

**Small Farmers Organic Tea, Sanjukta Vikas Co-operative - A Case Study Organic Farming in Hills. - Initiative from Darjeeling, West Bengal.**

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**Background:**

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. The *busties* come under Darjeeling Sub-division; Lebong I and Dabaipani Gram Panchayats, Block Development Office, Bijanbari. Darjeeling is the northern most district West Bengal, the hill subdivisions coming under the Darjeeling Autonomous Gorkha Hill Council.

Harsing, Dabaipani and Yangkhoo form the major portion of what constituted the Harrison Tea Estate last registered as Lebong and Mineral Spring Co. Ltd - Registration Number 1973 with a gross acreage of 575 acres. Harrison's Tea Company was established in the year 1824 by Mr. Harrison.

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.

Under Mr. Harrison the daily wage rate for permanent workers was: male 25 paise, female 14 paise. Casual workers were paid 2 paise per pound of green leaf plucked. It is mentioned in records that with this wage rate the quality of life of the workers was grim so Mr. Harrison increased the wage rate by 4 paise. There was still no change in the lives of the workers under Mr. Samson. Mr. McClain introduced adolescent workers (14 to 18 years of age) to Lebong and Mineral Spring and they were paid a daily wage of 2 paise. With the commencement of World War II, the British Empire ran into rough weather and this was felt in Lebong and Mineral Spring too. Finding it difficult to run the garden it was sold to Mr. James Warren for Rs. 5,50,000 prior to India's independence. Things did not get better with James Warren and the tea garden closed down in 1956.

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 nor 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.

When the tea estate closed down in the early 1950s, 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 people, for the next decade, survived by selling green tea leaves to the neighbouring estates during the plucking season. At other times, they felled trees in the tea garden reserve forest and sold firewood and charcoal.

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. 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 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> generation daily wage labourers in Lebong and Mineral Spring 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 tea over a long period renders the soil infertile. 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 and till date many are not able to practise terrace farming properly.

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 paise per litre. The total population of milch cows was only 35 among the 64 families interviewed. 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. In the early days of the tea industry, the large labour force was exposed to hardships of every description. Low wages, inadequate housing, scarcity of drinking water, virtual absence of

medical and sanitary arrangements reduced them to sub-human stature. Therefore, the necessity for suitable legislation on plantation was felt with a view to formulating a social policy towards a vast labour population seeking to ameliorate their living conditions. This led to the formulation of the Plantation Labour Act, 1951 which is a Central Government Enactment. 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. 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. Now the tea gardens also come under the Panchayat Raj System. Harsing, Dabaipani and Yangkhoo, inspite of the closure of the tea estate in the 1950'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 31<sup>st</sup> 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.

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

The transformation into agricultural communities, unorganised sector with individual initiative and operation has been a difficult proposition leading to various problems.

In 1973 the first NGO intervention was made in this area by Hayden Hall Institute, Darjeeling. A dairy union was established and supported with medical outreach programmes. The dairy union ceased to function once Hayden Hall withdrew in the mid-80s. In 1996 with the intervention of Darjeeling Ladenla Road Prerna (Prerna), a Darjeeling based NGO, the people of Harsing Dabaipani and Yangkhoo initiated the Proposed Sanjukta Vikas Co-operative with milk as its first product. Today, milk, green leaf tea, consumer co-operatives and savings credit union are functioning under the aegis of the SVC.

The people of this community are mostly *Rais* and *Chettris* with a few *Mukhias* who are all members of the Nepali community with Nepali being the common and binding language.

They practise subsistence agriculture and most have small and uneconomic land holding, the average of all the villages being a mere 1.48 acres.

Many brainstorming sessions later saw the birth of Proposed Sanjukta Vikas Co-operative (SVC), which literally means United Development Co-operative as 11 hamlets were coming together to chalk out a development path for themselves. 'Proposed' because the co-operative has not been officially registered and within the West

Bengal Co-operative Act, one cannot use the word 'co-operative' unless registered under the Act.

The SVC has been functioning since January 1997 with 448 families as members(2003). The elected Board members of SVC for 2000 has 30 members of whom two are nominated from the Nari Sangathan(Women's wing).

**Activities:**

- Savings and Credit Union for all the members of SVC, 81% participating in it.
- Sanjukta Nari Sangathan, Savings and Credit Union for Women since February 1999 with over 100 members. The credit is made available through the Indian Bank, Darjeeling Branch under the NABARD Self Help Group Scheme.
- Milk Co-operative functioning since March 1997, 26.06% participating in it.
- Small Farmers Tea Co-operative functioning since April 1998, 58.63% participating in it. In this project the green leaf tea that the members of SVC have is sold to the Tea Promoters, India(TPI). This is then processed by TPI in Selimbong and marketed as Mineral Springs, co-operative tea. Long term plan is being undertaken so as to have 25% of the land of the SVC under tea cultivation. This is the first time in Darjeeling Tea history that tea is being produced by non-plantation farmers and as a polyculture. The SVC has been granted organic certificate by Institute of Marketecology, Switzerland.

The focus of this paper is to discuss the various aspects of the SVC especially the small farmers organic tea. The focus of the paper is not so much on the technical details of organic tea but the process of community participation in organic farming. The case study also looks at the problems of small farmers organic farming and also the relevance of small farmers organic tea in Darjeeling.

The paper looks at organic farming as a way of life which constantly evolves within the given resources. It presents a case study of a group of farmers who have come together and are interdependent in the entire process. Even though the focus is on tea the farmers are not exclusive in their cultivation of tea. Tea is part of their larger farming practice. Thus even though the paper presents small farmers tea certified by Institute of Marketecology, Switzerland, it encompasses the entire farming practices of the people as one cannot have one section of catchment organic nor one crop in a farm organic. It looks at the interdependence of the farmers for organic farming and also the governance to achieve it.

The members of SVC elect two members per hamlet to the Board of SVC who are responsible for the governance and policy of the SVC. The members of each hamlet also elects 5 hamlet committee members who are responsible for the functioning of the hamlet and also liase with the Board. The SVC Board has sub-committees looking after their various activities. The members of Darjeeling Ladenla Road

Prerna have an advisory role with no voting powers. The Board and the Hamlet Committees meet on a regular basis.(SVC bye-laws attached)

The Nari Sangathan or the womens wing was an outcome of a conscious intervention of Prerna. Since the inception of SVC in 1997 only once has the Board seen a female member. Thus, the Nari Sangathan was formed with the President and Secretary of the apex Sangathan having reservations as members in the Board.

In all the activities of SVC there is a great emphasis on interdependence within members and collective action being more beneficial than individual. The rights and responsibilities of members and the SVC clearly stated and accepted by members before becoming members.

This interdependence and rights and responsibilities become more focussed and needed in the small farmers tea. The SVC has built a partnership with Tea Promoters of India. The green leaf tea that the members of SVC have is sold to the Tea Promoters, India(TPI). This is then processed by TPI in Selimbong and marketed as Mineral Springs, co-operative tea especially in the European Market. The members of SVC have been given an producer organic status by Institute of Marketecology, Switzerland(IMO).

The small farmers and organic is the key element in this programme.

The SVC, IMO, TPI and Prerna have devised an Internal Control System, Internal Regulation System. The ICS and IRS, within the SVC, has further demarcated roles and responsibilities of members, paid tea collectors(%age of sales), Board, and tea committee. It also outlines the roles and responsibilities of Prerna and TPI the external agencies. The ICS and IRS enshrines roles and responsibilities which will ensure organic farming practices as a whole. It works on the basis that individual members in performing their duties will enable an organic status for the entire community. Every member signs a bond of organic farming with the SVC. The bond states the rights and responsibilities of the member on organic farming practices. The members in turn are able to reflect their opinion through the governance structure of the SVC. This is an intricate system as even if one member fails to live to the standards of organic farming the entire community production is denied their organic status. Thus, they get a conventional tea price which is much lower than the organic price. Also demand for conventional small farmers tea is very limited. Once deemed conventional the process of gaining organic status again is a long drawn expensive process taking sometimes three years. Thus, the small farmers organic tea project of SVC is delicately balanced demanding precise management.

The technocratic organic farming aspects are very localised and area specific based on the resources of the community.

The biggest stress that has been laid upon is the process of improving the fertility of the soil. A combination of vegetative composting, vermi-composting and bio-dynamic fertilizers are used.

Stress is on the use of technology which is easily adopted by the larger community and also on resources locally available.

Pest management is integrated in the cropping patterns and special inputs using local herbs like equisetum, stinging nettle with cow urine is used at specific seasonal time periods.

The technology is shared through decentralised field trainings.

The farmers maintain a daily farm diary which enables proper research and documentation of the evolution of organic farming within the Sanjukta Vikas Co-operative. The farm diary has minutes of intervention as well as observation by individual farmers in the field. The farmer also maintains the farm description and farm map in the diary.

The SVC experience is the first in Darjeeling Tea history where tea is being produced by non-plantation farmers and as a polyculture. The ramifications of this experience is tremendous.

In the larger scenario of Darjeeling tea, there has been a downhill slide in the industry with lack of long term planning and reinvestment in the industry. In the early 1990s a large shipment of Darjeeling Tea was sent back from Germany with the chemicals exceeding the maximum residue limit. This led to a number of tea gardens going organic in the Darjeeling region. Thus, for the fact that the organic label is there the tea demands a better market value in terms of product placement and pricing. Environmental safety is the first step in ethical market not only for the producers and consumers but the planet earth herself.

Environmental standards being met and access to better markets, with the recent trend in ethical trade and consumer movements in the First World, improvement on market value meant addressing labour issues. Access to an equitable share of profits is an issue that is of critical concern. Prior to the SVC experience, organic tea plantations were setting standards in environmental sustainability. In the ethical market, plantations were trying to gain an upper market edge by addressing labour standards. But, the labour standards are being addressed from within the structure of the Plantation Labour Act 1951 and the colonial ideology of tea being a plantation crop. The plantation economy revolves around the differentiation between the owner management class and the wage labour class, where the decision making and ownership of assets are within the management class only. Thus, the addressing of the labour standards are from the perspective of the management which refuses to upset the apple cart and address the core issues of asset ownership and profit sharing.

In such a scenario the SVC experience has made a tremendous impact in the tea economy where the producers own their assets and also certified organic tea is grown as a polyculture. This has shattered the accepted understanding of tea being a plantation crop with strict demarcations of ownership and labour. This also shatters the perspective that organic certification is possible in huge plantations alone.

The SVC model comes as a beacon of hope in a scenario when environmental and labour standards are being adopted for the sole reason of the market. The SVC model is still evolving, but it has proven to the tea economy that it is possible to break from the accepted norm and become a sustainable people and environmental friendly livelihood. The SVC model is not a perfect one which is still dependent on external agencies for production and marketing but even within the ethical tea market it is proving to be an alternative from the plantation driven ethical tea.

The members of SVC are undergoing a strategic plan based on an analysis facilitated by Prerna on 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2003 to move into the future.

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