

Tea, Tourism and Torture; Analysing the Structural Strains of the Tourism Industry in the Darjeeling Hills

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ABSTRACT

The Tea and Tourism industry of the Darjeeling hills in West Bengal has raked in significant fame, profits and attraction towards the State. However, the system that maintains these institutions are inherently outdated, riddled with colonial tendencies and inequality. Whether it is the lack of proper wages to Tea Garden workers or a lack of proper land administration, the system is clearly collapsing. Additionally, the lack of regional autonomy of the people of Darjeeling also adds to this problem, highlighting the importance of recognising identities within smaller regional economies. Along with this, faulty administration and haphazard constructions have also led to collapse on multiple fronts including economics, geographic and ecological. Hence, this paper will seek to critically examine the tourism industry and its cascading effects on smaller towns, with Darjeeling as the primary case of analysis, and highlight how a lack of autonomy and mismanagement can lead to collapse on multiple levels through the use of primary and secondary research.

Keywords: Tea, Tourism, Darjeeling, Regional Autonomy, Structural

INTRODUCTION

“The gears of capitalism are lubricated by the blood of the workers.”

-Anonymous

What is the price of the mundane? How often does one sit still, think and analyse the cost required to acquire a seemingly ordinary necessity? One such necessity, especially in Indian households, is tea. One of the places synonymous with tea worldwide is the hill station of Darjeeling, a seemingly quaint, picturesque and peaceful town full of kind locals who live mundane lives. Yet, this perspective is one riddled with naivety, privilege and bias, as all these facets of Darjeeling are under threat and crumbling. The serenity, comfort and calm that the place provides to tourists and residents alike are merely facades to hide the cripple infrastructure that lies in the underbelly. What is even stranger is that this collapse is simply not isolated. Rather, it is intersectional and multifaceted, part of an intricate spider's web that is barely holding on by the seams. The day this web collapses will have catastrophic consequences, in particular for the residents of the town. This paper seeks to analyse the very same structural strains of the industry that provides this perfectly curated image of Darjeeling, i.e, the Tourism Industry. This industry is also synonymous with the Tea industry, hence it will also be analysing certain aspects of the same. Additionally, the paper will also seek to analyse the political structure upholding the very system, as well as its socio-cultural connections. Hence, the paper will adopt a multifaceted approach to the Tourism Industry, and try to portray a picture which is as close to the ground reality as possible.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Analysing any system requires context. Hence, one cannot understand the strains associated with the Tourism Industry before understanding its roots, and these roots are colonial in nature. As Golay (2006, p. 38) argues that through colonialism, “The hill-man was turned into a reified commodity,” since it is the labouring hill people who were the backbone of the Tea industry under the British. This commodification was not merely of the physical body alone, but also of the geography. Bennike (2017) talks about the idea of “Frontier

Commodification,” where the wild frontier of the Himalayan was promptly transformed into a perfect Tea plantation for the British through historical revisionism and quick integration into the global capitalist machine. This commodification only spilt over following the Indian independence. The region was engulfed in political unrest, a lack of linguistic and political autonomy for the Gorkha population, and multiple human rights violations under the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) government of West Bengal, as Khati (2024) writes. This lack of autonomy was naturally a result of the hands of the colonial master switching over from colonial Britain to communist Bengal, as the commodity of the hillman and the tea gardens continued to exist. Additionally, the lack of autonomy over labour only carried over in the 21st Century. Darjeeling Tea was recognised as the first Geographical Indication (GI) of India in 1999, but the workers were simply following the will of the managers and being lulled into the “self-exploitation” with no knowledge of the GI tag, a reclamation of “terroir” but an “obliteration of labor” as Besky (2013) writes. Additionally, this obliteration of labour is further solidified by Patriarchal norms, with women outnumbering men in the plantations, most hailing from low income families and not having any means of upward social mobility, as covered by Gurung & Mukherjee (2018). External factors primarily the prominence of international competitors only worsen the situation, as Turkey & Nepal (2012) write. All these signify a politico-cultural strain towards the foundational labour which attracts tourists towards Darjeeling, one which has been carefully orchestrated to commodify and oppress the people of the hills (Khati, 2024).

There are also various ecological and urban strains associated with the region. As covered by Chettri & Tamang (2013), the town has seen an exponential growth in terms of population and development since the 1950s, with many of the local population having to deal with problems of waste dumping, traffic congestions, sewage and sanitation issues. This has only been worsened by the perpetual lack of drinking water in many regions of the town, along with improper management of the resource by local authorities, as Bhutia (2017) writes. This lack of resources and mismanagement does not go well with the exponential increase in medium and low-grade hotels, mushrooming into residential areas, as Giri (2020) writes. All of these urban strains culminate into an ecological crisis, which makes the region more vulnerable to natural disasters, coupled with the strain in resources.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The paper will adopt a qualitative approach to research, making use of the review of several other primary sources of literature. Additionally, the paper will also make use of certain secondary sources such as news articles and blogposts, in order to highlight the recency of certain issues. The paper will collate all of these sources together and critically analyse the structural strains associated with the Tourism Industry of Darjeeling. It will also use secondary sources and other points of data to highlight the main point of contention. Along with this, the paper will also be drawing certain connections between the primary and secondary sources, as it aims to adopt a diverse approach to a multi-faceted problem.

Objectives

The paper has two main objectives;

1. To provide a suitable account of the structural flaws associated with the Darjeeling Tourism Industry.
2. To highlight the intersectional problems associated with the Industry and the Himalayan Region.

Socio-Cultural Strains

Colonial Roots

Labour is essential in the maintenance and smooth functioning of any kind of system. When this backbone of labour is treated with a strong sense of harshness and inequality, strains are bound to occur. Such is the case with the many who work behind the Tea and Tourism Industry of Darjeeling.

One first needs to analyse the historical roots of this strain. Like many of the injustices in the global south, the roots of this problem can be traced back to colonialism. Ethnographical knowledge of the colonial British state

saw the “Gurkhas” as a martial race, one which was extremely subservient, loyal and expendable (Golay, 2006). This notion of subservience carried over with the establishment of the tea gardens in the Himalayan frontiers, where the “hill-man” was turned into a hard working tea plucker labourer under the watchful eye of sardars (local appellation for agents) (Golay, 2006, p. 38). Hence, we see the commodification of the hillman under the Colonial hegemony, both in terms of warfare and agriculture. This commodification instilled within the Gorkha a lack of autonomy, an insecurity which dictated that a master should always be at the helm of the operation. This insecurity created numerous pathways for exploitation in the later years, primarily in terms of wages and identity. Additionally, this commodification was bolstered by a strong historical revisionism carried out by the colonisers. Colonial law saw the acquisition of land as valid through the “natural law,” as Darjeeling was legitimized in 1835 following its leasing by the East India Company. This natural law tradition theorises the legitimacy of territorial acquisition through notions of lack: the lack of inhabitants, the lack of private property and resource exploitation, and the lack of territorial sovereignty (Bennike, 2017, p. 6). Colonial history argued that, due to the lack of all three, the history of Darjeeling “begins” with the advent of Colonial expansion. However, this is merely a narrative which is narrow and biased. Later studies debunked the pre-colonial history of Darjeeling. Historical records speak of the Barfung, a clan of the Lepcha community in the 18th Century, who were reinstated as local landlords following the conquest of the area by the Gorkha kingdom (later known as Nepal) (Bennike, 2017, p. 7). However, colonial history only touched upon this, and saw the legitimacy of Darjeeling with the appointment of Dr. Archibald Campbell as the first superintendent of Darjeeling (Bennike, 2017, p. 8). This revisionism provided an important tool for the colonisers to exploit the markets of Darjeeling, whose effects continue to ripple throughout time. The colonisers were able to distinguish Darjeeling as a “wasteland,” i.e., a land filled with missed opportunities and a lack of productive engagement (Bennike, 2017, p. 9). Although Bengal followed the same notions, it was permanently settled through the 1793 Permanent Settlement, which implied that “waste” (missed opportunities) could be reduced through the empowerment of the Bengali zamindars, introducing fiscal stability through fixed rates of taxation (Bennike, 2017). However, Darjeeling was not permanently settled even after half a century later, as colonial history dictated that there were no landlords with whom settlements could be reached. Instead, the large tracts of wasteland were auctioned to British companies, as land rules were left to the discretion of the Superintendent, and the loyal “Gurkha” was brought about to toil away on the Tea Plantations (Bennike, 2017). Additionally, the establishment of the area as an ideal “summer place” akin to the Swiss Alps in the 19th Century painted a picture of leisure, completely overshadowing the presence of a labour class and the Tea Industry as a backbone of Colonial Export (Bennike, 2017, p. 12). This exposes a major structural flaw in the tourism industry, as we see the formation of a paradox. Historically, not just the workers, but even the land was commodified in order to suit the needs of the colonisers without accounting for the autonomy of these individuals or providing any form of fiscal security. However, the industrial backbone was overshadowed by the tourist commodification of the land, overshadowing what little autonomy the workers held in the first place. This creates an extremely exploitative system, which refuses to recognise any autonomy of the worker while also hiding that exploitation under mirages of beauty and luxury.

Post-Colonial Exploitation

To study the socio-cultural strains of the Tea Industry following Indian independence, one cannot ignore the struggle for Gorkha identity and autonomy. Being one of the oldest movements for linguistic and political in Indian, the struggle for a separate State for the Nepali speaking population of India started even before Independence, with the establishment of the Hillmen’s Association, formally established in 1921 under the leadership of Bahadur Rai, Hari Prasad Pradhan and Laden La, sought for the creation of an autonomous administrative unit (Khatri, 2024, p. 3). However, the demands were left unfulfilled by the colonial administration, and Darjeeling was instead ceded to the state of West Bengal, a state which was linguistically at odds with the Nepali speaking population of Darjeeling. Once again, the labourers and citizens of Darjeeling were under a different coloniser, as Bengal meddled with State census data to prevent reorganisation. The State Reorganisation Commission (SRC) of India mandated reorganisation of any particular region into a separate state if more than 70% of the population spoke a different language compared to the majority (Khatri, 2024, p. 3). However, in February 1961, the then Chief Minister of West Bengal, Bidhan Chandra Roy, had based his estimate of the Nepali population in Darjeeling on the 1951 census, proclaiming that only 26% of the Darjeeling population spoke Nepali while the 1961 census put the actual number at 75% (Khatri, 2024, p. 3). This worsened the already abysmal autonomy of the workers during colonial times, as there was no true “independence,” merely

a switch of the masters from the foreigner to the fellow Indian. Additionally, the association of the Nepali speaking population with that of a foreign citizen only cemented this sentiment. Hence, the demand for autonomy naturally erupted into the Gorkhaland agitation of 1986, a period characterized by revolution, mobilization of Gorkha autonomy and multiple human rights violations by the coloniser such as sexual violence, detention without due process and killings (Khati, 2024).

During this time period, the Tea Gardens were also crumbling. As Ganguly (2005, pp. 474–475) writes, the hill economy was facing acute problems in the 1980s ranging from low productivity, labor unrest, marketing mismanagement and financial bankruptcy leading to the eventual closure of many tea estates (the number of active tea gardens had come down to 85 in the 1980s from 102 in the 1960s). The closure of tea estates rendered around 50,000 workers unemployed. The tea estates that were still active found their markets and profit margins shrinking as a result of the high cost of tea production. Moreover, most of the tea estates in Darjeeling were not owned by Gorkhas, but people from the plains; being motivated purely by extracting the highest return on their investments and fearing that one day they might be forced to leave by the local people, these private owners rarely ploughed back a substantial share of their profits in their tea estates. The tea industry, therefore, continued to suffer from lack of investment. Hence, even under a new coloniser, the industry was continuing to suffer. The lack of autonomy coupled with a crippling economy pushed the strain on the system, as the coloniser was only relying on the luxury that Darjeeling provided, while the economic and political systems that held it in place were collapsing.

Contemporary Times

Although the Revolution of 1986 came to an inconclusive end, the state of the Tea and Tourism industry today is filled with even more contradictions, illusions and inequality. Tea plantation tourism has only boomed in the 21st Century. The exoticism associated with tourists visiting tea plantations and tasting tea straight from the source is very much akin to visiting the best of vineyards in today's world. As expected, due to this form of exoticism, the plantations have received global recognition. In 1999, Darjeeling tea was recognised as India's first Geographical Indication (GI) a legal protection for foods with terroir, or "taste of place," a concept most often associated with artisan foods produced by small farmers in specific regions of the Global North (Besky, 2014). However, the contradiction lies in the fact that Darjeeling tea is grown in industrial plantations instead of being associated with small scale farmers and artisans. Formed as "heritage," GI is part of a complex set of practices that enrolls tea planters, marketers, and even low-wage plantation laborers in producing terroir. However, the concept of terroir and GI and the discourses surrounding it completely disregard the role of labour, and merely take into account the material "labor" associated with the making of terroir (Besky, 2014). The issue of Darjeeling being an industrial crop was circumvented as Darjeeling was seen as both a place of rest and an industrial area by the British colonisers (Besky, 2014). Additionally, there was a linguistic contradiction as well. The colonisers preferred the word "garden" for the plantations, while the workers used the Nepali word *kamān* (कमान) to signify their place of work as a plantation instead of a garden (Besky, 2014). Linguistically speaking, the tea in Nepal was grown in a *bāri* (बारी), and not a *kamān*. The nature of the *kamān* being natural, serene and calm-like is a sham, as even the tea bushes, *camellia sinensis*, were imported from China to Darjeeling in the mid-nineteenth-century to satisfy British consumers' demand in the wake of the Opium Wars (Besky, 2014). Even the word itself signifies regimented work schedules, repetitive labor, and routine submission to the weights and measures of management, as thousands of low-paid wage laborers of Nepali origin, who live in cramped villages amidst the sweeping fields of tea are employed by affluent outsiders who profit off of their toil. Hence, this idea of violence and colonial oppression was repackaged through the feminization and the subsequent fetishisation of the land and terroir. The feminization of tea merged ideas of labor and leisure, as the soft hands of tea pluckers (juxtaposed against their hard bent backs) echoes the soft touch of the genteel colonial female tea drinker, and in Darjeeling's case, GI goes one step further, transforming female laborers into "ecologically noble," hyper-fertile features of a timeless landscape (Besky, 2014). This absolute fetishisation of both the labour and land seeps with harmful patriarchal language and intent, as it implies the women who primarily work in the plantations as mere producers of future labour while simultaneously being exploited themselves. Additionally, this implication does not let go of the colonial notion of the land being a "feminine" entity that needs to be subdued and conquered.

This patriarchal connotation only extends further when one analyses the ground realities of the plantations. As per a field study conducted by Gurung & Mukherjee (2018, p. 4), majority of the workers were married women with 81.7% representation, whilst 1.7% is unmarried. Thirty-five per cent of the women workers are illiterate, whilst the remaining 65% are school literates. Out of the total 536 members, 58% are school literates. The selected respondents are classified according to their monthly income classes, 55% of the total worker households have an income ranging between Rs. 1501 to Rs. 3500, whilst only 5% of the worker households have an income range of Rs. 7501 to Rs. 9500. This is possibly because the other contributing family members were government employees. Similarly, 48.3% of the workers had their monthly expenditure ranging between Rs. 2001 to Rs. 4000 and only 3.3% fell into a monthly expenditure class of Rs. 6001 to Rs. 8000. The mean income of the workers in the sample is Rs. 3963, and the mean expenditure is Rs. 3283. It was also observed that women predominate as field workers, whilst in the factory work women are engaged only in sorting; a few work as medical staff (nurses and midwives) and teachers. The activities in factories are mostly male dominated. Additionally, a poverty assessment was conducted where it was surmised that the per capita expenditure on food and other items was lower for casual workers. This expenditure is not reinforced by the low wage rates. The wage rate of the daily-rated workers in all the tea plantations of Darjeeling hills was Rs. 90 per day during the time of the field survey in 2014. As per 2025, the wage rate of the workers is Rs. 230, which the plantation owners fail to pay on several occasions, leading to numerous strikes, protests and bandhs by the workers, often with inconclusive results (Minj, 2025). This vast inequality which is an intersection of patriarchal colonial norms and capitalistic disparity leads to a crumbling socio economic system on an industry heavily dependent on manual labour.

Urban & Ecological Strains

While the socio-cultural setup of a system determines the functioning of that particular system, it is the urban and ecological setup that acts as the backbone of that system. With the collapse of these, the entire system is at the risk of annihilation. Unfortunately, the very advent of the Darjeeling tea industry started with ecological degradation. The expansion of tea plantations from just one tea estate in 1856, 39 in 1866, 113 in 1874 and 186 by 1905 apparently led to large-scale forest clearing, resulting in landslides, soil erosion, loss of wildlife and biodiversity (Tirkey & Nepal, 2012, p. 53). With the gradual increase in population, unemployment in tea plantations multiplied, which compelled people to search for alternative livelihoods by often tapping forest products, encroaching forest and slope land; thereby, further damaging the local ecology and degrading the environment (Tirkey & Nepal, 2012). In addition, the unchecked deforestation, faulty land use practices, settlement of burgeoning population on mountain slopes, unregulated construction of roads and encroachment of forest lands led to radical transformation of the geo-ecological conditions in the Darjeeling, a problem which continues to persist in the modern day. Additionally, the rapid expansion of urban spaces makes the area more vulnerable to disasters such as landscapes in the form of weakening of slopes, soil erosion and land sliding and other forms of environmental degradation (Tirkey & Nepal, 2012). The repercussions of rapid urbanisation is still felt today, as irregular rain patterns coupled with weakened soil led to the landslides of 2025, leading to the death of over two dozen people (Reuters, 2025).

Moreover, this urbanisation is only made worse by the exponential increase in population. With a growth rate of over 20% per decade, the town has seen exponential growth, with the current population far surpassing the previous 22,000 residents as per the 1869 consensus (Chhetri & Tamang, 2013, p. 64). Naturally, this strain in population will lead to a plethora of issues, one of them being a lack of resources. Darjeeling town generates over 6.6 MLD (2001) of sewerage. The sewerage system of Darjeeling is age old, which was laid down in 1935 and covers only about 35% of the town at present. It was originally intended to serve only the European settlers and has almost broken down. The town has an underground sewerage collection and disposal system. The system collects the domestic waste from 2500 holdings and 50 community toilets, which is conveyed to 6 central septic tanks and ultimately disposed into the jhoras. 5 out of 6 septic tanks are in defunct state and the entire conveyance system needs repairs (Chhetri & Tamang, 2013, p. 65). Additionally, there is also a persistent traffic problem associated with the region. All the roads in Darjeeling town except Hill Cart road and Lebong Cart road belong to the municipality. Owing to the geology of the area all the roads follow the contour lines. The total length of all types of roads including the stepped path within the Municipality is around 9 km in length. The road density ranges to about 9 sq.km. All the roads of Darjeeling Municipality area are not meant for heavy vehicles and

majority of them were constructed prior to the independence period. With rapid urbanization of Darjeeling town without any land use plan, the main Cart road (i.e. National Highway 55) within the Municipal area remains a constant source of nuisance due to frequent traffic jams (Chhetri & Tamang, 2013, p. 66). Most importantly however, the town struggles with the perpetual crisis of drinking water. As per the 2011 census, the Darjeeling town urban agglomeration with an area of 10.57 km², has a population of 1,18,805 persons (Bhutia, 2017, p. 54). The water supply system of Darjeeling town consists of tapping of 26 numbers of springs from the catchment area of Senchal Forest and wildlife sanctuary located about 15 km away from the main town. The water from springs are collected in an Arrestor tank and fed to the Masonry conduit line (about 8 km in length) which brings water on gravity to twin Senchal lakes. The primary reason for this water shortage is an overreliance on the Senchal North and South lake to cater to the water demands of Darjeeling, infrastructure which was originally constructed to meet the demands of only 25,000 –30,000 Darjeeling citizens under the British (Bhutia, 2017, p. 55). Only 50 per cent of the municipal households are connected to the municipal water supply. The historic water problem has gone from bad to worse because of the widening gap between supply and demand. Water supply figures definitely indicate the mushrooming of such water shops in the near future. The average demand for water for the Darjeeling town is 15 lakh gallons but the availability is 5 Lakh gallons. This amounts to a per capita water supply of 22 liters whilst the national standard is 70 litres per day (Bhutia, 2017, p. 57). This leads to a lack of basic amenities for even the residents. How then can the town manage to handle the massive influx of tourists, with Darjeeling receiving around 3.5 lakhs domestic tourists and 50,000 foreign tourists per year that generates nearly 30% of the total tourism business of the region worth around Rs 350 crore per annum (“Sustainable Tourism Development in Darjeeling”, 2015). Moreover, the rapid urban expansion of low and medium grade hotels put an extra burden on residential areas already facing a lack of basic amenities (Giri, 2020). Additionally, since the town is heavily dependent on tourism as a source of income, development becomes a paradox, as developing more infrastructure catering to tourism comes at the expense of ecological, urban and economic strains and eventual collapse.

CONCLUSION

Systems are bound to go through strains, that is inevitable. What matters however is how one reacts to those strains. Additionally, it is also important to first identify the strains in order to be able to act upon them. Through this paper, there was an attempt to identify the intersectional strain associated with the Tea and Tourism industry of Darjeeling. By identifying the various socio-cultural, political, ecological and urban strains, one is able to try and determine the next best course of action for the residents of Darjeeling. The collapse of the industry would mean the collapse of the entire town itself. Hence, it is of paramount importance to address these problems first hand instead of choosing ignorance. The solutions are obvious, better pay for workers and more autonomy for Gorkhas will lead to better understanding of the nuances and problems faced by the locals. Taking that first step in the domino will massively increase the chances of tackling other systematic problems in the future. The future of a particular people, whether good or bad, can only be determined by the people themselves and not any other body or entity.

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Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Ethics declaration

Ethical approval was not required as no human participants were involved in this research

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are drawn from publicly available secondary sources, including

published books, journal articles, reports, news articles, and other open-access materials cited in the references section. No new empirical dataset was generated for this study, and no primary human-subject data were collected. As a result, all data used in the analysis are available from the cited sources or corresponding publication links where applicable.

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