



PESHOK TEA ESTATE: A POST-INDEPENDENCE JOURNEY THROUGH CHANGING OWNERSHIP AND POLITICAL INFLUENCE

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

The renowned Darjeeling Tea Gardens have gained global recognition for their production of top-quality teas, often likened to the esteemed "Champagne of Teas." Situated in the foothills of the Eastern Himalayas, these gardens serve not only as centers for agriculture but also play a crucial role in the cultural and economic landscape of the area. Among the numerous tea gardens located in the Darjeeling hills, the Peshok Tea Garden is one of the eminent tea estates in the region. This article examines the post-independence transformation of the Peshok Tea Estate, highlighting the complex interplay among changes in ownership, labour conflicts, and political influences. It provides a thorough examination of the mechanisms through which these factors jointly influence the socio-economic dynamics of Darjeeling's tea plantations, thereby establishing the estate as an illustrative example of the wider regional context. Through various ownership transitions, challenges, and regional influences, Peshok epitomizes the comprehensive narrative of the Darjeeling tea industry—an account marked by both resilience and hardship.

Keywords: *Darjeeling Tea Garden, Peshok Tea Estate, Ownership Transition, Labour*

Introduction

Darjeeling is a district in the northernmost region of the Indian state of West Bengal, situated within the foothills of the Himalayan mountain range. The tea gardens of Darjeeling are renowned for their production of teas characterized by a unique aroma and flavor profile, thereby rendering them highly coveted on a global scale. The tea cultivated in this region has granted Geographical Indication (GI) status, which guarantees that only tea cultivated within the confines of Darjeeling can be marketed under the labeled "Darjeeling Tea." Within the context of these tea plantations, the Peshok Tea Garden possesses considerable historical and socio-political significance. This article aims to examine the Peshok Tea Garden, one of the numerous estates within this region that enhance Darjeeling's standing as a distinguished area for premium tea production.

History of Darjeeling Tea Gardens

To comprehend the significance of Peshok Tea Garden, it is imperative to first explore the broader context of the Darjeeling tea industry. The inception of tea cultivation in Darjeeling can be traced back to the early 19th century, a period during which the British East India Company sought to dismantle China's monopoly on tea production. Darjeeling, characterized by its temperate climate, elevated altitude, and nutrient-rich soil, was recognized as an optimal site for the cultivation of tea.

Dr. Archibald Campbell, serving as a civil surgeon, is acknowledged for his pioneering efforts in the cultivation of tea within the Darjeeling region. By the middle of the 19th century, tea estates began to proliferate across the Darjeeling hills, thereby establishing the groundwork for what would evolve into a globally esteemed tea industry.

Peshok Tea Garden: An Overview

Peshok Tea Garden is a village within the Rangli Rangliot Community Development block in the Darjeeling Sadar subdivision of the Darjeeling district, located in the state of West Bengal, India.

Colonial Beginnings and the Growth of the Tea Industry

The history of Peshok Tea Garden is intricately connected to the extensive backdrop of British colonialism in the Indian subcontinent. During the mid-19th century, the British East India Company endeavored to establish tea plantations in the Darjeeling region, acknowledging the area's significant potential for the cultivation of *Camellia Sinensis*. Peshok Tea Garden emerged as one of the estates established during this period, serving both as a center of agricultural production and as a symbol of British economic and cultural dominance within the region. The colonial era was marked by significant land appropriations intended to promote tea production. The local populations, repeatedly experienced displacement due to the growth of tea plantations. European planters exercised control over these estates, while the labour force primarily consisted of migrant workers hailing from Nepal and neighboring areas. These laborers suffered from oppressive working conditions, insufficient wages, and diminished rights—an issue that continued to endure well into the post-independence era.

Post Independence Transitions

With India's independence in 1947, numerous tea plantations, including Peshok, saw ownership changes as British planters progressively withdrew from the region. Indian businessmen and local entrepreneurs tried to profit from these estates, inheriting not just the beautiful tea fields but also the problems of managing labour groups used to decades of slavery.

The Peshok Tea Garden underwent various transitions in management, which profoundly influenced the operational dynamics of the garden and the circumstances of its workforce. Between the years 1959 and 1975, the estate was under the ownership of Ramdin Singh, despite the garden being rendered inactive from 1970 to 1975 due to economic hardship. This period of inactivity not only impeded tea production but also caused considerable disruptions to the livelihoods of its workers, who were significantly reliant on the tea garden for their economic support.

The subsequent transitions in ownership—from the Tea Trading Company India (T.T.C.I.) to Alkemist Company, and finally to Silcon Agriculture Tea Company in 2022—highlight the instability that often defines tea estates. Each transition was accompanied by distinct challenges, ranging from fiscal mismanagement to suboptimal labour relations, thereby mirroring the overarching trends prevalent within India's tea sector.

Labour Unions and Their Role in Darjeeling Tea Estates

Labour unions have played a pivotal role in shaping the socio-economic and political landscape of the tea estates in Darjeeling, significantly affecting labour relations, wages, and working conditions. Since the colonial era, laborers in Darjeeling's tea plantations have faced exploitative practices, marked by meager wages, harsh working conditions, and restricted access to land rights. Gradually, the formation of labour unions emerged as a significant mechanism for promoting workers' rights and challenging systematic inequalities.

The situation at Peshok Tea Garden regarding wages has been unstable, much like in other tea gardens in Darjeeling. For example, although minimum wage standards in India fluctuate across different states and sectors, tea garden labourers in regions such as West Bengal receive approximately ₹232 per day. This sum is insufficient to support a family, particularly when factoring in the escalating costs of living, inflationary pressures, and the scarcity of supplementary income-generating opportunities. Workers have been subjected to enduring delays in the disbursement of their remuneration or have faced irregular payment timelines, which has led to considerable turmoil among the workforce. This problem is typically exacerbated by the garden's changing status—sometimes open, sometimes closed—as well as the impact of political forces and union activity. Such challenges reflect bigger issues in Darjeeling's tea industry, where poor salaries, inadequate benefits, and inconsistent payments have long been a cause of dissatisfaction among tea workers.

The report from the Parliamentary Standing Committee for the year 2022 advocated for the enforcement of the Minimum Wage Act specifically for workers in tea gardens, asserting that the daily remuneration for labourers in Darjeeling tea estates ranks "among the lowest wages allocated to any industrial worker across the nation."

Political Influence

The demand for the creation of a separate state of Gorkhaland has emerged as an enduring theme throughout the historical discourse of Darjeeling. The Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) spearheaded this movement in the 1980s, subsequently gaining traction under the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM). The subsequent protests frequently paralyzed the area via strikes (bandhs), consequently disrupting everyday life and negatively influencing essential sectors such as education, tourism, and agriculture.

The tea industry, which serves as the economic cornerstone of Darjeeling, experienced some of the most severe repercussions. The operational efficacy of tea gardens, including Peshok, is contingent upon a meticulous schedule for the plucking and processing of leaves. The political turbulence disrupted these essential processes, culminating in crop losses, diminished quality, and failure to meet export timelines. The strikes often compelled gardens to suspend operations for extended periods,

inflicting irreversible damage to their financial viability. However, the combination of labour unrest and political disturbances considerably obstructed its operational efficiency.

No Land Rights

Historically, tea plantations in India have been predominantly owned and managed by companies that control extensive tracts of land through contractual arrangements with governmental entities. The workforce within these estates, frequently sourced from both indigenous populations and migrant groups, traditionally lacks legal entitlements to the land upon which they labour. Consequently, the notion of Parja Patta assumes a more complex dimension, as it converges with overarching issues related to land reform, labour rights, and political movements.

The absence of formalized land entitlements for tea labourers in Darjeeling, including those in Peshok, has surfaced as a contentious concern over several decades. Numerous political movements, particularly those spearheaded by trade unions and advocacy organizations, have brought attention to the necessity of land reform within the region. The Gorkhaland movement, which advocates for statehood for the Gorkha populace, has similarly underscored the significance of land rights for tea labourers as an integral component of its overarching political agenda.

Challenges Faced by the Estate

Throughout its history, the Peshok Tea Estate has experienced a number of significant challenges. The estate has intermittently faced phases of closure, with operations beginning and ending dependent upon changes in ownership and economic feasibility. Political turmoil, labour disputes, and acts of vandalism have further complicated the estate's continuity, rendering its historical trajectory intricate.

Conclusion: The Present State of Peshok Tea Estate

The Peshok Tea Estate, encompassing an extensive expanse of 98,854 hectares, historically symbolized the affluence and capability of the tea sector in Darjeeling. However, since its independence, it has been entangled in a cycle of mismanagement, political interference, and labour unrest, preventing it from realizing its full potential.

Ownership has undergone several transitions—from the tumultuous period under Ramdin Singh, through the corporate governance of Tea Trading Company India and T.T.C.I. Company, to Alkemist Company, and ultimately to Silcon Agro Limited. Notwithstanding these changes, the fundamental issues continue to remain predominantly unaddressed. Although there has been a rise in wages, they continue to be inadequate to release workers from the grips of poverty, and the factory, previously a hallmark of efficiency, now lies in a state of deterioration and defacement.

Political unions, while fulfilling an essential function in the advocacy of labour rights, have concurrently exacerbated the instability of the estate. The estate is presently in instability, fluctuating between periods of active activity and closure, with the workers and their families bound within this unstable situation.

The post-independence history of Peshok Tea Estate reveals a complex network of ownership changes, labour disputes, governmental meddling, and economic issues. Each new owner offered the promise of stability, but the estate has yet to recover its previous lustre. The vandalized factory and abandoned ropeways stand as harsh reminders of the estate's downfall. Nonetheless, there is hope that with the correct investments and political stability, Peshok Tea Estate would be able to grow again.

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