



An Analysis of Out-Migration and It's Socio-Economic Impacts: A Study of Chongtong Tea Estate in Darjeeling Hills of West Bengal

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Abstract

This paper looks into the issue of out-migration from Darjeeling hills particularly from tea garden area in the northern hills of West Bengal. The 2011 Census of India, clearly highlights the fast-growing rate of out-migration from the region. Studies have indicated several reasons such as aging of tea bushes, low productivity, decreased value of Darjeeling tea in the global market, political instability, poor wages, among other factors resulting in uncertainty of tea industry. People hailing from different parts of the region including towns, rural areas, tea garden, are all rapidly migrating to major Indian towns and cities as well as to other nations mainly for employment purpose. In order to study the growing case of out-migration primary data was collected from Chongtong tea garden, one of the major tea gardens in Darjeeling hills. Several field visits were conducted in the study area, the migrant respondents were identified using purposive and snow-ball sampling techniques. The first-hand data was gathered from them through face to face and telephonic interviews. The study concludes that out-migration in the region is not generally out of ambition, willingness or a voluntary act but due to compulsion emanating from various socio-economic reasons. Migration does help in fulfilling their economic aspirations but at the same time it also has an adverse ramification on their socio-cultural domains.

Keywords: Chongtong tea estate, tea garden workers, out-migration, youths, Darjeeling hills, socio-cultural changes.

Introduction:

After starting the commercial tea estates in Assam, the British colonizers also began tea production in Darjeeling since the mid nineteenth century. Setting up of tea gardens required adequate amount of land for planting tea bushes and for setting up factories. As such areas with less population were selected. During that time Darjeeling was sparsely populated and covered with dense forest. Enough amount of vacant land was available for starting tea cultivation. However, there arose a problem of labour shortage as tea industry requires lot of human resource, to work outside in the field and inside the factory. In order to fulfill this gap, labourers were brought in from the adjoining areas. Majority of these migrant labourers came to Darjeeling hills from the adjoining regions of Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim (Besky, 2007), to develop the infrastructure and tea industry. Most of them left behind their place of origin permanently and migrated to the newly established tea gardens.

They did not migrate as individual workers but moved out along with their families, contradictory to present day economic migration trend.

The colonial administration as well as the tea companies encouraged this pattern trend of migration as it solved the issue of labour shortage and it also facilitated more stable and settled work group. These labourers were recruited through the *sardari* system. A *sardar* was appointed by the authorities whose task was to bring the labourers from Nepal to work in the tea estates in an annual basis (Griffith, 1967). The tea owners under the policy of British administration provided the workers with housing facilities, land for cultivation, primary education for their children and healthcare. Despite of such facilities the working condition of labourers was very harsh and exploitative. They were restricted to move freely and their condition was almost like that of a bonded labour (Das Gupta, 1992 and Besky, 2007). Sociologically, these migrant labourers were caged inside a system of closed social mobility. Strict legal arrangements were made for the labourers to administer them and restrict their movement. Hence, most of them settled in these plantations permanently (Sarkar, 2019).

It was only after independence that the movement of labourers became flexible with the execution of modern constitutional policies. Sundas (2011) claims that historically, out-migration from Darjeeling was common mostly among men to join the Indian armed forces. Despite of tough working condition in tea gardens most of the labourers hardly migrated as the plantation provided them with income, housing, rations, education and medical facilities. It was after 1961, that tea gardens across India started to face the problem of employment generation. It was a signal that job crisis in tea estates had begun and Darjeeling became an epicentre of this phenomenon. From the period between 1950 – 1990, the national average growth rate of tea industry was 20.89 while the state had the growth rate of 31.23 and it was only 13.39 per cent in case of Darjeeling (Chakrabarti and Sarkar, 2007).

Additionally, the country's economic growth rate was slow and unchanging during this time. There was a dire need to bring reforms in the national economic policy which eventually compelled the government to introduce LPG (Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization) in India. This led to the end of closed economic system and introduction of open market, foreign investments and modernization of industries. It was mainly the urban areas that benefited directly. Until 1990's the internal migration within the country was low (Singh & Shandilya, 2013). However, post 1990's, people from rural areas including those from tea gardens began to migrate to the cities in search of work since the tea sector began experiencing crisis.

Methodology:

The present study has been conducted in Chongtong Tea Estate in Darjeeling hills. The study area has a total area of 393.11 hectares out of which 376.15 hectares has been used for tea plantation. According to 2011, Census of India, Chongtong has a total population of 5802 with 2876 males and 2926 females. It is located approximately 25 kilometers away from Darjeeling town on the way to Bijanbari via Ghoom. Several field visits were conducted in the study area and both primary and secondary data as well as qualitative and quantitative data have been collected to understand migration patterns and lived experience of migrants. The sample population comprised of migrants from the study area and the information given by their family members were also recorded. A semi-structured interview schedule and an observation checklist were used to collect primary data. The source of secondary data

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During field surveys, interviews with migrant's family members and migrants were carried out. The same interview schedule was also used for telephone interviews with migrants who were working in cities. Using the participant observation approach enhanced comprehension of living conditions, sociocultural customs, and community life. The study deploys purposive and snow ball sampling techniques to examine the growing case of out-migration and the socio-cultural and economic condition of the study area. Purposive sampling was chosen as this study is specific to the migrants from tea gardens and as they are spread out and often hard to track down, snowball sampling was employed to find them. A total of 100 migrants were communicated through face to face and telephonic interviews and another 50 members of migrant's family also provided information for the study.

Objective of the study:

1. Investigate the socio-cultural, economic and structural factors responsible for large number of out-migration from the region.
2. Examine as who migrates, where and why.
3. Evaluate the impact of out-migration on migrants, their families and society at large.

Review of Literature:

Migration among the people of Darjeeling has been a part and parcel of their life and history under different regimes like Sikkim, Nepal and British colonialism. Ganguly (2025) observes the role of migration in developing the urban border town of Darjeeling and also fostering the sense of belonging among the inhabitants. Migration is of two main categories namely international and internal. International migration occurs outside national borders, whereas internal migration occurs within a country's borders. In the book 'Principles of Population Studies', Bhende and Kanitkar (1978) divided internal migration into two categories: in-migration and out-migration. In-migration is the movement into a particular area, whereas out-migration is the movement of an individual or population out of a particular area. This study is limited to studying the out-migration part of internal migration.

Number of factors like agricultural production, conflict, diseases, exploitation, displacement, and environmental degradation etc., are regarded as the reasons for human migration. However, whether forced or voluntary migration, it has historically been seen as a geographical and economic necessity (Ketkar 2005). Additionally, migration is categorized according to its drivers, such as social, environmental, or economic migration (Chandna 2009). Contemporary migration in most cases is motivated by economic factors. According to Abella and Atal (1986), migrants are drawn to areas with greater economic prospects and compensation because they want to improve their current economic circumstances. Studies on migration from rural to urban areas suggests that the majority of people leave their villages because of the unemployment and underemployment crises, as well as the reduction in land accessible owing to population growth.

A study carried out by Debnath and Nayak (2018) shows that out-migration is occurring in a higher rate in North Bengal. The migratory flow is basically from north to south, comprising mostly from the hill areas of North Bengal. The study highlights that mostly men from rural areas are migrating due to poverty and lack of job opportunities. They claim that migration trend is generally from less developed agricultural areas, mostly comprised of

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landless farmers. They are moving towards the major Indian cities to join the urban informal sector.

According to the Report published by the Government of West Bengal in 2012, in Darjeeling district alone there were 85 functional tea gardens catering job to almost fifty-four thousand people. Until the early 21st Century the tea industry was considered to be a reliable and trustworthy source of livelihood as the plantation provided the workers with all the basic necessities of life from housing, fooding, education, health and so forth. However, with time tea plantations have started to face severe production challenges and at present almost 15 tea gardens have been closed down in Darjeeling hills. Ringtong was the first tea garden to close down in Darjeeling hills in 1996 (Sarkar, 2019). Rai (2020) points out that tea plantation apart from being an economic enterprise is also a social institution providing various social prerequisites and securities. Once the tea garden closes down, it also results in the end of social securities.

Golay and Hannan (2024) through their study in three closed tea gardens of Darjeeling hills reveals that the displaced workers were found to be engaged in activities such as extraction and quarrying, subsistence farming, raising animals, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), retail establishments, daily wagers or agricultural labour, etc. Additionally, the workers also migrated to cities in search of employment in metropolitan cities. According to Savran (2023), globalization is one major reason for economic migration and it creates a greater number of workers than the actual number of jobs. Many feels compelled to migrate to economically viable urban regions for employment opportunities. The modern urban industries use cheap labour to maximize their profit. In doing so they give more priority to migrants who are paid low and made to work in poor conditions.

Migration also occurs due to other socio-cultural practices like inheritance, post-marriage residence, and marriage regulations (Palriwala & Uberoi 2008). In pan Indian context, marriage is the primary cause of female out-migration, accounting for about half of all female migration (Haq 2007).

Discussion and Findings:

A total of 150 respondents were interviewed through face to face and telephonic conversations in this study. Out of the total respondents 100 were the actual migrants who had left homes for more than a period of six months primarily for employment purpose and among them 76 were males and 24 were females. The remaining 50 interviewees were the family members of the migrants of which 28 were males and 22 were females. They also provided information relating to migration. 84 per cent of the migrants were in the age group between 18 to 45 years. 12 per cent were above 45 years old and the remaining 4 percent was below 18 years old. It was noted that most of the migrants were the youths. The primary reason for their migration was said to be job or employment. When the migrants were inquired about the reason for migration more than 80 per cent said it was due to lack of job opportunities in the place of origin and few also cited that there was no future in decaying tea industry in which they were not really eager to work. Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) 2005, was helpful in providing an alternative job avenue with better daily wages as compared to that to tea garden. However, this policy was not providing perennial income as the work lasted hardly for 80 days. Further, since March

2022 MGNERGA has been stopped in West Bengal by the Union government alleging that the State government's failure to submit the budget utilization records.

The education qualification of the respondents showed that 12 percent workers had not received any formal education, 44 percent respondents had studied up to class 8 and 23 had acquired education till class 10 while 15 had acquired higher secondary school certificates. Six respondents had pursued graduation and it was the highest educational qualification among the sample population. These educated youths were working in better job positions like retail chain stores, call centers and managers in restaurants. It was found that 72 percent of the sample size were working in hotels and restaurants as cooks, waiters and support staff. 16 of them were employed as maids or house staff in Bungalows and apartments of wealthy people in cities and 06 were in the armed forces.

On inquiring about the place of destination, 28 respondents had migrated to Delhi, 31 to Bangalore, 16 to Kolkata, 13 to Bombay, 4 to Hyderabad, 2 to Chennai and the armed force personals were deployed in Jammu and Kashmir, Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh and Assam. People were migrating to cities as salaries there was almost two and half times double as compared to the wages in tea gardens. Kinship and friendship networking played a very significant role in enhancing out-migration and getting jobs. A respondent said

"It is through our friends circle or relatives that we get information about job opportunities in cities".

Another migrant said

"I came to Delhi as my uncle was already working in a restaurant and he gave me a placement and also made arrangements for my accommodation here".

It was the informants above the age of 35, seventeen in number who argued that before the 1990s earning a livelihood in tea gardens was self-sufficient. A respondent said "*having a job in the tea garden was like having a milking cow*", meaning working in tea gardens provided them regular income but one could not leave it like a cow that gives milk cannot be abandoned. Plantation used to provide them with wages that was quite feasible to run their families then. Moreover, they also received rations, education for their children, health care benefits along with incentives like gratuity, provident fund and regular bonus before Dussehra. However, with time the tea company owners gradually stopped all these facilities one after the other on the pretext of poor production and loss incurred in the business. A respondent said

"Earlier we used to get raincoats, umbrellas, lifebuoy soaps, ambulance facilities but these facilitates have been stopped now".

It is indicative that the tea gardens in contemporary times are more focused on making more profits by cutting down the cost on basic facilities given to the workers. Earlier getting a job in tea garden was not difficult but after the year 2000 if one wanted to work in tea gardens on permanent basis and have their names in payrolls then one had to pay a sum of almost 30,000 INR to INR 50,000. It was also found that many people were selling off their tea garden jobs to willing buyers. After selling their jobs the worker either started own-business or migrated elsewhere in search of job.

The beginning of 21st century marked the closure of many tea gardens and the workers who had been working in the gardens for long time were denied their gratuity and provident fund money. Chongtong tea garden witnessed work suspension in August 2002 due to financial problems and also due to the inherent conflict of interest between the management

and the workers. It was during this period that Mr. B.R Dewan from 86 Division of Chongtong gave away his life in a hunger strike for protesting against the mismanagement of tea garden. The tea garden reopened in November in the same year but the working conditions and benefits which the labourers were entitled according to Tea Plantation Act, Provident Fund have all been in a blurry state. The management started to cut down many basic facilities like health care, subsidized rate rations and in many occasions the tea gardens opened only during the flush period and again closed after the tea leaves were plucked. Such operations made the workers frustrated and lost their hopes on them management. Such incidents gradually pushed the workers from the organized tea industry towards cities as informal labour force. Most of them returned to their homes during their vacations after earning for some months or years in the cities. While many returned on completion of their vacations but it was also clear that these migrants had moved to cities only to earn and had no ambition to permanently settle down in urban spaces.

Presently, during every Dussehra problems began to arise between the management and labourers with regard to bonus as well. In September 2024, various trade unions of tea garden workers of Darjeeling got together and called for a strike. The main reason behind this demonstration was the issue of disagreement on bonus percentage between the workers, management and the government. The workers demanded for 20 percent bonus and the management was willing to pay only 13 percent bonus despite the state government's recommendation for 16 percent bonus. The local leaders in the media stated that they were neither for nor against the strike. In fact, one leader from the local administration said that since tea gardens falls in lease out land the local administration has no right over it. Although 70 to 75 per cent of the total population of Darjeeling hills comes from tea gardens, they do not receive any visible support from the local administration as well. It was also reported by 28 respondents that they have experienced racial allegations and abuses when they go and work outside. As such the migrants from tea gardens are not formally protected within and outside their place of origin.

The last documented daily wage of a labour in Chongtong tea estate was INR 250 before it was finally shutdown in September 2023. It was observed that the migrants were sending remittance back home which became the regular income source for running households, children's education, health and maintaining other socio-cultural obligations. Male migration accounted to 76 per cent of which only 40 percent were married and in case of females it was observed that only 7 out of 24 female respondents were unmarried. The overall salary ranged from a minimum of INR 15,000 per month to a maximum of INR 50,000.

The 50 respondents in the place of origin were the family members of migrants. The information provided by them has also been used in the present study. It was often found that when the male head member of the house migrated his wife or other family members had to take care of the household management and also performed other roles which were earlier performed by the male out-migrant of the family. A housewife whose husband lived in Delhi said

“Earlier my husband used to fetch potable water, firewood for household use and also fodder for our goats. After he moved to Delhi, I have to oversee all these work by myself which at times becomes very tough.”

Migration also hampers the family structure. In many cases joint family was reduced into nuclear or smaller families. One respondent said

“Having a male in house is very important because there are some works which only men can do. In our house after our son left for Delhi I and my daughter-in-law live with our small granddaughter.”

In the absence of youths there was a crisis of human resources in times of need like natural disaster and to organize social-cultural activities and functions. The lack of youths also affects the social institutions and the century old knowledge relating to tea industry also gets destroyed and die out when there is no successor to carry out the traditional work that their ancestors have given life for. There was also a clear tangible collection of assets like television, refrigerator, touch screen mobile phones, two-wheeler motor vehicles (in 22 households) in the study area. The migrants were forced to leave their homes in tea gardens and compelled to work in cities in insecure informal sectors which doesn't guarantee them any life chances like insurance, provident fund, fooding, education, health care and other perks.

Conclusion:

Migration has played a pertinent part in the formation of Darjeeling and introducing it into the world map as the finest producer of tea. Despite, being a popular tourist destination and a major tea exporter with an administrative autonomy the workers from tea garden still faces severe challenges to accomplish a sustainable source of livelihood. Migration since the very inception, from setting up of this industry to the decline of the same, has plays a central role. Historically, tea garden work although was labourious and difficult, did provide the workers with stable income and other socio-economic incentives like the housing, healthcare facilities, elementary education, transportation, portable water supply, sanitary facilities, food grains at a discounted rate, and other amenities like dried tea, firewood, shoes, umbrellas, etc. ensuring the workers' and their families' well-being.

The decline of tea production and its value in the global market, discontinuation of basic benefits allotted to the labourers coupled with political instability in the region, intermittent closure of tea gardens and so forth completely destroyed the societies in tea gardens and forced the people to rethink about other alternatives in the cities. Currently, the tea garden workers are compelled to move out from the once perceived secure and organized tea industry towards the insecure urban informal sectors. Mostly it is the unmarried male and female youths with average educational qualifications that are migrating to urban cities for jobs. These migrants choose urban areas where they already have kith and kins as well as better job opportunities.

Migration on one hand has evolved as a reliable alternative for better livelihood and helped the migrants in accomplishing their economic requirements through sending remittances back home to run the household, finance children's education, maintain health care, buy modern amenities and participate in socio-cultural activities. However, on the other hand it has also affected the structure and functional aspect of families. Joint families are gradually breaking down into nuclear or smaller families. The functional gap created by out-migration has to be fulfilled by other family members, the women and children in most cases. These migrants have grown up along with tea bushes and several generations of their ancestors have engaged in tea industry for over centuries, it is obvious that they possess special knowledge and skills in tea plantation. Such traditional knowledge would be

An Analysis of Out-Migration and It's Socio-Economic Impacts: A Study of Chongtong... Animesh AL Rai adversely affected by the closing of tea gardens and the unwillingness of individuals to work there. Social institutions are getting weakened as the youths migrates, their absence creates vacuum during the times of social celebrations and emergencies like disasters, landslides, earthquakes etc. Both the migrants as well as their family members back home have to bear the emotional and social vulnerabilities of living life in separate spaces.

Lastly, the history of tea garden workers since the time of colonial period to contemporary period of Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization is marked by economic migration. Despite being the real producers of world's finest tea, their condition is still too bad to get better. In order to preserve the century-old heritage tea estates and the precarious labourers, the proper implementation of the Tea Plantation Act (1951), the Minimum Wages Act (1948), Employees' Provident Fund, Miscellaneous Act (1925) and other robust socio-economic policy initiatives are very much essential.

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