

***Commercial cash crop and the development of capitalist economy:  
A study of colonial tea plantations in Darjeeling hills.***

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**Abstract:**

*The present study focuses primarily on the development of Darjeeling hills as a region of tea plantation since the beginning of the mid-nineteenth century. The development of tea plantation ushered in infusion of colonial capital, which completely altered the existing feudal economy. Darjeeling's potential and possibilities as a zone of tea cultivation had attracted the immediate attention of the EIC officials who sought to transform the almost uninhabited forested tract of Darjeeling into a tea region. Large tracts of virgin forest and grasslands were cleared by British Planters and cultivated with tea. In establishing and cultivating their estates it was apparent that the planters were initially able to secure labor from the neighboring Nepal hills. In fact, tea as commercial plantation in Darjeeling since early fifties of the nineteenth century had been a sheer coincidence which was taken place as a part of larger imperial project. Since then tea continued to be the backbone of the economy of Darjeeling hills. The expansion of tea industry in Darjeeling had fundamentally altered the nature of political economy of Darjeeling hills and that too at the cost of forests, ecology and environment in particular. The colonially induced expanding tea plantation lovably called 'imperial cash crop', owned and engineered by the British planters under the patronage of British East India Company gave rise to an insular economy hitherto unknown by the indigenous people lived in so far on tradition based subsistence economy. The substantial quantum of profits accrued from Darjeeling tea used to be siphoned out to Europe and tea labourers had to be kept satisfied with wages only. Such a situation gave rise to a kind of dependent development economy in Darjeeling under the aegis of new technology transformation. In this way, as a part of grand imperial political project, Darjeeling hill was drawn into the world capitalist system.*

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*KEY-WORDS: Tea plantation, Colonial Capital, Imperial Objective, Zone of Tea Cultivation, Imperial political project, Imperial cash crop, Political Economy, Dependent Development Economy, Technology Transformation, World Capitalist System*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this paper is to explore the impacts of commercial tea plantations on the forested lands and on the socio-economic and material conditions of people living in Darjeeling hills. Darjeeling had been the first location in Colonial Bengal to have been penetrated by the tea plantation on commercial basis since the mid of the nineteenth century. In the initial years, the growth was simply phenomenal in the wake of large colonial capital investment. Credit must go to imperial science, European entrepreneurship, knowledge, and governance skill at the one end, as well as innumerable hardship of neighboring human labors on the other. Till then, tea continued to be the backbone of the economy of Darjeeling hills and Terai (Foot-hills) with the resultant consequences on the lands, landscape and demographic configurations.

With the expansion of commercial tea plantations in Darjeeling hills, the natural forest wealth had been subjected to virtual plunder. In fact, the idea of forest conservation and application of scientific forestry reached in Darjeeling at later decade, when a large area of forest land was alienated for tea plantation. Natural dense forest at the initial years was considered to be as an obstruction to development of physical infrastructures and commercial expansion of tea. The realization of optimal revenue had been the priority of the East India Company. Consequentially, by the late fifties of the nineteenth century, sixty percent of the forest cover had been cleared for development purposes including expansion of tea gardens. The rapid and continuous depletion of forested zone, extensive deforestation produced irreconcilable balance in the human-nature relations giving rise to continuous soil erosion, innumerable landslides, devastating floods in the foot-hills and the plains. The depletion of forests resulted in the massive degradation of the ecologically fragile Darjeeling hills.<sup>i</sup>

The establishment of first commercial tea garden, Tukvar Tea Estate at the

Lebongspur by the British owned East India Company in 1856 heralded the beginning of a new era in the Darjeeling hills by exercising new mode of natural resource use necessary for much needed economic growth.<sup>ii</sup> The then prevalent nature of subsistence economy, mostly based on barter economy, with few exceptions of briskly Tibetan trade and a few of East-West Himalayan mountain trade, was radically transformed to monetized economy due to infusion of colonial capital in commercial tea plantations. Tea plantation capitalism in the mid of nineteenth century Darjeeling had substituted the landless labors to wage earning workers.

### **Tea Plantations in Darjeeling Hills**

For Darjeeling, the development of commercial tea plantations coincided with the economic development of the region. The initial idea of making Darjeeling hill station as a sanatoria and military garrison was placed in the back seat, let alone the triumphant tea as a commercial cash crop connecting Darjeeling with European market if not with global market. By 1861 both railways and roadways connecting Darjeeling with the plains and subsequent arteries roads connecting tea gardens were put in place. Tea Plantation opened up a new vista of employment opportunities in a land once clothed with forests where a very low number of people lived a life on natural subsistence economy.<sup>iii</sup>

The credit for bringing Darjeeling onto India's economic map goes to the British led tea industry. Not only small numbers of indigenous inhabitants were engaged in employment in tea gardens, but also thousands of people from neighboring Eastern Nepal immigrated to Darjeeling hills for accessing new employment opportunities in the tea plantation. For assuring uninterrupted labour supply in the expanding labour intensive tea industry, the system of having indentured labour was never adopted in Darjeeling.

For the plantations in Darjeeling, mostly, immigrant workers came from Nepal. The chronic unemployment prevailing in Nepal due to overthrow of a large chunk of Nepali population belonging to the lowest strata of hierarchically structured caste driven society of Hindu Nepal; the age old tradition of the landless Nepalese leaving home in search for employment in India, the proximity of Darjeeling to Eastern part of Nepal and the similarity in the climatic and physiographic conditions – all combined to facilitate the

movement of labour from Nepal to the plantations of Darjeeling. The Nepalese labourers immigrated on their own initiative being affected by push factors and attracted by the pull factors. The plantation management did not have to engage any recruiting agency. At the initial few years, a good chunk of immigrated labours went back to Nepal, but in course of time, being assured to live with families, majority of them settled down in Darjeeling as permanent residents.<sup>iv</sup>

Such immigration had remained continuous and rapid in between the decades of 1850's and 1930's. Most of such people started working as unskilled labour force as plantation workers. A good number of skilled labours was engaged in tea plantation as clerks, managers etc. Tea provided ancillary employment opportunities in the making of chest tea, plywood and tea packaging and such other businesses and trades linked with the tea industry.<sup>v</sup>In fact, the Nepali population in Darjeeling had outnumbered all other population settled there since the beginning of 1880's.

Despite the contribution of tea plantation to the economic development in Darjeeling hills, the expanding tea plantations had huge adverse impacts on geo-ecological and socio-economic condition of people. The enhancing expansion or the rapidly growing tea gardens – just from one estate in 1856 to thirty-nine in 1866, one hundred and thirteen in 1874 and one hundred eighty six in 1905, had led to large-scale deforestation, landslides, soil erosion, loss of wildlife, adverse changes in the Darjeeling's biodiversity.<sup>vi</sup>Darjeeling hill tract was once a land with extensive vegetation and dense forests were deforested with the clearance of forests as the rapid expansion of tea plantations in the region began.<sup>vii</sup> Around the same time, the construction of hill cart road connecting Siliguri Terai and Darjeeling up to Lebong Cantonment and construction of cobweb of link roads connecting tea gardens by earth cutting, blasting of rocks had weakened the slopes of the hills, soil erosions and landslides causing large scale environmental degradation.<sup>viii</sup> Moreover, the use of pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers caused contamination of river/streams and degradation of land.<sup>ix</sup>

The maximum growth of immigrated population resulted in increased unemployment in tea plantations and affected adversely the sustainable livelihoods of all plantation workers. The population overgrowth led to massive depletion of natural

resources such as forests, vegetation and land. Random cutting of forest wood for fuel and slope lands were indiscriminately used for cultivation, thereby accentuated further damages to the local ecology. Additional pressure on land and water resulted in environmental degradation<sup>x</sup> and deteriorated the socio-economic conditions of hill people.<sup>xi</sup> The increased human settlement added to the vulnerability of Darjeeling hills.<sup>xii</sup>

By 1840's, Darjeeling, an obscure piece of hill tract did no longer remain a land of anomaly as the British established firm political consolidation on Darjeeling. By 1839, Col. Llyod, the first Agent of the East India Company and the Chief Officer to negotiate with the king of Sikkim, was replaced by Dr. Cambell as the First Superintendant of Darjeeling. Along with other designated officers for tea plantation research elsewhere in India, Dr. Cambell, a Member of Company's Medical Service was eager and interested to experiment tea plantation in Darjeeling hill area. It is important to mention that Brian Houghton Hodgson, the Resident of Nepal, introduced tea cultivation into the Himalayas, establishing a plot in the Residency garden using seeds obtained from China by Kashmiri merchants. Dr. Campbell remained Assistant Resident, Nepal at that time till he joined as Superintendant, Darjeeling in 1839. Dr. Campbell's repeated experiment in Darjeeling leading to the establishment of commercial tea estates by 1852.<sup>xiii</sup>

Dr. Cambell's successful experiment with tea plants in the backyard of his Bungalow and the achievement in implementing first tea plantation for commercial purposes heralded a new era of colonial political economy in Darjeeling. We find from report dated 28<sup>th</sup> April 1853 of Dr. Campbell that he was pleading with the government all along for establishment of experimental plantations directly by Government or for extension of trials by the native residents, in the Darjeeling region.

Dr. Campbell's experiment was followed by the plantations of Dr. Withcombe, Major Cromelin in the lower valley, called Lebong. In 1856 tea industry developed on an extensive scale at Takvur by Captain Masson, at Kurseong by Mr. Smith, between Kurseong and Pankabari by Captain Samler. The year 1856 was a landmark in the history of Darjeeling tea industry. The year marked the opening of Alubari tea garden by Kurseong and Darjeeling Tea Company and another on the Lebong spur by Darjeeling Land Mortgage Bank. In 1859, Dr. Brougham started the Dutaria garden. Between 1860

and 1864 four gardens at Ging, Ambotia, Takdah and Phubsering were established by the Darjeeling Tea Company. By the end of 1866 there were no less than 39 gardens with 10,000 acres under cultivation producing 4,33,000 Lbs of tea and in 1874 the number of gardens had increased to double. The area under cultivation rose to 18888 acres, the outturn to 3,928,000 lbs; and labours increased to 19000 persons. Between 1866 and 1874 the number of gardens under tea was almost exactly tripled, the area under cultivation increased by 82 percent; while the out turn often was multiplied nearly ten times.

The rapid growth of tea plantation in Darjeeling during the colonial period was due to certain convenient factors and congenial circumstances. These are : (a) Availability of cheap labour of the neighboring territories, especially from eastern part of Nepal; (b) Availability of freehold land in abundance; (c) convenient revenue policies; (d) Availability of forest wood and timber for fuel and for such other infrastructural purposes at a very low price or without price; (e) Physical and spatial status of Darjeeling congenial to the growth of tea plantation and quality tea production; (f) Special status of Darjeeling to establish European planters' raj restricting non-European to own tea garden in Darjeeling; (g) Emerging interest among the Europeans to invest capital in the tea industry of Darjeeling.

Since Tea industry was primarily the labour intensive industry, the requirement of labour both skilled and unskilled had largely been felt, however did never remain as a problem due to aspiring unskilled labour force was readily available in the neighboring territories. The Nepali emigrants had kept the supply of labour flowing to the Darjeeling tea plantations. Unlike the Assam Planters, the European planters of Darjeeling did not have to introduce the system of indentured labour. It was not a single labourer but the family of labourer was encouraged to settle in Darjeeling tea plantations to ensure sustainability of labour and to make child labour and women labour available at a cheaper rate. There had always been a steady supply of Nepalese labour force during the whole period of colonial Darjeeling. From the recorded information, it is seen that during the decades between 1850-1870, there was a steady supply from 30,000 per decade till 1871 to 75000 per decade till 1951 (in 78 tea plantation)<sup>xiv</sup>

The phenomenon of long-distance labour migration, within India and overseas cannot be simplistically described as a voluntary process. There never was and never had been anything like a 'free' market in labour functioning in India. And rarely ever, for that matter, were labourers 'freed' in the simple Marxist sense, of being, at one instance forced off the land and compelled to sell their labour. More often a process of gradual immiseration was at work, with migrant labour being one of a variety of options open to peasants and tribals in which they might attempt to resist the pressures which they were under. As such, they undoubtedly exercised a choice, but that choice was exercised in an environment heavily structured by other features of the culture, society and, above all, economy in which they lived. To speak of this as 'free' choice therefore makes no sense at all. At no stage were they entirely able to escape exploitation, and often that which they subsequently endured was far more systematic than any which had governed their previous existence. If at the end of the day these labourers prospered, it was frequently despite rather than because of the opportunities open to them. Nonetheless many migrants were able to build for themselves a space within the interstices of the colonial labour market, taking the initiative, saving money to support their relatives, resisting or otherwise adapting to their circumstances. Many became jobbers, gang-leaders and recruiters themselves. The role of returnees as recruiters was sometimes deliberately engineered by plantation owners and other employers, although featuring little in official Documents of Indentured Labour.<sup>xv</sup> Equally often however the process was initiated by the migrants, seeking to build for their relatives a friend a better life, in order to reunite divided families, or in other ways to prosper. As such, it is a tremendous testimony to the individual genius of migrants, to the new world which they built for themselves, and to the enduring links that they were able to maintain, often over vast distances, with their culture, kith and kin at home. In the process new identities were constructed to enable them to bridge this gap between the old and the new and to somehow maintain their links with both.<sup>xvi</sup>

Initially, while encouraging European businessmen to invest in tea industry, pound-sterling based companies were allowed to register as Joint Stock Company and local administration had made land available at low prices, even arrangement was made

to sell the wasteland through open auction. However, with the passage of initial years, thirty years lease system for cultivation of tea was established. All these opened accesses, governmental patronages and supports resulted in positive expansion of land as well as number of tea estates in colonial Darjeeling as evident from the following table.

#### Expansion of Tea Acreage in Colonial Darjeeling

Year	No. of Tea Plantations	Tea Cultivation Land
1852	1	433 hectares
1866	39	3000 hectares
1870	56	4400 hectares
1874	113	11000 hectares
1896	186	16230 hectares
1943	142	21075 hectares
1947	138	16569 hectares

Source : Tea Statistics, 2001

The expansion of tea plantation in Darjeeling was rapid during early years of colonial rule due to extraordinary special powers and huge discretionary powers vested in the Superintendent, Darjeeling by the East India Company Board of Directors located in Calcutta. The patronization and encouragement went to the extent whereby the planters could grow tea without paying revenue taxes, normally imposed on agricultural land. It is found that “146 tea estates were revenue free covering an area of 74286 acres as compared to revenue paying tea estates of 82127 acres. These revenue free tea estates consisted mainly of wasteland, the revenue of which were committed under the Wasteland Rules of 7<sup>th</sup> May 1859. So grant of wastelands put up to auction at an upset price of Rs.10/acre. As a result, between 1859-62 more than 9000 acres of land were sold in the hills by public auctions at a average rate of about Rs.12/acre. Only after the passing of West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act, 1953, all the erstwhile freehold rights have been extinguished and all the tea estates have been made revenue paying”.<sup>xvii</sup>

Campbell gave special encouragement and inducement to attract settlers in Darjeeling. With a view to encouraging the growth and expansion of the tea industry in



Darjeeling the British government offered land on especially favourable terms, under various sets of rules introduced from time to time. But a time soon came when Government had to devise ways and means to regulate the settlement of prospective tea planters. Land management rules in respect of plantations thus evolved according to the requirement of circumstances. There were at least twenty different tenures mentioned in the papers under which land cultivated with tea was held. But only three of which had practical importance to Darjeeling. They were the Old Assam rule also known as 99 years lease Rules, Fee Simple Rules of 1862 and the Cultivation Leases given under the Orders of the Government of Bengal issued on 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1864.

After 1854 the Board of Revenue proposed to extend to Darjeeling the rules for leasing wastelands under the Old Assam rules. But Dr. Campbell successfully opposed their introduction, chiefly on the ground that the public were satisfied with the existing rules. What kind of existing rule Campbell was referring to was not very clear. Probably it was a discretionary power which he had been vested with, of granting leases. The leases of 1853 expired in 1858, and many correspondences were granted with the Board of revenue on the subject of their renewal. Some of them were primarily renewed for 1859, and then nothing seems to have been done until 1860.<sup>xviii</sup> Immediately after the acquisition of the Darjeeling territory in 1835, there was not much demand for land; and the applications which were made were dealt with by the Superintendent at his discretion. In 1838 a large number of applications for land for building sites led to the issue by Government of a set of rules for the grant of lands, dated 4<sup>th</sup> September 1839.<sup>xix</sup> Prior to 1850 Dr. Campbell did not find it practicable to report any land revenue from the aboriginal inhabitants of the Darjeeling territory. It is quite clear from a report of Dr. Campbell, to the Board of Revenue in August 1850. In 1850, however, he tried the experiment of settling defined tracts upon the headmen of the communities living within such tracts, for a period of three or five years. Up to 24<sup>th</sup> December 1850 he had given twelve leases, ten of which were for three and two for five years. In 1853 all these leases were renewed for five years.<sup>xx</sup> At that time there was not much demand for land in Darjeeling territory. A second lease was granted in 1853 and the demand for land in Darjeeling increased in view of tea cultivation. The leases of 1853 expired in 1858, and

much correspondence granted with the Board of revenue on the subject of their renewal. Some of them were primarily renewed for 1859, and then nothing seems to have been done until 1860.

Meanwhile a new set of rules for the grant of wasteland in the Darjeeling territory was issued by the Board of revenue with the approval of the Government on 7<sup>th</sup> May 1859.<sup>xxi</sup> The most important provisions of these rules were:

- 1) Grant of wasteland should be put up to auction at an upset price of Rs.10 per acre.
- 2) That the sale at such auction should convey a freehold title; that existing leasehold grant might be commuted to freehold at the option of the grantee.
- 3) Building locations might be commuted at the rate of 20 years purchase of the annual rent.
- 4) Between the introduction of these Rules in 1859 and their abrogation on the introduction of the Fee-Simple rules in 1862, over 9172 acres of land were sold in the hills by public auction at an average rate of about Rs.12 per acre.

The Fee-Simple Rules: In October 1861 Lord Canning published a resolution, in which he sanctioned the alienation of wastelands in fee-simple and the redemption of the land revenue of wastelands already granted on leasehold tenure. The resolution also contained an outline of the rules which Lord Canning proposed to make.

Lord Canning's minute of the 17<sup>th</sup> October 1861<sup>xxii</sup> laid down three main principles on which grants of wastelands were to be made in future. These were, firstly, that such lands should be granted in perpetuity as a heritable and transferable property, subject to no enhancement of land revenue; secondly, that all prospective land revenue would be redeemable at the grantee's option by a payment in full when the grant was made, or a sum might be paid as earnest at the rate of 10 percent, the remainder being paid later; and thirdly, that there should be no condition obliging the grantee to cultivate or clear any specific portion within any specific time. The minimum price for the fee-simple was fixed at Rs.2-8 per acre, so that by anything 10 percent of this or four annas per acre, a title was obtained. Lord Canning's rules were considerably modified at the instance of the Secretary of State, and on the 30<sup>th</sup> August a fresh set of rules was issued by the

government of Bengal. This modified version of Lord Canning's rule is called the Fee-Simple Rule of 1862.<sup>xxiii</sup>

They provided that all un-assessed wastelands, in which no right of proprietorship or inclusive occupancy was known to exist, should be available for purchase unless specially reserved by the government. Ordinarily, no lot was to exceed 3,000 acres, but there was no calculation to the number of lots any one person might obtain. Each lot, if available for purchase, was to be put up to auction at an upset price of Rs.2-8 an acre. The price might be sold in installment within ten years of the completion of the purchase. Thus these estates were held in fee-simple or as revenue-free lands, the right of the Government to rent having been hold out. Under these rules, 24 holdings, with an area of 11,152 acres, were sold for about Rs.13 per acre. The most important point of difference between these rules and Lord Canning's is that under the latter the land was given to the applicant at fixed rates, ranging from Rs.2-8 to Rs.5, while the fee Simple rules required that it should be put up to auction. This provision was very much disliked by the speculators, who complained that after they had spent time, trouble, and money in searching for a suitable piece of land, they were liable of lose it altogether, or to have to pay more than its value for it at the auction sale. There was an agitation for the re-introduction of leasehold tenure, which had been discontinued under a clause in the fee-simple rules. Another provision, which was much objected to, was one requiring the demarcation and survey of each lot previous to sale. Gradually the Government had to suspend the survey prior to the sale. The result was disastrous. It happened on many occasions that the grantee had purchased one piece of land and got a title deed describing one quite different.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Cultivation Leases: The agitation against the auction clause of the fee-simple rules prompted the government to permit lands to be taken up on thirty-year leases for the purposes of cultivating tea. When orders to this effect were passed by the Government of Bengal in 1864, the Board of Revenue drew up a set of rules. In 1864 a new tenure was introduced under Government order, No.1765 T, of the 22<sup>nd</sup> July of that year; by which lands were granted on cultivating leases for a term of thirty years at 6 annas per acre, with a right of re-settlement at the end of the term at half the rates paid for land cultivated with

the ordinary crops of the District. These holdings were not commutable to fee-simple tenures. There was no efficient provision made for the survey and demarcation of the leaseholds, or in the protection of native interests. In Darjeeling much land had been taken up on this future. In the tea growing areas of the Bengal presidency, under the old rules of 1854 about 30,000 acres held by different tea planters. Similarly 320,000 acres were held under the simple rule and 1,00,000 acres were held under cultivation lease. In a statement on the state of tea culture in the District of Darjeeling, E.W. Whinfield the deputy commissioner on 27<sup>th</sup> February 1873 gave an account of the land held in different tenure in Darjeeling.<sup>xxv</sup>

The practical result of those grants was large-scale alienation of forest land (which would otherwise have been state property) by government than was actually required for the extension of tea cultivation. A large quantity of charcoal was required then in the tea factories of Darjeeling for firing and drying the tea. In fact the tea industry initially relied a great deal only on Charcoal as the source of fuel. Another very important requirement of the tea industry was wooden boxes used for packing manufactured tea. All these were taken place at the cost of forest wood.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Thus, it may be stated that most tea plantations were established by clearing natural forests on lands acquired or purchased from the government of India. Whenever markets for tea were strong enough to enable expansion of plantation acreage, forest cover correspondingly was reduced. There was also attempt by the Forest department to prevent greater alienation of forest land to the tea planters as well as those who indulged in land speculations. However, most of them were of the view that encouragement of a steady increase in the area under tea would serve the interest of the general public. In the interest of the government and the forest administration of Darjeeling, it was felt that the grantees of forested lands should be made to pay for the timber standing on the land thus obtained in such a manner so as to ultimately check the insidious tendency to acquire large areas of forest land, not with the view of planting it with tea, but to keep the land for sale in the future. Thus, the tea industry contributed significantly to deforestation of the natural forest of Darjeeling.

To provide the planters further legal and administrative protection, the district

administration of colonial Darjeeling created a *Touzi* (distinct land revenue) Department primarily to look after the interests of the European planters by setting apart the tea plantations from the agricultural sector and thereby from the jurisdiction of the general land revenue administration too. This explains why the *Touzi* Department is having its existence only in the two tea producing districts namely Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling to provide special privileges.<sup>xxvii</sup> Effectively, there had been none in between the tea planters and the East India Company Authority except the single layered bureaucratic frame headed by the Superintendent/District Collector. This arrangement also explains how the nexus was built between the private European planters and the District administration in Darjeeling. The *Touzi* Section under District Administration dealt with land matters of the tea garden land, renewal of the lease of the tea garden, collection of land cess/salami/penalty/fine etc., it also dealt with giving no objection certificate for the development purpose, permission for uprooting and replanting/felling of shed trees. *Touzi* was also held responsible for the resumption of the retained land of the tea garden. Interestingly, the post-colonial independent state government administration continued this colonial arrangement and *Touzi* section under District Magistrate Darjeeling still continues to operate.

The annexation of Darjeeling from the king of Sikkim (through a Deed of Grant), Darjeeling was given a special status by the East India Company administration under which it was designated as a non-regulated district and the land laws of Bengal did not apply.<sup>xxviii</sup> Such unique arrangement provided opportunities for bringing a huge portion of land under tea cultivation. Consequently, the rapidly growing tea industry played a major role in the initial development of the entire hills of Darjeeling. As a matter of fact, once conceived as sanatoria or as a military station, Darjeeling had been brought under the fold of tea economy and had been designated as tea land being tea designated as the colonial cash crop. The period between the establishment of first tea estate in 1852 and till 1947, the entire Darjeeling hills (principally restricted to Darjeeling Sadar and Kurseong sub-Division and only five tea gardens in the western part of Tista under lately annexed Kalimpong sub-division), experienced an unprecedented growth in tea plantation. The number of tea estates and the area under tea cultivation increased steadily from just one

estate (1856) with an area of 4.33 hectare under tea cultivation to one hundred and thirteen tea estates covering 11,000 hectares of land under tea cultivation in 1874. In 1895, the total number of tea garden rose to 186 and the area occupied under tea cultivation as recorded in 1943 rose to 21075 hectares.<sup>xxix</sup> However, the periods from 1896 to 1943, experienced the decrease in the number of tea gardens due to closure, suspension of works, declaration of sick garden, or merger with the big group of tea companies, and increase in the area of land under tea plantation. There had been other factors too for the expansion of tea area and reduction of number of tea gardens.

In 1873, the first General Meeting of the Darjeeling planters was convened in Darjeeling to discuss on the issues and problems confronted by the planters. After the passage of roughly two decades, Darjeeling planters Association was formally formed in 1892 and was associated to Indian Tea Association in 1910.<sup>xxx</sup> A separate association called the Terai Planters' Association was formed in 1928. This association faced friction between some Indian and European members due to lack of trust between planters. Simultaneously, another important event of technology transformation was taken place in Darjeeling tea plantation. Mr. O'Brian an engineer, first time applied the power driven tea roller and tea sorter in the processing of tea in 1872 by installing turbines. This resulted positive impact both on the quantity and quality of tea processing in Darjeeling and held responsible for rapid growth and expansion of tea plantation.<sup>xxxi</sup> Rapid expansion of tea plantations in the second half of the nineteenth century created major employment opportunities and served as the impetus for initial economic development of the entire hill tract of Darjeeling.

Thus it may be stated that most tea plantations were established by clearing natural forests on land acquired or purchased from the Government of India. Whenever markets for tea were strong enough to enable expansion of plantation acreage, great cover correspondingly got reduced. For many years, the tea planters held dominant financial and political leverage in Darjeeling and prevented the Forest department from gaining control over the wide forest area of the district. Higher ups in the forest department wanted to prevent greater alienation of forest areas to the tea planters as well as to those who indulged in land speculation. The large scale alienation of forest land for plantations

and speculation as was indulged in at that point of time spoke of the great concern with which the forest department viewed the growth of the planter's interest in the district of Darjeeling. The dichotomy of interests between government foresters and private planters went unabated throughout the colonial period. The Colonial revenue officials had always tilted their balance to private planters in view of their revenue paying capacity.

Taking legitimate control over the forest land was the acknowledged policy of the British Government from the very beginning of the establishment of the Forest Department. British Government gradually realized that if the prevailing state of affairs was allowed to continue unchecked, in the same proportion as cultivation increased and forest was cleared, the government forest property would not only become valueless, but might soon be diminished to such a degree as to be incapable of supplying the just demands of the country, which it was considered as the duty of a civilized government to secure. It was also recognized as practically impossible for a government to undertake the systematic management of a vast state property from which every individual could supply his or her wants free of charge, and frequently yielded no income from local sale. Soon it became evident that in order to effect the required changes, it was necessary to legislate in order to legalize the settlement and the reservation of forests areas as well as the assumption of the complete control of their management

It was consequently necessary to discern, in the first instance, between forests in which the control of the state was still absolute; forests which were the property of the state, but which were burdened with legal rights, prescriptive or granted. It was found that the forest Act of 1865 drew no distinction between the forests which required to be closely reserved, even at the cost of more or less interference with private rights, and those which merely needed general control to prevent improvident exploitation. It also provided no procedure or inquiring into and settling the rights which it so vaguely saved, and gave no powers for regulating the exercise of such rights without appropriating them. The forest Act of 1865, of such reasons, lent itself badly to the constitution of the state reserves. As a matter of fact, the Indian Forest Act of 1878 which was subsequently passed, did not per se accept the forest settlement work done under the earlier enactment.<sup>xxxii</sup>

The credit for bringing tea to Darjeeling goes to Dr. Cambell who was appointed in 1839 to the post of Superintendent. In 1841, there was successful cultivation of the plant at an attitude of 213.36 metres, from the seeds of a Chinese variety brought from Kumaon. The other early planters were Dr. Whilecombe, a civil surgeon and Major Crommlin, a civil engineer. It was identified that the land around Lebong – a little below Darjeeling north side, was particularly suitable. By the beginning of 1850's, on the way up from the plains, the Pankhabari and Kurseong gardens were developed by pioneers like Martin and Captain Samler. The commercial potential of Darjeeling as a tea cultivation zone with its unique kind tea aroma was proved beyond doubt and several other gardens were established. These tea gardens were promoted either on the basis of proprietorship or as joint stock companies. In 1856, the Kurseong and Darjeeling Tea Company opened the Alubari Garden. The Dhutana garden owned by Dr. Brougham opened in 1859. Dr. Campbell attempted to inspire the local indigenous people by way of distributing tea seeds; however, his attempts were proved to be a failure.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

With the initiation of tea cultivation on commercial basis, by 1860's several concerns like the Darjeeling Tea Company and the Lebong Tea Company opened a number of tea gardens at the high mountain ridges of Darjeeling hills. But soon there was interest in opening estates at lower levels in the Terai region. In 1862, James White, owner of Singel tea estate of Singel near Kurseong, opened the first garden in the Terai at a place called Champta. In 1872, the property was registered and the partners were W. Lloyd, G.A. White, S. Cochrane, A. Smallwood and R.S. Wright.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The business was converted into a joint stock company called the Champta Tea Company, in 1883. This huge estate was reorganized and the New Champta Tea Company was created in 1889 under the managing agency of Davenport and Company.

In 1866, 14 years after the first commercial planting, Darjeeling district had 39 gardens producing a total of 21,000 kg. of tea. In 1870, the number of gardens increased to 56 producing about 71000 kg. of tea. By 1874, there developed 113 gardens in the district covering an approximated area of 6000 hectares under tea. Tea was proved to be a highly profitable venture and by 1905, tea was grown over some 20,000 hectares – nearly 80 square miles and the production had risen to about half a million kg. The following



chart shows the expansion of tea in Darjeeling between 1874-1907.

Year	Number of Gardens	Tea cultivated area (ha)	Output (kg)
1874	113	7643	1781700
1885	175	15380	4123359
1895	186	19705	5313720
1907	148	20485	5646172

Source: Tea Statistics, Darjeeling.

The table approves the fact that during years both land under tea cultivation and output of tea had always an upward tendency, however the number of gardens experienced a downward tendency while compared to the figures of 1895 and 1907. This was due to the fact that a number of adjoining gardens were amalgamated for economic management and changes in the ownership deed of registration from personal proprietorship to Joint Stock Company. Over and above, tea flourished both in the hills and terrain plains of the district.

Interesting to note that Indian entrepreneurs were allowed to open a number of gardens in terrai part of Darjeeling after 1907. They were however allotted land with less favourable soil. However, the rest of the Darjeeling gardens located in hills were still kept under European ownership. The expansion of tea cultivation in Darjeeling went unabated till it faced notable crisis during the world wars. Till then, there were 71 gardens across 10,117 ha within the jurisdiction of Darjeeling Thana, 46 gardens across 6,889 hectares under Kurseong Thana, and 32 gardens across 3197 hectares under Siliguri Thana. Thus about one seventh of the district was covered with tea and no less than one third of tea population lived off the industry.<sup>xxxv</sup> The Census of India showed that 64000 persons were engaged as plantation workers. Darjeeling tea imbued with fine unique aroma became famous by 1870's for this flavour and realized higher prices.

The tea industry in Darjeeling continued to progress satisfactorily between 1901 and 1940. There had been the decline in the numbers of tea gardens, however, area under tea cultivation in Darjeeling district continued to increase from 20485 hectares to 25520 hectares and the output grew from 5,464,292 kg. to 10,760,072 kg. The district grew both

black and green varieties of tea and the 1942 output was 12,010,420 kg. and 563371 kg. respectively. However, in the post World War II period, the tea industry in Darjeeling suffered a decline. The area under cultivation fell and production remained virtually stagnant. The tea industry in Darjeeling started suffering from starvation of capital. The recurring depression in World tea price, falling profitability of investment in tea in India in general and Darjeeling in particular, devaluation of rupee and the problem of repatriation of dividend and remuneration had been the causing anxiety to investors and made the British capital problematic.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

The penetration of colonial capitalism in India led to the growth of a wage-earning industrial labour force divided into several segments in the second half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. A major segment was the plantation labour force formed and maintained essentially on the basis of unfree labour. In view of all this and also in view of the multi-tribe, multi caste and multi-lingual composition of the labour force and the subsistence of primordial tribal/caste linguistic ties can such a labor force be viewed and identified, if not in the subjective sense but at least in terms of objective content, as a working class or a segment of Indian working class? This leads to the broader issue of ambiguities in the process of class formation under conditions in which the capitalist sector emerges and grows but the capitalist relations are not sufficiently generalized in the economy as a whole. This suggests once more that the plantation labour force was very much a phenomenon of unfinished capitalist relational process of history. All this had also very important bearing on the process of development of class struggle and labour and for class consciousness among the plantation workers.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

During the last few years of colonialism, Darjeeling experienced organized trade union movement which penetrated into the tea gardens around 1943. The Provisional Committee of the Communist Party of India (CPI) delegated Sushil Chatterjee to organize a unit in the Darjeeling district. Mr. Chatterjee came into close contact with Ratan Lal Brahmin, a local popular person commonly acceptable among the labours of the gardens. R.L. Brahmin was drawn gradually into organized Leftist politics and won the National Assembly constituency seat in 1946 as a Communist candidate. The rift

between other emerging trade unions of the Gorkha League, Congress and the Communists had widened as a result.

### Conclusion:

It has been explored that the development of Darjeeling hills as a region of tea plantation had acquired its credential since the beginning of the mid-nineteenth century. It was only with the abolition of the East India Company's trading monopoly of tea with China in 1833 that a quest for tea in British India acquired urgency. The British Scientists and Botanists under the leadership of Nathaniel Wallich had noticed that the tea plant succeeded best on the sides of mountains. During the same period, the coincidence was that including Darjeeling hill tract along with extensive tracts of the Himalayan foot-hills had been brought under Company's direct control as the end results of wars with Burma, Nepal and Sikkim.

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