

## **EMERGING MICRO TEA GROWERS IN DARJEELING DISTRICT, INDIA: AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL OF SUSTAINABILITY**

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### **Abstract**

Darjeeling, being renowned for its world-famous tea, has all together 87 tea estates that produce the world-famous Darjeeling Tea. Apart from the traditional orthodox Darjeeling tea, more preference is now being given to organically grown and manufactured tea as the demand from world buyers is trending towards organically grown teas. Taking this as an opportunity, many small farmers in and around Darjeeling have converted their traditional farming into small tea growing patches. They produce green leaves for the production of the tea, and then they sell the green leaves to a nearby tea factory or a factory owned by a cooperative society. This way, many of the small farmers are coming closer and converting themselves into small tea growers, manufacturing authentic Darjeeling tea, and selling it in the markets. This paper will try to review the process of converting these farmers into tea farmers and will also evaluate the role of small tea growers in the production of Darjeeling tea for world buyers.

**Keywords:** *small tea growers, organic, tea, Darjeeling, farming, farmers, cooperative.*

Tea is one of the most consumed drinks in the world, and India, being one of the important countries to produce this beverage, has a critical role in supplying the world market with its best and most genuine teas. Nestled in the lap of the Himalaya, Darjeeling produces one of the finest teas in the world. The Britishers explored Darjeeling as a sanatorium for their sick soldiers, who used to get sick in the heat of the plains when they were used to send them to Darjeeling to heal themselves (Besky, 2013). After taking Darjeeling on lease from the Sikkim Maharaja, the Britishers started setting up a mini-England in Darjeeling (Bhadra, and Bhadra, 1997). The climatic conditions and the geographical conditions were so perfect that they started experimenting with tea plantations (Bhutia, 1991). When the experiment succeeded, commercial tea plantations were started by various British officers. This tea plantation started manufacturing the finest tea in the world. The tea manufactured in Darjeeling started to gain a lot of attention on the world market, and people started demanding Darjeeling tea for consumption (Bomzan,

2008). Hence, Darjeeling turned herself into a paradise for the planters. During the years 1850–1900, numerous tea gardens had already been planted, and the production of orthodox Darjeeling tea was in full swing (Chakravorty, 1997). In today's date, Darjeeling has 87 functioning teagardens that produce first class, second-class, and autumn-class flushes. Previously, before independence, the owners of the tea estates were British, and post-Independence, the owners were mainland Indians (Chhetry, 1999). Taking this into account and also after seeing the perspective of tea production, local farmers in and around Darjeeling started converting their traditional farms, which previously used to farm, oranges, cardamom, broomstick, ginger, etc. and converting it into small tea gardens (Das, and Bhuimali, 2011). They produce green leaves and sell the green leaves to the surrounding tea gardens. According to the data provided by the Board of India, there are around 52,000 small tea growers, who are engaged in small tea farming in the district of Darjeeling (Das, and Bhuimali, 2011). These people are creating a very supportive and sustainable way of farming and cultivating Darjeeling tea. They are contributing significantly to the economic growth activity of this region as well as promoting genuine Darjeeling produced local tea. At present, there are many challenges that small tea growers come across during the process of cultivating tea, such as environmental, social, and economic challenges (Hunter, reprinted 2012). But somehow, they have overcome these challenges and are producing some of the finest organically, grown Darjeeling tea (Karmakar, 2011).



Fig. 1 shows Niroula's orthodox black tea, which is sold in wholesale form in Chotta Pubung Busty of Ghoom in Darjeeling. Fig. 2: In the areas of Mineral Springs Pubung, Bunkulung, and Seeyok in Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts, many local people are practicing microtea farming.

The small tea growers are putting a lot of support and effort into uplifting the local economy of the area (Khawas, 2006). Local job opportunities are being created because of these activities. The good thing is that these growers are following the minimum wages act laid down by the government of West Bengal and are paying the employees according to the act, which, in the case of the tea gardens owned by big industries, still does not fall under the minimum wages act of the West Bengal government but instead falls under the plantation labor act of 1951 (Milligian, 1919). Also, people are being capitalized by these farmers in the local environment, which gives them the benefit of using local resources. The produced tea is also playing a major role in the local markets, as locals are getting an opportunity to test the purest form of Darjeeling, which was produced right in our backyard (Mishra, 1979). We have seen and heard when asked if they have tasted the finest Darjeeling to you, the answer is no. Therefore, this

industry is also giving the locals an opportunity to taste one of the finest teas in this region (Mitra, 2010).



Fig. 3: A group of small tea growers have arranged a seminar to highlight the certifications that are required to term their teas as Darjeeling tea.



Fig. 4 & 5: Local tea growers have formed the Darjeeling orthodox small tea growers' welfare society in Bungkulung Busty and also built one tea processing unit named Yanki Tea.



Fig. 6, 7, and 8 : Yanki tea processing units in Bungkulung Busty.



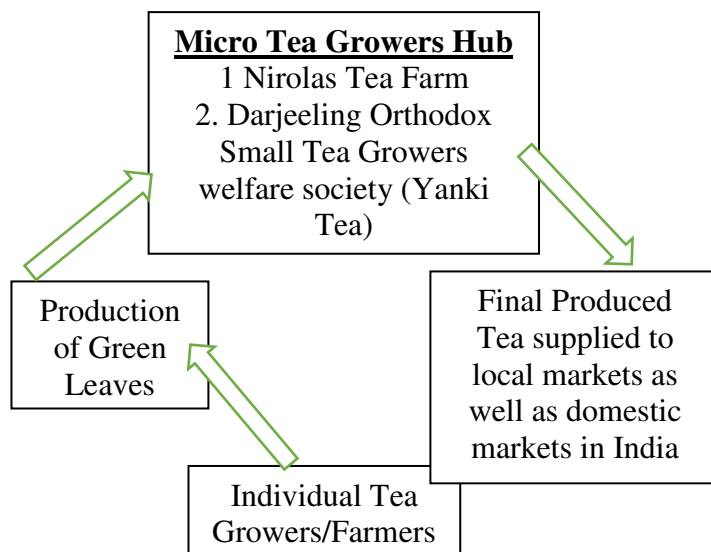


Fig. 9: Model of Small Tea Growers in Darjeeling.

As the environment allows them to cultivate tea in this region, the farmers cultivate tea bushes in small patches of land that are easily manageable (Roy, and Chettri, 2014). Because it is easily manageable, the use of pesticides and insecticides is not practiced. Instead, they prefer to go in an organic manner, and they use the locally sourced compost for their farms. As it is small in nature, during the dry season, bushes are taken care of properly and can be irrigated in an easy way, which results in the production of healthy bushes and better-quality tea leaves. Pest control is also easily done because of the small size of the farms. This results in the production of the finest green leaves, which naturally results in the production of well-manufactured tea (Sarkar, 1972). Because of its small size in nature, the environment is also not disturbed, as is the local wildlife that exists in the area. Thus, there has been no incident of human-wildlife conflict (Sarkar, 2008).

It was seen that small tea growers are providing various opportunities to the local people in and around them and are helping the socially and economically backward people of society by giving them an opportunity to earn their livelihood (Shah, 2013). They are not just creating jobs but also creating a dream that if the big companies can come from outside and make a good fortune from the land in their own backyard, then why cannot they also do so (Sharma, 2000). The local small tea growers were also following the traditional method of manufacturing tea, which resulted in the production of the simple but finest Darjeeling tea. The farmers, who used to sell the green leaves to the nearby tea garden for about 50 to 55 rupees per kilogram, have now set up a cooperative society where they sell the same tea leaves for about 60 to 70 rupees per kilogram (Snehaghai and Ramawat, 2016). The cooperative has also set up a small tea factory. Where the green leaves are processed, manufactured, and packed?

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