

Ph.D Synopsis

on

**The Condition of the Plantation Labourers of Darjeeling and the
Sub-Himalayan region of North Bengal: The Role of Trade Union
Movement (1860's to Early 21st Century)**

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Introduction

Darjeeling situated in the northern side of West Bengal and Dooras and Terai which is known as the Sub-Himalayan region is situated from the foothills of Darjeeling and stretches to the plains of Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar which are famous for its different varieties of tea and tourism. Darjeeling is known for its scenic beauty and cool climate where as the Sub-Himalayan region for its dense forest and many wildlife sanctuaries. The common history allied with both the regions are of the tea plantation. The tea plantation in Darjeeling and Sub-Himalayan region has its history from the Colonial times. Like most of the plantation crops in British colonies tea was also one important export orientated product. The rapid expansion of tea cultivation in Assam was followed by the establishment of plantations in Darjeeling (1839), Terai (1862) and Dooars regions (1874) of North Bengal.

The colonialism introduced various plantation in the colonised countries, the plantation such as coffee, sugar, cotton, tea and others. The introduction of such plantation in a larger manner has affected the local agriculture, tradition, culture, and even the biodiversity in some cases. After the introduction of the plantation the colonisers were in need of labourers as major number of labourers are required in the plantation sector. To Bring the labourers in the plantation sector became a necessity as the plantations were mostly introduced in less populated areas and when the inhabitants of that area refused to work in the plantation. The above mentioned two factors fits in the tea plantation of Darjeeling and the Sub-Himalayan region. In both the regions the some of the local inhabitants refused to work in the tea plantation under the colonisers and some of the inhabitants who all worked or were forced to work were not enough for the plantation. Hence the migration of the labourers was done from within the country and even from beyond the country borders. The colonial history of plantation has been related with the history of labour migration in the plantation areas, which has been the same in the tea plantation history of Darjeeling and the Sub-Himalayan region. Therefore, this research has tried to study the labour history of the tea plantation regions of North Bengal.

It is important to understand the living condition of the tea plantation regions as after the migration to new place the socio-economic and cultural state of the people does change, hence the study tries to bring that of both the colonial and post-colonial period. The research tries to deal with whether the socio-economic condition of labourers has been changed with a growth in their living condition or whether the situation has gone to a lower and gloomy

state. The study of labourers has always been associated with the labour organisation and trade union in every plantation and the industrial sector. The study tries to bring the account of the role played by them for the development of labours condition, and will observe whether the condition of the labourers has improved or has been the same.

Statement of the Problem

The history of Darjeeling and the Sub-Himalayan region has always been connected with Tea Industry. These two regions have their distinct history but allied with the tea plantation introduced by the colonisers. The idea of tea plantation in these two regions by the colonisers did not occur suddenly, there are factors behind that idea. Hence the historical factors related with the idea of tea plantation which resulted in the introduction of tea plantation in India and in North Bengal region should be understood. The introduction of tea plantation has dragged the migration of labourers in the plantation region after facing the labour problem. The historical factors which pulled the labourers from various regions to the plantation area and the factor which pushed the labourers to migrate to the plantation area living their homes and lands must be understood and this study tries to bring those factors in a clear manner.

To bring the labourers in the tea plantation and recruit them in different tea plantations was not an easy task for the colonisers. The migration of the labourers was possible for the colonisers with the help of Sardars who worked as an agent to bring the labourers to the plantation areas. The process of how the labourers were brought in the tea plantation and the way in which they were recruited in the tea gardens has been studied in a historical manner in this research. The tea plantation labourers after being brought into plantation areas were settled in the garden itself. The process in which the labourers were settled in the tea gardens, changes in their socio cultural and economic status; whether the quality of it has improved in colonial control than that of when they were in their native places. The wage payment has become one of the important factor by which the labourers were controlled by the colonial planters in the tea gardens. The methods and changes in the wage and wage system during the colonial period has to be understood. This present study tries to bring such issues into light.

The colonial regime in India was removed after long fought independence movement, resulting in various changes in the country. Even after the colonisers left the country the tea plantation sector remained one of the important industry in India. In the tea plantation no big changes were made after independence, mostly everything remained the same. The study on

the socio-economic changes which has taken place in the post-colonial period in tea gardens of this two regions will be focused on. The study of the post-colonial state of the tea gardens especially during the late in the 21st century has to be brought into lime light. The change in the wage, the rate of increment in the wages, the quality of living condition which the planters has provided to the labourers has to be studies. In recent period many tea gardens are facing shut down and irregularities on running of tea gardens, the labourers have to face the consequences. The shutting down and abandonment of tea gardens has led to severe cases of death by hunger, malnutrition, lack of medical treatment, trafficking and others in the garden. Thus the study tries to bring into account such incidents related with the labour and tea plantation of the recent period.

Tea plantation and other labour intensive industry has always been associated with labour organisation and trade unions. The role played by the trade union in the tea gardens and in improving the living condition of the labourers has to be studied. The Plantation Labour Act being one of the primary weapon for the trade unions and labourers to fight for their rights and receive benefits is provided but the implementation of it has not taken place. Hence the study will try to understand the issue and look for the appropriate response.

Review of Literature:

A number of literature works has been done related to the tea plantation in Darjeeling and the Sub-Himalayan region, some of which has been reviewed below. At first it is important to understand the history of the tea plantation regions of West Bengal. The literature which deals with the history of these two regions has been reviewed. Regarding the history of Darjeeling work by Sanjay Biswas and Sameer Roka¹ presents the history of Darjeeling mainly putting light on language, literature, history, culture, socio-political structure of Darjeeling before independence and so on.

Basant. B. Lama² in his book gives chronological records of the incidents occurred in Darjeeling. He has used the primary sources like letters and government records which makes it easier for the reader to understand.

L.S.S.O' Malley³ work has been used as one of the first gazetted source of Darjeeling. The collection of primary official data as a record by the British was done for their benefits but has turned as one of the first recorded and printed gazetteer for study related with the history of Darjeeling. It has detailed information about the physical aspects, history, people,

agriculture, tea industries, forest, administration, etc. Similarly, the other gazetteers which have recorded the official and primary documents of Darjeeling are works done by A.J. Dash⁴ and W.W. Hunter⁵.

The history of Darjeeling has not only been associated with the tea plantation but also has a political history which has various movement associated with it. Such political history has been presented in the works by Amiya K. Samanta,⁶ where he mentions about how the growth of a sense of ethnic exclusiveness came across the Indian Nepali or Gorkhas communities. This work presents the history of Darjeeling from the time it was handed over to the East India Company by the Raja of Sikkim. Further it has been shown that how the movement of autonomy emerged in this region and how it was taken forward by different regional political parties.

D.S. Bomjan⁷ also presents the brief history of Darjeeling and has given the account of the political development and the political movements which has taken place in Darjeeling. Bomjan being a member of Communist Party of Revolutionary Marxist (CPRM) has presented the scenario where he presents the role communist party and its members from Darjeeling in the various political turmoil's which has occurred in Darjeeling.

The early history of the Sub-Himalayan region has been mentioned in in various works such as D.H.E. Sanders⁸ work, which presents the surveyed report of the settlement, and other aspects such as history, geography, agriculture, and all others. Such detailed works regarding the Sub-Himalayan region has even been done by others such as works of by J. F. Grunning⁹ and J.A. Milligan¹⁰ which presents the records of every aspect of the Sub-Himalayan region.

Sailen Debnath's¹¹ work presents the history of the Sub-Himalayan region from the early times. His work tries to bring the narrative of the unknown past of this region and analyses the historical transitions of the Dooars region. The historical establishment of Kamtapur kingdom of seventh century has been presented and the beginning and the expansion of the Koch Kingdom has also been presented. The historical transition of other aspects of Sub-Himalayan region such as socio-economic, political, cultural are been elaborated in this work.

While analysing the literature which deals with the tea plantation, Debabrata Mitra's¹² work deals with the history of tea plantation in West Bengal. He presents how tea plantation

under British flourished in India, most importantly in West Bengal regions. Mitra presents different phases of trade union movement from the colonial period to post-colonial phase which occurred in the tea plantations and even narrates about the formation of trade unions in the tea plantation regions. The industrial relation in the tea plantations in post independent period has also been debated in this work.

Khemraj Sharma¹³ writes about the parallel movement of the Trade Union and the Movement of ethnicity in Darjeeling hills. The focus has been made in how the different regional parties of Darjeeling mobilised the people with their party with the call of ethnic movement and even taking on the trade union forward mostly dealing with the problem of tea garden. The importance of the regional party's like CPRM, CPI(M), GJMM, AIGL, GNLf, to maintain trade union as well as to go forward with the movement of ethnicity was that whoever had the upper hand turned to be the power party of Darjeeling.

Sharit Bowmik,¹⁴ in his article writes about the unrest in Darjeeling and Dooars because of the Gorkhaland Movement and its impact in the trade union of the tea gardens. Even the focus has been made on how the rise of GNLf in 1986 and GJMM in 2007 made its control over the trade union of these two regions. He even puts light in the wage politics played in between GJMM, AVP and KPP.

Sharit K. Bhowmik and Virginus Xaxa¹⁵, work presents the narrative of how tea plantation being one of the largest employer in an organised sector. It further states this sector being one of the important foreign exchange sector, pay the lowest rate of wages to its labourers and are most exploited within any industrial sector. They also narrate the historical events of how the Plantation Labour Act 1951 was passed, even when it was being opposed by the planters. Unfortunately, the act has not been implied in the tea plantation sector till now. The similar narrative of how the women labourers had to fight for their right of Maternity Benefits which were not provided before.

Ranjit Das Gupta,¹⁶ in his article work deals with the transformation of peasants and tribesmen to plantation workers. He argues on how the labourers were brought into plantation from being peasants and tribesmen, in the plantations of Assam. He narrates that the labour mobilisation in tea plantation created a huge change in the life of tribal, semi-tribal and peasants as they were detached from their indigenous habitat and the style of work and were forced in totally different plantation work.

Vimal Khawas¹⁷ in his work discusses that Darjeeling produces highest quality of tea and generates good amount of foreign exchange, but still this plantation labour stays in the lowest economic strata. He further argues about the existing problems which are been faced by the tea garden labourers of Darjeeling even in the recent period the primary problems being the economic problems, electricity, proper roads, education facilities, are because of the negligence and authoritarian approach of tea management towards social and economic development of tea garden labourers.

Shyamal Chandra Sarkar,¹⁸ regarding the tea plantations of the Jalpaiguri has done a work in which he at first presents the historical background of tea plantation in Jalpaiguri, the Anglo-Bhutan War and the formation of Jalpaiguri district in 1869, which was followed by the first tea plantation in Jalpaiguri. He then presents the narration of the migration of labourers which took place in the Jalpaiguri district and the socio-economic condition of the labourers of the tea plantation of Jalpaiguri during the colonial period.

Sharit Bhowmik,¹⁹ in this work has discussed about the tea gardens of the Sub-Himalayan region, which were shut down mainly from the year 2006-07. Bhowmik has basically brought the plight of the labourers of these closed tea gardens and the insensitivity shown by the planters by shutting the gardens upon the fate of the labourers. Further he has shown the distressing living condition of the closed tea garden labourers.

Piya Chatterjee²⁰ in her book has provided an ethnographic, and historical critique on labour practices in the Indian plantation with sophisticated examination of the production, consumption, and circulation of tea. She argues how the image of women in the advertisement of tea has distracted the viewers and the consumers from terrible working conditions, low wages, and coercive labour practices enforced in the tea plantation. She even explores the global and political dimensions of local practices of gendered labour, which are prevalent in the tea plantation. She discusses the extended reflection on the cultures of hierarchy, power, gender differentiation in the plantation villages.

Manas Dasgupta²¹ in his work emphasises upon continuity and transformation in the labour condition of Darjeeling, Sub-Himalayan region and Terai tea gardens. He focuses on the changes in the economic condition of the labourers which has been the primary concern for the labourers.

Soma Chaudhuri,²² in her work brings the pain and plight of the Adivasi women tea plantation labours. Her main argument presents the connections between tea production and village level conflicts among the plantation workers that lead to women being targeted and persecuted in the name of witches in the tea gardens of Jalpaiguri. Women labourers after facing the hard system of work in the tea plantation even has to be victim of inhumane social dogma in which they are been tortured physically and mentally, which has been presented by Choudhuri by presenting various instances.

Percival Griffiths²³ work is probably the first work based on the tea plantation in India. Griffiths has given an account in this book as a business history but the detailed information about the tea plantation in India with an account on the history of tea and the myths related with its origin. He further presents the history of first tea plant found in India and chronological history of growth of tea plantation in India from the year 1830's to the end of 1960 has been presented. He discusses from the recruitment of labourers and till remuneration of labourers and its changes, and every aspect of history of tea in India. Being a British writer Griffiths work is not free from prejudice, as various aspects are not being mentioned in such volume of work.

Roy Moxham²⁴, presents the history of how tea as a drink became popular in Europe. He further presents the key events, and features related with the tea production and its consumption worldwide. He even presents the early tea plantation scenario in the tea plantation of Assam after a native tea plant was found, primarily he has presented nothing but the British experience of tea. The plight of the tea labourers and their lives has been unseen.

Literature plays an important role in placing the prevailing society of the particular period. In this context some of the novels written in nepali language has presented the scenario of tea gardens. Prakash Kovid²⁵ in his novel presents the society and people of Darjeeling and the tea garden area during the colonial period. After the successfully in the trail of tea the plantation kept on increasing, hence more plantation required larger number of labourers. The resistance shown by the by the aboriginal community of Darjeeling who are the Lepchas to work under colonisers as a result of which they were forced to leave their land has been presented. The inhumane system of *Chokri System*, *Hatta Bahar*, are presented. Balkrishna Thapa Mangar²⁶ in his novel presents more descriptively about *Hatta Bahar* system. The labour society in the tea plantation were facing the arduous system. Such kind of system and the labourers resistance has been shown by Ashit Rai²⁷ in his novel.

Research Gap:

Studies has been done in the tea plantation in Darjeeling and the Sub-Himalayan region by various scholars of various fields of social sciences. Such research is done from the economics perspective, some are done from the sociological aspect, some has been done to understand the geographical importance of these places. Hence I have done this research from a historical aspect, I have tried to bring history of these plantation regions from its earliest time and to analyse how and what kind of changes or historical changes or incidents has taken place in these plantation regions which I found to be a gap in these area. As historians cannot write history without facts and sources, one can use the other works done by scholars from different schools of social science as their supporting sources or facts while writing the history or historical research; the only thing is how we present it, by writing this reminds me about E.H. Carr saying “Facts are Sacred but Opinion is Free.”

Significance of Research:

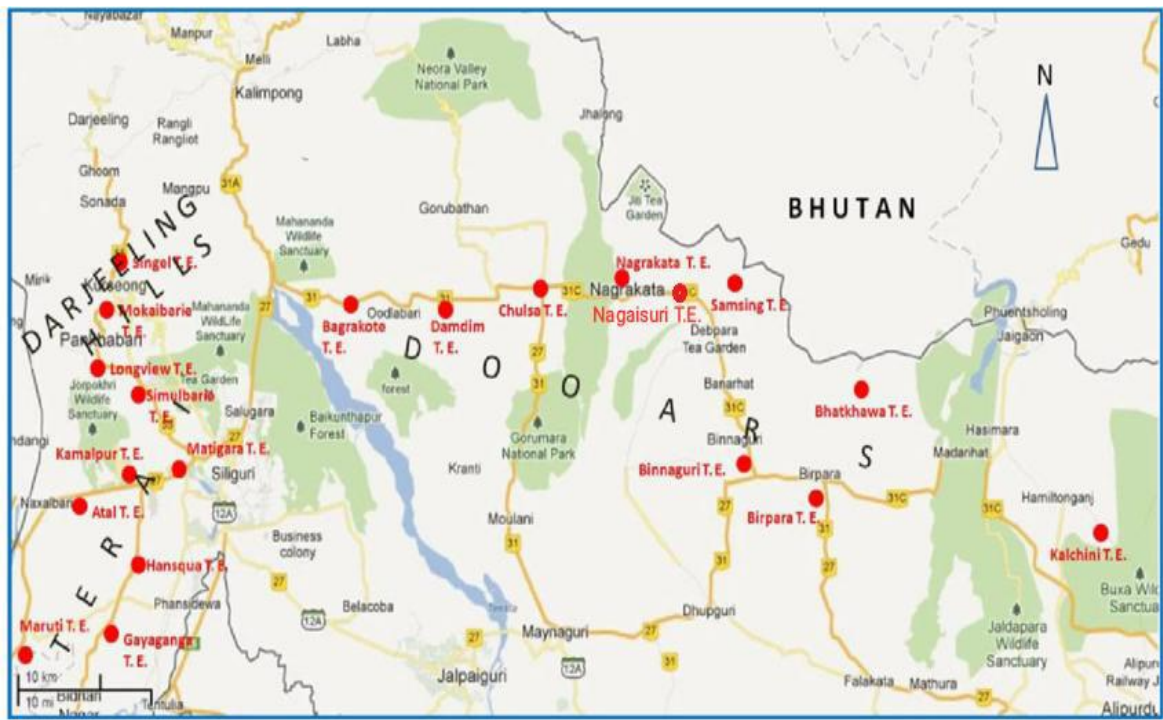
The Significance of this Research are:

- ❖ This research helps to understand the history of Tea Plantation in Darjeeling and the Sub-Himalayan region.
- ❖ This research will bring the plight and sorrow of the labourers which are hidden behind the lush green tea plantation and big advertisement hoardings.
- ❖ Another significance of this research would be, this will help the future research scholars to understand the problems and prospect in these area of research in a historical manner.
- ❖ With the help of these kinds of research the concerned authority might get informed and take necessary actions on the required matters of the tea plantation labourers.

Research Area:

The research area for my research is limited within the tea plantation regions of West Bengal, or to be more precise the northern region of West Bengal which are the Darjeeling Hills and the Sub-Himalayan region also known as Bengal Dooars. Darjeeling district consists of hills, foothill plains and plains, tea plantation is found in all the three regions, but the authentic and orthodox Darjeeling tea of which Darjeeling is famous for comes from the hilly tracts. The Sub-Himalayan region are the alluvial flood plains which is situated in the foot bed of Bhutan hills. This Sub-Himalayan region falls within the districts of Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar. This

Map 2: Tea Plantation Regions in the Sub-Himalayan Region.



Source: From Unpublished PhD Thesis of Pratima Chamling Rai, Research Article by D.Saha, A. Mukhopadhyay, M. Bahadur, 2013, p-93.

Research Time Period:

The time period in history plays a vital role, in history writing and in historical research it has an important part. Regarding my research, the time period is not fixed from one certain year to another which we usually see in other research. Rather, my period of research covers the colonial era during which the tea plantation flourished in these two regions of West Bengal. After that the period even covers the changing situations or the conditions of tea plantation and its labourers in the post-colonial era. One important factor for this long period, which covers many decades is that, any changes such as social, economic and political in the tea plantation regions does not occur in short period of time. Till now any such changes which has taken place have taken a long gap, which will be much clear to understand while going through my research.

Objectives of Study:

The objective of this research are:

- ❖ To understand the factors behind how the tea plantation came to India.
- ❖ To understand the process of how tea plantation flourished in different parts of India as a successful plantation.

- ❖ To analyse the factors and historical process of labour migration which took place in the tea plantation regions of Darjeeling and the Sub-Himalayan region.
- ❖ To learn about the historical process of labour recruitments which occurred in tea plantation of both the region.
- ❖ To analyse the socio-economic status of the labourers during the colonial period.
- ❖ To understand the remuneration process under which the labourers were paid in the colonial and post-colonial period.
- ❖ To study changes of the socio-economic life of the labourers in the post-colonial phase.
- ❖ To look at the changing scenario of labour present in the tea gardens.
- ❖ To analyse and identify the factor affecting the quality of life of the closed and sick tea gardens in the 21st century.
- ❖ To analyse the history and role of the trade unions and other labour organisations related with the tea plantation.

Research Question:

The research question draws the basic understanding of research objective.

- ❖ Were there factors behind the introduction of tea plantation in India or was it a historical coincidence?
- ❖ What led to the migration of labourers in tea plantation? Was there a change in the demography of that place after that?
- ❖ What were the basis of recruitment of labour in the tea plantation?
- ❖ Was the living condition of labourers and the wages paid justifiable during the colonial period?
- ❖ Has the quality of living condition of tea labourers changed during the post-colonial period?
- ❖ The number of labourers in the tea gardens are declining gradually. Are the management and negligence of owners responsible for it?
- ❖ The pathetic social condition such as human trafficking, death by hunger, malnutrition and others has been call of the day in the closed and sick tea gardens, who are to be responsible for this?
- ❖ Has the trade union been able to solve the labour problems in tea plantation?

Methodology:

This research is an empirical study which include Primary Sources and Secondary Sources and even field works in order to present this research. Primary source includes various documents government records, newspapers, documents used by the trade unions during their various programmes, and manifestoes of various political party, trade unions, etc. In the Secondary Source books and articles relevant to this research topic has been used. The research also consists of the archival materials and even interviews with some personalities related to the topic for supplementary information.

In the methodology, I have followed various methods for my research. Firstly, I have studied the background history of Darjeeling and the Sub-Himalayan Region and even the history of Tea plantation in Darjeeling and the Sub-Himalayan region with the help of different primary and secondary sources. Secondly, the method of selecting the tea gardens on the basis of different owning companies and looking at its running situation has been done. Thirdly, field works were conducted where at first general information of the tea garden and its historical background were researched. In the another stage of my field work, the problems in the tea garden were been enquired by interviewing the tea garden labourers and some of the local trade union representatives.

In order to conduct the above field work questionnaires were prepared to understand the socio-economic, political situation of the garden, which was also followed by casual conversation regarding such issues. The interview was not limited to the labourers and the trade union representatives but also of the leaders of political party, writers, members of tea planters, academicians, tea labours rights activist, retired tea garden managers and other learned persons in this field. During the interview process with the above mentioned dignitaries the interview was conducted in an informal discussion and questions.

Chapters Present:

Chapter: 1: Introduction

This chapter consist of the introduction of my research which will consist of the synopsis of my research, literature reviews, statement of the problem, methodology and summary of the chapters.

Chapter: 2: History of Tea Plantation in Darjeeling and Sub-Himalayan region from the Colonial times.

This chapter at first presents the history of Darjeeling and the Sub-Himalayan region before the introduction of tea plantation. It also tries to bring how tea became an integral part of the European culture after it was introduced in Europe by the Portuguese. Further the history and incidents related with the tea trade and its experiment in various places of India has been mentioned. In the last part the course of history on how the tea plantation was introduced in the Himalayan region of Darjeeling and later in the Sub-Himalayan region has been presented.

Chapter: 3: The Migration of Labourers in Darjeeling and Sub-Himalayan region during the Early Tea Plantation Period.

This chapter deals with how after the introduction of tea plantation in Darjeeling and the Sub-Himalayan region the scarcity of labourers compelled the colonial planters to search for more labourers, which resulted in the bringing the labourers from different parts of the country and from the nearby region. Further this chapter argues both the pull and push factors responsible for the migration of the labourers in both the regions. It then presents the entire migration process and the demographic change which occurred in both the tea plantation regions.

Chapter: 4: Recruitment of Labours in Darjeeling and Sub-Himalayan Region Tea Plantation.

After the migration of labourers in the tea gardens started, immediately their recruitment process in different tea gardens started too. This chapter presents the different kinds of recruitment process which the labourers had gone through. The system in which they were brought into tea gardens with the help of *Sardari* system and the *Arkatti* System has been explained. To understand the recruitment process of the two tea regions of West Bengal first a brief discussion on the labour recruitment which took in Assam has been presented, as the first labour migration and recruitment in tea plantation happens to be in Assam.

Chapter: 5: Socio-Economic Life of the Tea Plantation Labourers in Darjeeling and the Sub-Himalayan Region of West Bengal During Colonial Period.

This chapter analyses and discuss the living condition, social life and the wages paid to the labourers during the colonial period. After the recruitment the labourers they were kept within the plantation area, hence this chapter tries to present the quality of living condition

such as house, sanitation, hygiene etc., provided to the labourers by the colonial planters. This chapter even tries to discuss about the social life of the labourers and the social restrictions and inhumane social practices which the colonial planters used to imply on the labourers. This chapter presents the argument on the rate of which the labourers were paid and with such rate of payment how the labourers used to be controlled by the colonial planters.

Chapter: 6: The Post-Colonial State of the Tea Plantation of Darjeeling and the Sub-Himalayan Region of West Bengal.

This chapter deals with the tea plantation labourers living condition during the post-colonial period. The first part of this chapter presents the change in the ownership of tea gardens after independence of the country. The chapter even discusses about the hierarchy and the work associated with it in the tea gardens. In order to understand the change in the labourers living condition this chapter analyses the changes in wage rates, the rate in which the houses were provided to the labourers, the medical facilities provided. The discussion regarding the decreasing number of labour in the tea gardens has also been done. This chapter even discusses about the aspects like out-migration, human trafficking which are growing in closed, sick and even in the running gardens quite abruptly. The chapter even discusses about the living condition of closed and abandoned tea gardens of north Bengal. Pity living condition with very less earning, some with almost no earning, death by hunger, malnutrition, absence of medical facilities and other has been a daily call of these gardens, these kinds of situation has been brought into light in this chapter. Lastly, this chapter presents the historical factors related with the formation of trade union in the tea gardens of both the region. It also presents the labour movements under trade unions and its works in the past; the narrative of the trade union in the present days has also been discussed.

Chapter: 7: Conclusion and Recommendation.

This chapter comprises of the concluding discussion of every chapters of the research. It also discusses about my findings of this research which I have come through during the due course of my research. Further, this chapter presents the recommendations presented by myself as per the crisis and the area of improvement which I found was necessary in order to solve various issues of the tea plantation and their workers of Darjeeling and the Sub-Himalayan Region²⁸

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Signature of Supervisor

Signature of Candidate