

A Bitter Brew: Peshok's Boon in Disguise

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Abstract

Darjeeling known for its exquisite quality of tea but the bitter truth of the ongoing plantation exploitation and closure can't be turned a blind eye. Peshok tea garden is one of the eloquent tea gardens of the Darjeeling hills which have been dogged with incessant closure since the early nineties. There has been a huge paradigm shift in the social ecology, economic and cultural aspects of the tea garden as we know for a fact that change is the only constant. The resilience to change is what builds a society into a remarkable one, Peshok tea garden has outdone their agony and lacking and has emerged into a path breaking, extraordinary tea garden. The formation of the societies has emerged as a breeding ground for entrepreneurship development, self sufficiency and a sense of ownership. The household, society and factory have formed an extremely dignified chain, thus helping in the participatory development of the human and their society. There is also a major role to be played by the government through improvement at the administrative level and also for the up gradation of the various plantation and labour acts for the smoothing run of this venture. These social innovations are the stepping stones needed to conquer greater human possibilities.

Keyword: Incessant closures; Paradigm shift; Resilience; Social ecology; Social innovation; Self sufficiency.

Introduction

Darjeeling Tea is a heritage, cherished with tradition, taste and passion, which is an accumulation of 87 myriad tea gardens present in the different areas of the region. The aroma of two buds and a leaf has spread through mountains and valleys to own a remarkable GI tag for its conservation worldwide. Whereas the ground reality has been a bitter sweet experience with the unfolding of many stories that are still left untold.

Methods: The text creation has been based on case study approach. The case study is basically a systematic probing to reveal a factual character of any event and system. The text generated through ground truth verification technique, entire case has been re-written, edited and configured.

Entry: Peshok tea garden

Peshok Tea Garden village is located in Rangli Rangliot Tehsil of Darjeeling district in West Bengal, India. Darjeeling is the district headquarter of Peshok tea garden village. As per 2009 stats, Lamahatta is the gram panchayat of Peshok tea garden village. Darjeeling is nearest town to Peshok tea garden which is approximately 32km away.

The tea estate dogged by misfortune

The Peshok tea estate has been shut down for quite some time due to myriad reasons starting from workers shortage to mismanagement. However, the workers have recuperated from the situation and has been an exemplar considering the present situation. It stands tall in the hour of the crisis and chaos in the tea industry.



Basic information of the tea estate.

Total area	988.54ha
Tea garden area	314.70ha
Wasteland	251.19ha
Village area	422.65ha
Population	4200
Household	910
Male population	2040
Female population	2160

History of the tea garden

The tea garden has a bitter story of its own struggle from glory to ashes. It was started off by the British in the mid 1800 with the advent of tea in the Darjeeling hills. Darjeeling tea was un debatably known as one of the most successful ventures of the British Raj in India and Peshok was fairly considered as one of the gems of that era. Until Pre-independence the year 1957, when the garden was sold to Ramdin Singh, he ran it up to 1975 with the closing and reopening dramas occurring ever since the late 1960's, eventually the garden was rendered closed due to the mismanagement as they were unable to clear the wages and other legal benefits were left pending for several months. Therefore, it was brought under the Government supervision. The Govt. gave it to the Tea Tanning Corp Ltd on lease in the year 1978, they ran the garden for 17 years up to 1993. Thereafter, the garden remained closed for 12 years at this time the Govt. of India granted the workers a pension of Rs.500 per month with an interference of the labour court, the pension was to be granted to the workers until they attained an age of 57.5 years after which it stopped. This created a feeling of distrust towards the management as well as the financial stability of the tea as a means of income, therefore, the workers shifted their focus on other occupation which led to it being a highly agriculturally inclined area in the Darjeeling district where they grew ginger, cardamom, mandarin, vegetables etc. In the year

2006, the Alchemist Company ran the garden up to 2009, after which due to losses and mismanagement they left the garden but not on an official notice until very recently in 2018 they officially left the garden thus declaring it a shutdown tea estate yet again.

The Reasons that led to the downfall

The workers are adamant to point fingers towards the mismanagement which is one of the factors undeniably but there are others factors too which has led the tea garden into its present plight. The reasons are discussed in brief.

Exhaustion of the soil

The garden started off in the 1800 during the British era even after such long period of time replanting is still not predominantly done in the garden, which makes the crop exhausted and it loses its genetic viability. Moreover, tea garden is a mono crop therefore it leads to exhaustion of the soil making it devoid of the necessary nutrients as tea is an exotic plant. Even after uprooting the tea bushes it takes years for the soil to be suitable for any other cultivation purpose.

Impact of ongoing population pattern

There has been increase in the population of the inhabitants, thereby creating a huge pressure on the social ecology and economy of the garden area which has remained constant over the years. The management did nothing to provide alternative livelihood strategies earlier which led to overdependence, but over the years the population pattern as well as peoples dependency on tea decreased. So now on the other side of the coin, people have less children as of now mostly they have 2 children in comparison to the earlier time when the no. was 6 or 7. Therefore there is shortage of labour in the tea garden hampering the hand plucked essence of Darjeeling tea.

Frequent strikes and statehood agitation

The strikes and statehood agitation has a history of its own but the politically unstable Darjeeling hampered the tea business therefore, being the reason for the losses faced by the garden owner leading to its shutdown.

Globalisation and liberalisation

Darjeeling tea is renowned to be the "champagne of tea" around the world .There are 87 tea gardens in total producing the high quality Darjeeling tea under an area of 19,500ha, producing 8-9 million ton of Darjeeling tea but in the liberalized world market about 40 million tea are sold as Darjeeling tea, which is unfair and injustice to the workers who toil so hard to produce one of the best tea's in the world. Despite of the GI (Geographic Indication) tag the misbranding is still quite prevalent. Worldwide all GIs face with primary two kinds of risk, one arising from the generic use to indicate a class of products without any regional nexus and the other from their dilutive use of as trademarks on similar or dissimilar goods or services. Enforcement of Darjeeling as a geographical indication has been no exception. (Kumar Rajendra et al., 2011)

Current scenario of the tea garden

The residents of the Peshok Tea garden have managed to re-engineer and reinvent their way of life and are prospering in a multicultural environment. At present under the Workers committee Peshok which is approved by the BDO(Block Development Officer), the tea garden labourers individually maintain their own stretch of tea growing land provided to the labour household residing in that part of the garden under mutual understanding and cooperation. The labour do the plucking to pruning and all other related activities related to the cultivation of the tea leaves and thereafter sell the green tea leaves through the workers committee to the other tea factories(Khawas Vimal, 2006). In 2019, they sold the green leaves for Rs.40 per kg.



The Govt. of India provides the tea garden workers Rs.1500 per month under the FAWLOI Scheme (Financial Assistance to the Workers of Locked Out Industries) after it was declared officially closed in the year 2018. Besides this, agriculture and livestock prospectus of the area is tremendous thereby being an important means of livelihood for the inhabitants. There is also an increase in the number of people going other nearby places and cities in search for a better future.

Under Supervision Of	No. of Labourers Working
British Time	1200-1000
Ramdin Singh	950-900
TTCL	800-750
Alchemist Company	570

Similarly the people of Mineral Spring, a closed tea garden in Darjeeling, have organized themselves into a collective which is in the process of being registered as Sanjukta Vikas Sanstha. It has a membership of 450 families. The governance structure is based upon member families with 1 vote, 12 hamlet committees and a board of 26 members. There is a women's wing called the Sanjukta Nari Sangathan. The President and Secretary of the Sanjukta Nari Sangathan are nominated to the board. Electionstake place once every two years. DLR Prerna has a non-voting advisory status within the collective. The board also has functional working committees and employees from within the members to implement its activities. Therefore, the closed tea gardens are becoming the breeding ground of self sufficient societies. (Rai Roshan, 2006).

The different ecological parameters in the tea garden

Water table

Natural springs serve as a major source of domestic and drinking water across the hill villages. They also rely on the P.H.E for drinking water and the forest dept also provide them water .The natural springs have somehow, declined over the years with some sources even drying up.

Water use pattern

The water use pattern is more inclined towards the agricultural production, as the tea garden is now redundant. The natural water sources have dried up due to deforestation, thus water scarcity is coming up as a burning topic.

Livelihood

The shift from monoculture to multicultural environment has been truly astounding. The people have mostly turned to agriculture after the betrayal and closure of the tea estate. The people grow vegetables, ginger, cardamom, avocado, beans, tomato and now they see a prospective of growing coffee too. The shift from tea to other agricultural crops has gradually increased over the years after the mistrust towards the garden officials over the period of time. People also rear livestock as they are

considered handy in case of emergencies, as they have persistently seen the lockdown and opening of the tea estate enough not to consider it a stable source of income.

Employment

During the days when the tea estate was in operation, the belief in resident garden society was that the only employment they could get, was that of a worker in the state. This made them neglect their children's education and education per se was not a priority. Today, some have learnt and improved their agrarian skills while others look beyond the tea estate for employment. Some of them have joined the army while others have gone to faraway places such as Delhi, Bangalore or Mumbai to work. All return with different experiences and exposure that benefits society on the whole.

Plant biodiversity

Over the years there has been an increase in the plant biodiversity as cutting of wood for fuel has completely declined due to the various schemes of the Govt. channelized to provide gas connections to rural household. These schemes have worked tremendously for protecting the flora population over the years.

Further amelioration of the tea garden

The successful evolution of Peshok Tea garden over the years is a gentle nudge in the right direction. In order to purview this growth further beyond ,there are some responsibility on the part of the Govt to promote it by providing their helping hand in bringing about some drastic changes on the existing Plantation act, estate aquistion act and the labour act. (Chettri Neelkamal, 2007)

The colonial management

The management of tea gardens is still under the perception of master and slave relationship. This outlook needs to change so that the exploitation of workers are not turned a blind eye through the rose tinted glasses of the owners.

The estate acquisition act

The estate acquisition act needs to be amended so that the resident plantation society finally gets the much needed space that has been denied to them all these years, so that it instills a sense of belongingness. Ownership of the houses that they have been living has to be transferred from the company to the actual working inhabitants of the

plantation. A clause needs to be added that ensures the plantation land to be distributed among the resident garden society as and when the plantation closes down.

The plantation labour act

The plantation labour act of 1951, by the central Govt. was for the welfare of the workers working under the different plantations in India. However its ground reality is still a façade in the Darjeeling tea industry and Peshok tea estate is no different to it. The proper implementation for what it stands for is still, a farfetched dream. The existing labour act needs to incorporate a social security net that will include multi-skill training, job counseling, in order to stimulate multi-skill environment so that the residents of the tea gardens won't suffer during the shutdown. When tea gardens are closed or locked out one clearly sees the inadequacies in the Plantation Labour Act. With closure, the workers are devoid of any assets, skills or policy support for life and livelihoods. The starvation deaths that one hears about in closed tea gardens of North Bengal are the result of this inadequacy.

Conclusion

The future of the Tea estate looks very hazy, as it's already under a lockdown and most of the household labours are mid age workers and the committee formed are run by the old garden workers, there is no participation of the young generation in anything related to the tea estate. They don't seem interested in conserving and working towards the betterment of their age old heritage. Most of the young generation prefer going outside than working for an unstable income. In terms of growth of employment, Assam's performance has worsened in recent years. Although labour productivity had increased relatively comfortably during the 1980s, during the 1990s labour productivity growth slumped in many of the districts of Assam. Employment elasticity has come down in Assam in the nineties in comparison to the eighties. (Mishra k Deepak, et al., 2006) This is an all India trend and Darjeeling is no different. On the brighter side, the world tea trade is based on monopsony, the role of corporate bodies is critical. Corporate social responsibility, much touted, needs to be put in place, based on trusteeship and not exploitation. Tea gardens like Mineral Spring, Peshok thus, prove that tea can be grown in models more equitable and sustainable other than is prevalent in monoculture plantations

and mindsets. A new development strategy must, therefore, improve the economic access of the resident garden society; ensure that its proposed solutions are conducive to local milieus and are efficient in welfare-terms rather than merely in productivity terms, and that these bring economic productions into closer consonance with the natural ecosystems. In practice, such solutions demand social innovation by re-orienting economic activity towards human development rather than technological developments. Such innovation comprises the integration of formal with informal activity, the proper utilization of resources and, most importantly, institutional responsiveness and adoption of technology appropriate to mountain areas where these tea gardens are located. (Chettri Neelkamal, 2007)

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