourism. The East India Company played a significant role in the development and growth of the economy in the hills. The *Treaty of Titalia* (now in *Tetulia*, Bangladesh), which was signed in 1817<sup>1</sup> became the point for the Britishers to enter the Darjeeling hills by 1835, to open up a new landscape of cool-weather sanatoriums, residential quarters, tea plantation and more significantly, trade with the Himalayan nations (Risley 1894; Lamb 1960; Harijan 2019). With the advent of the western model of development in the hills, Britishers began to clear the primeval forest for the commercialisation of Himalayan timber and the operation of tea and cinchona plantations from the 1840s onward. The number of tea plantations rises every decade, from 39 plantations in 1866 to 148 plantations in 1904, with forest clearing from 10,000 acres to 50,618 acres (Griffiths 1967: 88; Pradhan 2009).

Kalimpong hills which were wrested away from the hands of Sikkim by Bhutan in 1706, were brought under the British administration after the victory over Bhutan war in 1764 and signed the Treaty of Sinchula<sup>2</sup> in 1865, which created an impetus for the colonial ruler to formulate new route policies in the Himalayan region (McKay 2007; Harris 2008). The colonial initiation towards the new direction came from the eastern Himalayas, where Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalaya became the main gateway with an easy access route to reach Tibet via Jelep-la Pass and Nathu-la-Pass for not only trading purposes but also to maintain the diplomatic political mission with central Asia (Sir Richard Temple 1881, McKay 2007, Bhattacharya 2019). In a while, hills converted into a focal point for colonial-run missionary schools, travelers, British army cantonments, and more considerably, a trading hub, where traders and entrepreneurs of Himalayan states such as Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, Tibet, China, and Europe participated in trans-Himalayan trading (Harris 2008).

It flourished as fluid contact zones characterised by economic mobility, urban socialisation, and cross-cultural encounters (Harris et al., 2016: 48) and soon became a vivid example of a contact zone where Himalayan peoples met representatives of the British and Chinese empires, and trade acted as an instigator for contact (Tagchungdarpa 2017; Poddar & Zhang 2017). Colonial authorities had given numerous prominent reasons for the cession of Darjeeling and Kalimpong hills from the Himalayan kingdoms. Firstly, it was beneficial for the Centre of trade with Himalayan nations in Middle Eastern countries; second, it had great strategic significance with Himalayan kingdoms; and lastly, it provided an advantage to establish a sanatorium for military and colonial authorities (O'Malley 1907; Dash 1947). Such entrepreneurial activities continued after a decade of independent

India; however, because of the Indo-Sino War of 1962, the Indian government had to permanently seal the main outpost at Jalep La Pass. Subsequently, many traders and micro-entrepreneurs were forced to shut down their enterprises and move on to other professions. Even today, no leaders or government agencies have taken any further steps to open up the Jalep Pass to resurrect the old market hub of Kalimpong (Harris 2013: 94).

### ***Sociological Understanding of Entrepreneurship***

The sociological study of entrepreneurship mainly concerns itself with three broad themes such as, entrepreneurship can both reproduce and challenge the existing social order, entrepreneurship ensures the reproduction of existing organisational populations, and entrepreneurship affects the levels of stratification and inequality in society by shaping the life chances of the founders and the employees (Aldrich 2005). However, concepts related to entrepreneurship appeared with some frequency in the sociological literature of classical thinkers such as Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel. Schumpeter, for example, suggests that being an entrepreneur is only an episode in one's life course, and entrepreneurs can only temporarily be distinguished from managers or capitalists (Schumpeter 1980: 116). As a result, he turns to studying the bundles of activities that make up entrepreneurship and arrives at his famous definition that entrepreneurship is a recombination of production factors (Schumpeter 1980: 214). Weber, as another example, suggests that the spirit of entrepreneurs is largely moulded by their cultural and religious context (Weber 1988). Consequently, he turns to studying the socio-historic conditions that bring about entrepreneurs as gatekeepers in the transition towards rationalised capitalism (Weber 2009 [1921]). The picture conveyed here is that of entrepreneurship as a dynamic and socially embedded process. Ruef introduces the term entrepreneurial groups to encompass more diverse forms of engagement in business creation, including the financial, time, and emotional investments of family members, neighbours, or former colleagues who operate beyond the limelight of the start-up scene, but act as "everyday entrepreneurs" (Welter et al. 2016). This expanded conception also allows for the examination of informal engagement in the creation of a business (such as by the supporting spouse or family helpers). The further understanding of entrepreneurship through the micro sociological perspectives, which emphasise understanding, meaningful interpretation, lived experience, and the constitution of the life-world, inevitably positions the narrative study of everyday life with a strong focus on the micro-processes composing social

reality. What do individuals say, do, and think in the everyday sequences of events and experiences? And how do their perspectives and actions coincide with the wider interactions and expressions of meaning underlying social reality? In this regard, a significant guideline is found in Randall Collins' (1981), remark that empirical reality must be regarded as residing in direct experience. Collins regards 'the encounter' as the basic micro-unit of analysis; it is a 'shared conversational reality' at the basis of all social interaction, negotiation, and exchange (in Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel 1981: 83). For Gharam Crow, Goffman's sociology is a matter of developing one's "eye for detail" and the craft of precise observation to provide a set of key guidelines for approaching the study of everyday life (Crow 2005). Goffman's approach is to first train oneself to pay attention to what is simply ignored as irrelevant. On the other hand, social capital is another significant instrument in entrepreneurial fields, though it may be micro or macro (Collier 1998). It enables entrepreneurs to become more trusting of one another in credit or material exchange, and to circulate information, etc., (Gunakar and Bhatta 2021). There are several of ways social capital which may influence economic action (Lin 2003; Khan 2006; Meccheri and Pelloni 2006). In order to demonstrate these processes, the following paragraphs will now outline three cases, that highlighted micro entrepreneurial everyday life experiences, challenges, and perceptions from the hills.

### ***Challenges and Experiences from the Perceptions of Micro Entrepreneurs***

In this section I will portray the experiences of the micro entrepreneurs of Darjeeling Hills and the challenges that face the entrepreneurs with the help of a few case studies.

**Case Study 1:** Around twenty people have been directly engaged in flower nursery work for the last two decades in the hills. They have transformed the traditional approach of home gardening into an emerging, professionally oriented business, and they mostly cultivate the saplings of diverse flowers/plants and supply them to customers across the country. It might be possible because of the growing concern over pollution and environmental awareness among people across the globe. To practise this business, one does not require sophisticated technology, huge amounts of capital, or efficient management.

James Rai<sup>3</sup> is a 44-year-old B. Sc. graduate and a first-generation flower nursery entrepreneur from a tea plantation under the Pulbazar block of

Darjeeling district. I interviewed him about his eighteen-year entrepreneurial experience. In the whole of Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayas, flower nursery gardening is common as family-fashion traditional practices that come from many generations. Every family household, whether poor or rich or residing in an urban or rural area, cultivates or buys various saplings of plants and flowers for decorating their home garden. There are religious beliefs that having flowers in the home garden provides positive thoughts, happiness, blessings, refreshing, etc.; besides this, the flowers also provide filtering air as well as psychological benefits from being connected with nature. He recounted that before becoming an entrepreneur, he worked as a clerk on his plantation. After five years, he decided to quit the job and move on to follow his passion for business. He stated:

It was a tough situation for me to choose a different career because all of my paternal kin were engaged in this plantation work for four generations. With enthusiasm, I opened my first 'flower nursery' on my homestead in 2005. The initial challenges were to convince my family member to discontinue the plantation job rather than to understand the skills of cultivating, raising saplings, researching the plants for weather suitability, managing, and marketing. Although my self-motivation, patience and commitment to work led me to now employ eight full-time workers from my own village, aside from that, my dedicated research skills demonstrated that I could be capable of breeding new and diverse local flowers. Until now, I have created around twenty breeds of local flowers, with a specialisation in cactus plants. The diverse varieties of breed cactus have been found only in my nursery, which is why I am receiving orders on my online site from customers and agents across the country.

James statements highlighted how, on plantations, the generation of workers has continued to remain, pass down their jobs, and attach houses to their kin. It is a relic of colonialists who denied ownership over the land to the families staying inside the plantation and made it mandatory to send one member to be employed in the plantation; otherwise, they lost their residential home (Besky 2017). Even after independence, this colonial legacy has been continued by the state government under the Absorbed Area (Laws) Act of 1954, where land ownership of plantations and forest villages remains with the state, and leases a patch of tea plantation land in the hand of corporations for a period of time to cultivate tea production.

Each post-dinner, James has to prepare the ritual routine for the next day for all workers, including him and his wife, who manage all the financial activities. He usually starts daily work with the workers (including three males and five females), from nine until four o'clock, with a brief respite in the middle of the day where all the workers go home for their lunch. However, the everyday routine varies depending on workload and season. Generally, business goes down in every June to August month of the year because of two factors; firstly, during the rainy season, most flower saplings and cultivating work begin, and secondly, it is the off-season for tourism.

On the experiences of challenges James further stated that:

This colonial plantation structure never allows us to be free from the colonial notions of thought and practises. See the plantation itself is one of the most neglected areas, where no leadership has thought to change the pattern of livelihood. Two of the plantation's sons became political leaders, i.e., Subash Ghising and Bimal Gurung, who received adoring support from plantation residents and ruled over a decade, yet were unable to enhance the plantation's future. Land rights are one of the significant challenges for all micro-entrepreneurs or self-employed people like me who want to earn a livelihood while residing in their own village. I even received several warning letters from plantation management for operating the nursery without their permission. The management always tries to restrict other employment activities on the plantation because they always want us to live a marginal life.

The plantation's norms always compelled the plantation residents to confine themselves to plantation jobs and prevented them from becoming self-employed through different government policies and schemes. Since independence, a similar pattern of school dropout rate; number of unemployed, outmigration, alcoholism, and political hooliganism/rowdies has been found to be common in every plantation village as compared to non-plantation villages. Chettri discuss that Darjeeling's politics and rowdies are closely associated through a complex network because some of the political leaders evolved their political careers from such local rowdies, and most of the rowdies come from tea plantations where they were once victims of class exploitation and the vicious circle of poverty (Chettri 2018). And the issue of land rights in plantations is serious problem for the entrepreneurs as like James who claimed that the land documentation has always restricted him from getting government schemes to expand the

business. The land rights questions are one of the age-old issues that exist in the entire plantations and forest villages in the Darjeeling hills (Tamang 2022). The material discourse of land ownership in both colonial and postcolonial Darjeeling hills is fundamental to the ethnic determination to establishing their homeland (Tamang and Kipgen 2022).

**Case Study 2:** In around 1945, Swiss Father Andre Butte was the first person to establish the ‘Swiss Welfare Diary’ and initiate the tradition of cheese production in the Kalimpong hills (Pradhan 2004, Bhutia 2022). Kalimpong cheese is a popular food ingredient, especially prepared by rural entrepreneurs.

Sameer Pradhan, a second-generation 52-year-old cheese manufacturer in Kalimpong Block II has been engaged in this industry for 26 years. He learned these skills from his father, who worked in the cheese factory at the colonial school, Dr. Graham’s Homes, which was built in 1900. This colonial school had its own hospital, workshop, estate, bakery, farm, and central kitchen; it even had its own variety of cheese, locally known as Homes Cheese (Tagchungfarpa 2017). Sameer produced the typical cheddar cheese, which is relatively hard, off-white, and sometimes sharp tasting, similar to the cheese found in the European style that was introduced by the Swiss missionaries. Cheese is a term for a collection of fermented milk-based food items made in a variety of tastes and shapes found around the globe. There are numerous varieties of cheese based on its textures, which are primarily related to the cheese’s moisture content. Sameer produced in a traditional manner, mainly with the help of a thirty-litre capacity milk refinery machine. Most of his cheese products are manually delivered to some retailers in Kalimpong town and customers from Kolkata (especially the Anglo Indian Bhutia 2022). Around fifty farmers in his village directly depend on him. While he narrates his past challenging experiences,

I lost a net five lakh rupees due to the waste of manufacturing products during the political agitation of the long 105-day strikes in 2017. This was the first time in my entire career I had a worst experience, which not only made me economically weak but also frail in my entrepreneurial network. The post-strikes were a quite bitter experience to revive the production again; however, subsequently, two years later, the waves of the COVID-19 pandemic have made me pathetic again, which not only wasted my capital but also made me despondent as my wife, who was the prime adviser, died because of virus infection. At present, I am running the industry only to sustain my livelihood

because both my children have completed their education and my elder son is already on track to become self-employed, and soon I am planning to quit the work and shut down this industry.

He indicated that the most challenging experience of his more than twenty-year entrepreneurial career was the unsteady political situation in the hills, which always constrained his progress. The prolonged political tension for four decades has abandoned not only the emerging entrepreneurial spirit of the younger generation but also the arts, skills, culture, music, etc. of the region. He further said hill's youths are motivated either to migrate to metropolitan cities for employment or to get easy, lucrative work through political activities like contracting of construction work rather than to perform assiduous work like him (who can provide jobs to others).

**Case Study 3:** Robert Kaufmann, a 66-year-old Swiss-born first-generation coffee entrepreneur from a small village in the Kalimpong hills recounted the situation of coffee marketing in the region. He stated that:

At the grassroots level, we have been putting in our tireless effort to flourish and grow; however, there is no one to pull us, as like the bullock cart. I could produce approximately a quintal of coffee per session, but this wobbly marketing price, intermediaries' agents, the local political environment, costly labour and carrying charges, and the pandemic have severely affected me. At present, I am doing this for time passing and physical exercises because I am not able to make even a little profit from this coffee production.

Kaufmann is a Christian priest, author, and translator of Christian religious texts into Nepali. He eloquently speaks in the Nepali language. After a decade of living in Nepal and Assam, he migrated to Kalimpong for the first time in the late twentieth century. However, due to visa issues, he and his wife Cristina decided to accept Indian citizenship by naturalisation in 2008. Thereafter, he bought a five-acre plot of land from a friend in order to build a home and cultivate coffee. Since 2012, he has been involved in coffee production. He manufactures raw and roasted Bourbon and Arabica coffee in traditional ways with a local staff and sells it in the local market. As he mentioned in his decade of experience in this field, the intermediaries always interfere and exploit the local farmers or manufacturers because of their better business networking. During field visits, the majority of entrepreneurs who engaged in other enterprises also encountered similar difficulties with intermediaries, especially the old market players, who constantly benefited from their hard work. In this context, the role of social

capital contributes an invaluable part to entrepreneurship, such as family business background, membership in a business circle, work experiences, having entrepreneurial skills, etc., which are the key exploring indicators for all intermediaries who have traditionally dominated the market for a long time (Davidsson and Honig 2003). Social capital is defined as the tangible and virtual resources that facilitate actors' attainment of goals and that accrue to actors through social structure (Portes, 1999). Kaufmann further claimed that,

the government only distributes seeds and saplings to farmers but does not collect the harvest from the farmers. As a result, farmers always have to suffer due to poor pricing structures in the market. The reason behind the thousands of Indian farmer suicides every year is the government's negligence. The government intends to deprive agriculture while thriving service sectors to generate more revenue, as in developed nations. In contrast, the policies of the Swiss government are far more transparent than those of the Indian government because of the 'pre-fixing price policy' on agricultural and horticultural products.

Kaufmann's statement reiterates the point that despite practising entrepreneurship in a neoliberal economy or exercising agency by making a place, the marketing structural adjustment is ultimate imperious. In 2018, the regional administration spent crores of rupees to purchase coffee sprouts from Karnataka and distributed to farmers across the hills (The Telegraph, July 5, 2018)<sup>4</sup>. Ramesh Pradhan, a local manufacturer of the Himali Organic Coffee alleged with regional administration that instead of spending the amount on buying coffee saplings, if they invested it to reform the marketing structure of hills, then they should not be purchased; the farmers themselves would arrange and start to cultivate the coffee plantations. Both shared the similar challenges that, until now, no government support has received, though government officials and local leaders occasionally visit their workshops and take photographs with them to claim credit for their success in the media.

### ***Problems Concerning the Micro-Entrepreneurial Practises in the Hills***

Les Back (2015) stated that studying everyday life experiences allows us to attend to the inherent liveliness of social life and its time signatures. It particularly helps to identify the public issues that are alive in the mundane aspects of everyday life and offers the opportunity to link the smallest

story to the largest social transformation. In the context of the Darjeeling Hills, the micro entrepreneurial environment is different in contrast to other plains regions of the state for several grounds. The majority of them have faced numerous challenges to sustain themselves in this neoliberal, digitalized world, while numerous others are running their enterprises in vulnerable conditions. A longstanding movement for subnational autonomy, the exploitative role of intermediary agencies, a lack of digital marketing skills, being unable to switch to a modern approach, negligence from government agencies, etc. are some of the crucial and challenging problems experienced by micro entrepreneurs in the hills. The phenomenon of unequal rights to entrepreneurial resources often frames the differences among ethnic entrepreneurial groups, or among entrepreneurs in different regions or countries (e.g., developing countries). This view of social capital is closely associated with the emphasis placed by Coleman (1993) on community structures as a mechanism of social control, which, in turn, is also linked with the predominant culture in a specific society.

Beside this, one of the strategic experiences encountered by forest villages and plantation-based entrepreneurs was their village structure, which always prevented them from getting all the governmental schemes. The issue of land rights, paying enticements to plantation and forest officials, a lack of financial resources, etc. are some major challenges they have to face. I also noticed that many respondents, like James, who belong to tea and cinchona plantations and forest village, could not achieve their goal of expanding their enterprises despite fulfilling all the criteria for MSME due to an absence of land rights documentation. Tamang and Kipgen rightly observed how the land crisis and the issue of citizenship rights in the hills emerged after Britishers began to intervene in the region with their strategic and diplomatic colonial encroachment. They also claimed that even the voices of the sub-nationalist movement have arisen from the insecurity of land rights at the marginal level for those who have resided in the plantations and forest villages. They further argued that ethnic assertion through the demand for Gorkhaland remains dominant in the region, and individual land rights remain marginal in regional political discourse (Tamang and Kipgen 2022).

Nonetheless, on February 21, chief minister Mamta Banerjee's political moves to provide the land rights documents to the tea plantation labourers and forest dwellers from across the Hills, Terai, and Dooars regions of Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri, and Alipurduar districts took effect. A total of 4,000 land pattas were handed over, out of which 1,246 pattas were given to tea plantation labourers (Feb. 22, Millennium Post 2023). However,

this political initiative has also raised copious questions about the land's documentation in the plantation for providing them land pattas under the Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department of the state. Apart from this, the plantation labourers have provided less than five decimal homesteads instead of the total amount of occupied farming land inherited from their forefathers. The inhabitants who have resided in the plantations since the colonial period (around two centuries) are not gratified with the government's decision to treat them as second-class citizens within the state. Although there are still over six lakh residents of forest villages, tea and cinchona plantations from across the Hills, Terai, and Dooars who are still torn between accepting the government land document with a small homestead decimal and leaving the remaining undocumented farming land or simply ignoring it and waiting to fight for the rights<sup>5</sup>.

### ***Conclusion***

To sum up, the practises of micro-entrepreneurship at the grassroots level raise numerous questions of marginalisation in their everyday life-experiences. They are mostly restricted by inadequate opportunities to flourish on account of various configurations, such as colonial structural hindrances to land rights and plantation norms, neo-liberal marketing space, prolonged distorting political agitation and negligence from governmental agencies. Besides these, the dearth of social capital is a major impediment for the majority of hilly micro-entrepreneurs, which always forces them to rely on intermediaries (especially the old market players) who seize this opportunity to marginalise them. As a result, they have to bear additional expenses for negotiation, monitoring, litigation, and enforcement of a formal agreement rather than other challenges.

### **Notes**

1. The Treaty of Titalia was signed in 1817 between the Chogyal King of Sikkim and British East India Company Captain Barre Latter. The Treaty guaranteed the security of Sikkim's land, which had been annexed by Nepal over centuries, and in return, the British were given trading rights and the construction of the path up to the Tibetan frontier.

2. The Anglo-Bhutan War of 1864-65 has been concluded under the Treaty of Sinchula signed between Bhutan the king Ugen Wangchuck and Colonial government of India in 11 November 1865. Under which Bhutan would receive an annual subsidy in exchange for ceding some borderland area as Kalimpong.
3. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this article to protect respondents' identities.
4. The initiatives of the Directorate of Cinchona and Other Medicinal Plants of West Bengal, in collaboration with the Agriculture and Horticulture Department of Gorkhaland Territorial Administration, had brought 7.2 lakh coffee saplings from nurseries in Chikmagalur, Karnataka, for rupees two crore. As per the official source, the main aim of cultivating coffee in the hills is to offer an alternative means of livelihood to the farmers whose farm produce is unable to provide them with a proper income.
5. As per the online news portal, out of the total 4000 government land pattas, 198 were distributed to Darjeeling district, 437 to Kalimpong district, 150 to Jalpaiguri district, 850 to Alipurduar district, and 2040 to Cooch Behar district. The size of land was a maximum of five decimal homesteads for tea plantation labourer and fourteen decimal homesteads for forest dwellers.

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