

Mineral Spring, Darjeeling, India, an alternative to closed and abandoned tea gardens — a case study.

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Mineral Spring Geographical Location

Mineral Spring - Harsing, Dabaipani and Yangkhoo *Busties* lie on the Lebong Spur of the Darjeeling-Jalapahar Range, one of the great hill ranges radiating northwards towards Darjeeling from the central point, a saddle at Ghoom. Harsing *Busty* is located 10 km away from Darjeeling Town. Yangkhoo and Dabaipani are further away across the valley. The extremity of Dabaipani would be 15 km from Darjeeling town. The *busties* come under Darjeeling Sub-division; Lebong Valley II and Dabaipani Gram Panchayats, Block Development Office, Bijanbari.

Mineral Spring History

These *Busties* form the major portion of what constituted the Harrison Tea Estate. Harrison’s Tea Company was established in the year 1824 by Mr. Harrison. The tea estate was large in Darjeeling standards with 1200 workers. The estate in its last registration, as Lebong and Mineral Spring Co. Ltd, — Registration Number 1973 had a gross acreage of 575 acres under tea. The tea estate is also part of the watershed of the Senchel Wildlife Sanctuary. Documents show that the estate had income from cardamom and forest resources too. Thus the tea garden was well endowed with natural resources and also a fair income.

The name Lebong and Mineral Spring has a special significance. The Mineral Spring face of the garden in Nepali is known as Dabaipani or ‘Medicine Water’. Legend has it that an Englishman with festering sores washed himself in one of the natural springs and got cured, therefore Mineral Spring or Dabaipani.

During the World War II and early Post-Independence period, Darjeeling Tea faced tremendous problems due to numerous factors. The war effort made it difficult for the British companies to run the tea gardens. The Indian companies had no long term developmental goal, sans any re-investment plans. Speculative owners and centralized management systems put tremendous pressure on the gardens. With the financial monopoly of the British moving out and commercial financial institutions replacing, financial investments were very difficult for the tea gardens. The changing political environment, changing legislatures and their gaps also played a crucial role in the difficulties. This was true for Lebong and Mineral Springs too.

In the lives of the people of the garden, India gaining her independence hardly made a difference. The people were still exploited. The tea that they cared for, plucked, processed and later exported brought no positive change in their lives. With the passage of time they became more and more bound to the garden coolie life as their traditional

skills of self sustaining agriculture was lost to that of a daily wage earner in a tea garden, with no control over assets or participation in decision making process of the garden. They became part and parcel of the garden, bought and sold along with the garden whenever the owner felt like it.

Mineral Spring Closure

Between 1952 and 1960 the Lebong and Mineral Springs tea garden had 3 closures. 1952-53; 1955-56; 1957-60. An interesting point in the closures is that all the closures were after the plucking season. The closures can be attributed to mismanagement of the garden.

The Communist Party of India made its presence felt in Lebong and Mineral Spring in 1942 under the leadership of Mr. Ratanlal Brahmin and Mr. Bhadra Bahadur Hamal. The issue that they rallied upon was that the workers daily wage should be 50 paisa. The Gorkha League and Congress Party were born in the garden in 1948 and 1949 respectively. With the garden closing, the Congress Party demanded that the garden re-open by all means. This was opposed by the Gorkha League which demanded the garden's permanent closure. This became a bone of contention and in 1961 there was a major clash between the two parties on this issue and a number of people were jailed.

Mineral Spring after Closure

The people survived by selling tea leaves to the neighbouring estates during the plucking season as well as working in the neighbouring estates. At other times, they felled trees in the tea garden reserve forest and sold firewood and charcoal. The people lived in extremely difficult circumstances. The people lived their lives with the hope of the garden reopening.

Come 1962, the reserve forest had exhausted and the hope of the tea garden re-opening had receded further, the people, then, began to uproot the tea bushes partially and started to cultivate other crops.

Post 1965, people started "Land Grabbing" even with fear of appraisals from the management. The people distributed the land among themselves which gave birth to new settlements. The distribution of the land was done arbitrarily, brain and brawn being the only criteria for the size of the land grabbed. The elders remember only the verbal disputes at the time of distribution of land. This could be because there was land enough for all.

They began to grow maize and millet. The production was very low. The lack of knowledge of cultivation and the infertility of the soil were the causes of such low production.

The people of these *busties* were mainly 4th and 5th generation daily wage labourers in Lebong and Mineral Springs Tea Estate. They were engaged throughout the year in the tea estate at various stages of tea production. They depended solely on the tea estate for their livelihood and were not engaged in any other productive economic activity. Thus, agriculture was an alien lifestyle for them in which they failed miserably.

Cultivation of monoculture tea over a long period renders the soil unsuitable for agriculture. This is because tea is an exotic plant to Darjeeling and is grown as a monoculture. Even after uprooting the tea bushes it takes years before the soil becomes suitable for agriculture. Tea is cultivated in slopes whereas for agriculture to be viable in the hills one has to practise terrace cultivation. It takes expertise to cut terrace in the hills otherwise one has to pay heavy losses due to soil erosion. Terracing was also a new activity for the ex-tea garden labourers.

The people supplemented their subsistence income by selling milk. Most of the people had bought cows with the loans obtained from the village middlemen at very high interest. The interest rates ranged from 72% to 120% per annum. The milk was bought by the same middlemen. The price paid for it was mere 44 paisa per litre. The annual income per family of Harsing *Busty* only was approximately Rs. 600/-. (National Social Service, St. Joseph's College, Darjeeling, Survey Report 1971).

No government help was forthcoming because of the tea garden status. The Plantation Labour Act, 1951 which is a Central Government Enactment governs plantation life. The preamble to this Act aims at providing for the welfare of labour and to regulate the conditions of work in the plantations. To implement the provisions of this Act, West Bengal Rules were framed in 1956. A suitable organisational set-up was also established to enforce various provisions of this Act and Rules. But the Act does not have provisions for action after closure or lock-out of the plantation. Every aspect of tea garden life falls under the purview of this act, so, the government development and social welfare schemes were not undertaken in the gardens till the year 2000. Mineral Spring, in spite of the closure of the tea estate in the 1950's and 1960's had been designated legally as tea estate area hence deprived of the Government Development and Welfare Schemes.

Through the Kissan Sabha in 1977, official measurement and distribution of land among the people were initiated. On 31st May, 1983 the first Panchayat election took place. Lebong and Mineral Spring were divided into Gram Panchayats Harsing Hatta I and II in the early days.

Section of the reserve forest area of the erstwhile Lebong and Mineral Spring today forms a part of the Sanchel Wildlife Sanctuary. Eco-Development Committees (EDC) have been established in Bhotay Busty and Naya Busty. But during the formation of EDC the lower reaches of Dabaipani were not consulted. The Wildlife Act affects them but the provisions of EDC have not been given to them. Thus, they are harassed by wild animals, have immense difficulty for fuel-wood and fodder but no benefit accrues to them from EDC.

The people, therefore, had been rendered virtual destitute in their own land, bonded to the middlemen and resigned to their fate.

Mineral Spring Plantation to Agricultural Communities and civil society interventions

The transformation into agricultural communities, unorganised sector with individual initiative and operation has been a difficult proposition. From a mindset of a cog in the wheel of the lowest order in a plantation, to owners of land and agricultural entrepreneurs, have required behavioural changes and skills that were not easily acquired.

From a lowly worker to the owner of land assets, deciding upon it and drawing sustenance has been a major challenge. To decide and plan for oneself and the community from a group of workers taking orders brought about responsibilities that were not there previously.

The transition period has been tumultuous one for the people of Mineral Spring and this has never been fully documented. But, one can gauge the difficult circumstance when one hears of the SOS call that led to the first civil society intervention by the National Service Scheme students and teachers of St. Joseph's College, North Point and Hayden Hall Institute Darjeeling. The initial intervention was relief camps that had to be organised to address issues of malnutrition and ill health. Teachers recall the pitiable conditions of ill health, poor economic condition and exploitation. A stark reminder of the dehumanising process is the inability of the people to communicate with outsiders in the days when the relief programme was being undertaken.

On one hand civil society intervention ameliorated the conditions of the community, but one also notes the inability of the government machinery to address the situation. There is no government policy to address the conditions of the tea garden workers when the garden is closed or locked out. One also needs to note the lack of responsibility on the part of the owners on the workers. It must be noted that the 3 closures were always in the non-plucking season or the non-monetary income season, which also is the time for reinvestment in the tea garden.

In 1973 with the intervention of Hayden Hall Institute, Darjeeling, a dairy union was established and supported with medical and adult education programmes. The dairy union ceased to function once Hayden Hall withdrew in the mid-80s and the onset of the Gorkhaland Agitation. In 1996 with the intervention of DLR Prerna, a Darjeeling based NGO, the people of Mineral Spring initiated the Proposed Sanjukta Vikas Co-operative with milk as its first product. DLR Prerna has been actively partnering with collective since 1996 providing capacity enhancement support in terms of participatory planning, governance issues, organic farming and certification, linkage building and resource mobilisation.

Mineral Spring 2007

Today, the people of Mineral Spring have organized themselves in collective which is in the process of being registered as Sanjukta Vikas Sanstha. It has a membership of 450 member families. The governance structure is based upon member families with a vote each, 12 hamlet committees and a board of 26 members. There is a women's wing called the Sanjukta Nari Sangathan. The President and Secretary of the Sanjukta Nari Sangathan get nominated to the board. The elections take place once in two years. DLR Prerna has a non-voting advisory status within the collective. The board also has functional working committees and employees from within the members to implement its activities.

The collective is certified producer organic under national and international standards since 2001. The collective has an Internal Control and Internal Regulation Systems of organic farming (ICS and IRS). The ICS and IRS systematizes members' and collective's responsibility for organic farming and has become a pre-requisite for small farmers organic certification.

The collective has a MOU with Tea Promoters India, Private Limited, who process and sells the tea exclusively as Mineral Spring Small Farmers Tea. Systems have been developed where strict measures of quantity produced, processed and sold are maintained. Mineral Spring Small Farmers tea is thus sold internationally as a partnership between the collective, TPI and facilitated by DLR Prerna.

The collective has other activities of savings and credit Union, drinking water collection and distribution, milk, vegetables, horticulture and spices co-op, newsletter and welfare activities.

Since 2003 the collective is Fairtrade Labeled for small farmer's tea by the Fairtrade Labeling Organizations International. The labeling guarantees defined international recognized standards and conventions through inspection and certification. This ensures that the product fetches a Fairtrade minimum price. The minimum price being appropriate, covers cost of production and also enough to plan for the future of the business. The pricing of the product can be over the minimum price depending on the bargaining power. Over and above the minimum price, a premium price of 7 to 15% of the minimum price is quoted which goes directly to improve the lives of the communities and families of the primary producers.

Mineral Springs Features

An important feature of the collective is that the land is owned by its own members. The members also practice polyculture in their farming systems. Most also have systems of agro-forestry. Thus one sees a diversity of crops grown.

The communities of Harsing, Dabaipani and Yangkhoo have undergone tremendous changes in their development journey. From their ancestors who migrated from Nepal to establish the tea garden; tea garden labourers; refugees of a closed tea garden; agriculture entrepreneurs to small farmers certified organic and Fairtrade labeled collective; their journey has been arduous.

Mineral Spring Challenges

The collective has made economic gains and has become a model of development. But, challenges still face them, many of them internal challenges of equity and sustainability. The collective needs to decentralize further and enable its members to become proactive. Even today one can find the remnants of the tea garden labour mentality when it comes to decision making and responsibility sharing. Some members still look at the board as their bosses and not their elected representatives.

A need for building second level leadership is essential address the challenges. When the land was distributed, it was based on the rule of the brain and brawn and this inequity of land distribution is still evident. The inequity is not just in land ownership and income levels but it pervades into the power relationships in the collective.

The collective needs to improve upon its gender equity in power structure. For the first time in 2007, 3 women representatives were directly elected to the board by the members of the collective. In terms of gender roles in the

collective, back breaking work on tea is done by the women but the top most decision making body is highly male in number.

There is need for the diversification and strengthening the activities of the collective to include all its resources including its other crops. As of now, the major income base is the sale of green leaf tea. In tea, the collective needs to increase its control of processes and products as Tea Promoter India, still has the upper hand today.

Mineral Spring Implications

There are numerous implications of the Mineral Spring experience in the tea plantation scenario.

It is evident that tea workers have very little bargaining power in the decision making process of the tea garden. But they are the ones who suffer the most when a tea garden is locked out or closed. One can clearly see that for the management and the owner the workers are of no consequence as seen in the closure pattern in the non-plucking season. One can say that the conspiracy theory holds true when it comes to lockouts and closures of tea gardens. Closures and lockouts are abuse of power by the owners and management who shirk their responsibility on the workers and also reinvestment on the tea garden.

The plantations are colonial with its dark history and rationale based on “Slaves and Master Relationship”. This history being the basis of promulgation of the Plantation Labour Act 1956, ‘to ameliorate the living conditions of the workers’, is still a colonial hangover. It does not address the critical issues of ownership of assets and decision making power and merely changes the situation from a *Gora Sahib* to a *Brown Sahib*. One must also note that the Act only covers the permanent workers who are about 20% of the population in the tea garden in the Darjeeling Hills. It is also true that without the temporary workers, no tea garden will be able to function. It is ironic to note in West Bengal, land of land reforms, Plantations still exist where the tillers of the land are landless even after 6 generations.

When tea gardens are closed or locked out one clearly sees the inadequacies in the Plantation Labour Act. With the closure, the workers are rendered without any assets, skills or policy support for life and livelihoods. Starvation deaths, that one hears about in closed tea gardens of North Bengal is the result of this inadequacy.

Even with the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) being enforced in tea gardens one has to note that development and welfare programmes under the PRI is highly based on ownership of productive assets – land, which the workers do not own.

Need for policy change is an evident lesson learnt; a policy change which is not based on monoculture of the crop and mindset.

The Mineral Spring experience challenges the dominant model of tea plantations. The experience is a more sustainable and equitable model.

It brings forth an example of polyculture tea, tea that is part of a more diverse cropping system bringing in more sustainability. It provides more food security to the people which would have a direct impact to the starvation deaths in the closed tea gardens. Food security issues are universal for most small farmers in India in the present model of development.

Importantly, the people own their primary production asset — land, which is never a possibility in tea gardens. It shows ways for people to own and manage land to produce tea. With all its challenges Mineral Spring has, the responsibility of the people in developing their assets is highly evolved when compared to tea plantation workers who do not own the land. Policing that is required in tea plantations is absent in Mineral Spring. The decision making and the structure for it, is democratic, furthering equity and responsibility. The ownership of assets and the democratic institution promotes human dignity and rights where as the plantation dehumanises people.

In the increasing world of organics, Mineral Spring brings about an experience in the certification process, where a collective of small farmers are able to get certified in national and international standards. Certification is a cumbersome and expensive process, but with proper systems and support, even small farmers can access organic certification and the market.

Fairtrade tea from Darjeeling is primarily dominated by Plantation Tea. This is contradictory in nature as Fairtrade has standards of participatory planning, accountability and transparency which are conspicuous in their absence in the plantation system. This raises the question of how fair is Fairtrade then. For Fairtrade to function it has to sell its products too and there comes the challenge of existence as well as lack of alternatives especially when it comes to tea. Mineral Spring comes as a welcome change as the issues of participatory planning, accountability and transparency are inherent in its system, which are the standards of Fairtrade. Thus, it shows alternatives even in Fairtrade tea.

Civil society intervention has been an important aspect of the Mineral Spring experience. When one looks at the evolution of Mineral Spring, one clearly sees the role civil society played. A long term partnership is essential which is based on cross learning and continual evolution of theory and praxis. This partnership of sharing life's experience between the community and civil society has been instrumental in the developmental journey of Mineral Spring. This experience is of utmost importance when one looks at alternatives to closed and abandoned tea gardens. Sustained civil society partnership is essential as it means addressing issues of livelihoods of isolated communities who for generations have worked as tea garden labourers only, with no assets or skills other than that of a tea garden labourer.

In the world tea trade based on monopsony, the role of corporate bodies, are of critical importance. The much touted corporate social responsibility needs to be explored based on trusteeship and not exploitation.

Mineral Spring, thus, proves that tea can be grown in models more equitable and sustainable other than the monoculture plantations and mindsets.

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