



DECLINE IN WORK FORCE IN TEA GARDENS OF LEBONG, DARJEELING

Mr. Satish Tamang

**Assistant Professor, Department of English
Cooch Behar College, Cooch Behar, West Bengal**

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Abstract

Lebong is a valley situated at an altitude of 1819 meter above sea level and 8 km away from Darjeeling Town. The word 'Lebong' comes from the native Lepcha word 'Ali & Abong' meaning 'Tongue and Mouth' as it protrudes like a tongue from the ridge on which Darjeeling town is established. Lebong is famous for its defunct Race Course dating back from time when British ruled India now under Indian Army, Gorkha Stadium built in 1993 and Tea Gardens. It is said that the first tea bushes were introduced to this region by Captain Lloyd, the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling in 1841. He brought them from China. On the other hand, some sources say that these very same seeds were brought from China by Captain Charles White in 1841 and others claim that they were imported from Assam in 1853. The Darjeeling Tea industry is therefore more than 150 years old and is counted among the most potent brands in the world market today. The present paper is a humble attempt to shed light on the decline in tea gardens of Lebong and its consequences on the life.

Keywords

Darjeeling Tea, Lebong, Tea Gardens, Decline, Tea Garden Workers.

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Lebong with the geographical coordinates 27° 5' 0" North, 88° 17' 0" East and climate of an average 23 degree Celsius in summer and average 14 degree Celsius in winter, average relative humidity of 43% and average of 2477 mm of rainfall through the year has a perfect condition for growing Tea.

There are 6 Tea Gardens in Lebong Valley. They are i) Badamtam Tea Estate ii) Phoobsering Tea Estate iii) Kanchanview Tea Estate iv) Bannockburnt Tea Estate v) Ging Tea Estate and vi) Pandam Tea Estate. These 6 Tea Gardens collectively make 80% of the Tea production of Darjeeling.

i) Badamtam Tea Estate was established in 1958 and Mr. Gordon Fox is the owner. Badamtam had 5 Managers, 18 clerical staffs and 1097 workers in 2015. However, in 2016 the number of Managers and Clerical Staffs remains the same but the number of workers is reduced to 1079.

ii) Phoobsering Tea Estate which was established in 1864 and presently owned by Chamong Group had 3 managers, 11 clerical staffs and 657 workers in 2015. In 2016 the number of workers is condensed to 633 workers, 10 clerical staffs and 3 managers.

iii) Kanchanview Tea Estate founded in 1920 and Mr. Ajit Agarwal as its owner now in 2016 has 2 managers, 3 Clerical Staffs and 120 workers but in 2015 this tea garden has 2 managers 4 clerical staffs and 150 workers.

iv) Bannockburnt Tea Estate was initiated 1850 owned by Chamong Group faces the same attrition of workers with 3 managers, 10 clerical staffs and 500 workers in 2015 reduced to 2 managers 10 clerical and 400 workers in 2016.

v) Ging Tea estate also owned by Chamong Group was established around 1850 also face the shortage of man power with 3 managers and 10 clerical staffs and 600 workers in 2015. In 2016 it has 3 managers 9 clerical staffs and 500 workers.

vi) Pandam Tea estate owned by Darjeeling Organic Tea Estate Private Limited DOTEPL had 2 managers, 8 clerical Staffs and 268 workers in 2015 but in 2016 the numbers decreased to 2 Managers 6 Clerical Staffs and 235 works.

All 6 Tea Estate of Lebong has a steady and alarming decline in Manpower. There are various reason for the decline in the workers in these Tea Gardens. Absence of workers' rights, non-payment of minimum wages and benefits is not specific to the tea-industry alone but is rather a persistent feature of work in the highly segment labour-market in India. However, it is pertinent to highlight here the regional aspects of discrimination that are visible in the tea industry. The minimum wage paid to unskilled tea labour in Kerala is Rs.254, in Tamil Nadu it is Rs 209, in Karnataka it is Rs 228, in neighboring Sikkim it is Rs. 220 while the same in Darjeeling comes to a meagre Rs.112 Even the minimum wage paid in West Bengal for MGNREGA is around Rs. 130-151 and for agricultural labourers is Rs. 206 per day. The daily Wages of a labour Rs. 112 does not justify 8 hours of labour intensive work in hostile and extreme environment of Tea Estate Lebong. Thus, It is evident that majority of Masses of Lebong Valley prefer to work in other private and public sectors rather than working in a Tea Estate. Even the labourer working in construction site earns more than a worker in a Tea Garden. Low Daily wages, least medical facility and ration in the Tea Estate of Lebong is a significant cause for decrease in Workforce.

Another reason is a volatile political situation of Darjeeling. The long standing demand of Statehood-Gorkhaland originating around early 1980s and failure of the State Government and Darjeeling Hill Council of Darjeeling to come up with a permanent political solution of Darjeeling aftermath of which is Socio- Political unrest in Darjeeling, with such uncertain situations in Lebong and in Darjeeling majority of public specially the Youths desire and are forced to leave Darjeeling and work in other parts of India and abroad where the peace and jobs are plentiful.

Darjeeling takes pride in its Tea, Tourism and Education System which is one of the legacy of the British Regime; with enormous rise in Literacy in Darjeeling for past several decades, the mind set of an educated youth of Darjeeling see himself/herself beyond the Tea bushes. Education has broaden the horizons of the youth of Darjeeling .An average youth of Lebong no longer cling to a job in Tea Gardens, where they are overworked and underpaid.

Thus, low wages of workers, political strife and rise of literacy in the region has led in the decline in workforce in Tea Gardens of Lebong. Owners of the all 6 Tea Estates of Lebong need to address this alarming situation at once and plan long term solutions which will prevent the attrition of workers and guarantee steady flow of Human Resource. An immediate and logical step for the Tea Estate owners to take is to provide a better financial security, Healthier working environment for their workers, otherwise the day is not far that their Tea Estate will be a wasteland devoid of workers.

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