Economic evolution of Darjeeling:

Introduction:

Darjeeling is a beautiful hill station located in the eastern Himalayas with an average elevation of 6,709 ft. It was originally known as “Dorjee-ling”, a Tibetan word that means “Land of thehunderbolt”. Its beauty is such that it is popularly known as the “Gem in the crown of the eastern Himalayas “. To add to its natural beauty,Kangchenjunga, the world’s third-highest mountain is to its north and is prominently visible on clear days.

Not much is known about its economical history before the Britishers took it from the King of Sikkim. E.C Dozey in his ‘Darjeeling Past and Present’, writes, ‘Before the year 1816, the whole of the territory known as British Sikkim belonged to Nepal’ which won it by conquest’. It came in the view of the Britishers because of Captain Lloyd who claims to be the first European tovisit‘the old Gorkha station called Darjeeling’ for six days to settle a dispute between Sikkim and Nepal and was immediately attracted to its position. It served the purpose of a sanatorium as well as a strategic military station. Owing to its cool temperature Darjeeling became a place much preferred by the Britishers. It was also made the summer capital of Calcutta.

Economic Activities:

There were two major economic activities in Darjeeling, namely Tea cultivation and Tourism.

The **first** major economic activity in Darjeeling is tea cultivation which was an experiment to find an alternative for tea supply other than China. In 1841Dr.Archibald Campbell, Superintendent of the District who also happened to be an avid horticulturist planted tea bushes that had been cultivated from seeds brought by Fortune from China. The results were so good that by 1866 Darjeeling already had 39 tea plantations of 1,000 acres producing 133,000 lbsof tea. The advancement of tea cultivation was surreal, in the next ten years the number of gardens tripled, the acreage increased by 80 percent, while the production increased tenfold. This experiment forever changed the fate of Darjeeling, from being just a sparsely populated hamlet of three to four houses to being the producer of the world’s best tea.

In 1852, the first commercially producing tea gardens were the Tukvartea garden, Steinthal tea garden, and Aloobari tea garden. Between 1859 and 1864, the British Government established ten moretea gardens namely Harsing tea Estate, Dooteriah Tea Estate, Ging Tea Estate, Ambootia Tea Estate, Takdha Tea Estate, Phoobsering Tea Estate, Badamtam Tea Estate, Pandam Tea Estate, Makaibari Tea Estate, and Singell Tea Estate. In 1866 there were 39 tea gardens which then produced 20 quintals of Darjeeling tea. By the end of 1874, there were 113 commercial tea gardens in the Darjeeling district. By 1905, the number of tea gardens in Darjeeling rose to 117.

This huge success of the tea industry in Darjeeling attracted more and more Britishers to try their luck on this absolute source of fortune. The amateurtea planters had two main problems ahead of them. Firstly, they had very less information provided as to how to go about setting up new plantations.They would have to rely upon whatever little information they were provided with or sometimes even go with the hearsay. Those who were lucky were able to set up tea estateswhich brought them great fortune and those who did not have luck in their favor ended up going broke. Secondly, these tea plantations needed manpower. The former problem could still be tackled somehow but the latterwas a bigger impediment. The problem of not finding laborers for the Tea gardens frustrated the Brits. The indigenous inhabitants of the place, the Lepchas, who were again very less in number refused to work. They were simple men who preferred living out of nature. The problem of the laborers was the real one also because the tea gardens ran on the hard workof their laborers. The laborers acted as fuel for the tea garden, and it still does. Those Britishers who were determined on making their plantation a success decided to forcibly round up natives from the Chota Nagpur Hill area. They assumed that they were from similar hills and would form a good obedient workforce. But the natives of the Chota Nagpur Hill areas could not adapt to the cool and damp atmosphere of Darjeeling. Some ran away whenever they saw an opportunity and those who could work protested against the bounded laborfor which they were gunned by the British troops.

This wiped the slate clean for the Brits. They turned to Nepal hills for Nepali people who were known to be cheerful and hard-working people but had to be dealt with human considerations. The Brits were careful this time and adopted a leader also known as Sardars who were given special incentives for every worker they brought from Nepal. This move brought about a huge change in the Tea industry as well as in the lives of the Nepali people. They were provided free health care, water, a place to reside, and complete liberty to leave at any time. The biggest attraction provided by the British planters was the monthly and weekly wages which were unheard ofduring those days.

When we talk about the ownership patterns, the tea gardens of Darjeeling never belonged to any resident of Darjeeling or to the one who was born there. The only exception has been Makaibari.The priority was always given to the Brits planters willing to make investments. Some rich Indians who were in the good books of the Brits started getting opportunities to invest in the gardens too. The first among them was G.C. Banerjee of Makaibari and Bipradas Pal Chowdhury of Mohurgan and Gulmargh tea estates from Bengal. The Makaibari Tea Estate continues to be run by the Banerjee family and is the only Garden in the Darjeeling district which has a resident landlord. Initially, the lands were given as freeholdpurchases. However, after Independence and through a land reform act, such garden lands are now given on lease for a fixed period which is renewed. During those days only a British was allowed to be the garden manager. He had full authority over the garden workers and was also paid handsomely.

In recent times tea cultivation has seen a downfall.The main reason for this is the ownership pattern post-Independence.According to Mahendra P. Lama(teacher at Jawaharlal Nehru University and a former Member of the National Security Advisory Board, Government of India.) in his paper ‘Decaying Darjeeling Tea’ says that “Most worrisome is the fact that ownership has mostlybeen usurped by the merchant capitalists and petty traders who do not know attachment to or long-term interest in the tea estates of Darjeeling”. Looks like the tea gardens which produce the best tea in the world are going to dust because of the careless behavior of some greedy landowners. No political parties have ever been of much help to the hard-working laborers of the tea gardens. The only thing they have done to these innocent workers exploited them to the point that they become radicals. This diabolical game was started by the Left Parties of West Bengal and then intensified during the violent Gorkhaland movementby the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha. The major problems faced by these tea gardens are minimum wage, dividend sharing, land and hearth rights, and skill development and productivity improvement techniques. According to a study entitled ‘Tea Plantation Workers in the Eastern Himalayas’ over 75 percent of the total 285 strikes and bandhs in these gardens were attributed to “sympathetic political reasons”. However, hardly any strikes took place because of the issues that directly pertain to the workers. The decaying of Darjeeling tea cultivation is considered to be a classic case of mulching to death by estate owners, governments, and trade unions.

Apart from Tea cultivation, the **second** major economic activity in Darjeeling is tourism. The development of Darjeeling as a hill station began in 1835 when Captain Llyod established a sanitorium. Initially, Darjeeling acted as an enclavement only for the Britishers. Later on, with the introductionof the narrow-gauge railway in 1881 Darjeeling became accessible to the rich Indians as well as the workers who were attracted by the tea industry. With the success of the tea industry came growth and development as well as recognition of Darjeeling as a hill station. The initial initiative taken by the Britishers to start tourism was seen in the form of offering restricted accommodation for the tourists in Government Bungalow/Dak Bungalow at many places of tourist interest. Hotels in Darjeeling it’s birth in 1839, with the opening of the Darjeeling Family hotel with 12 rooms which was followed by Wilson’s Hotel, a two-storied house containing 18 rooms. Gradually there was an increase in the touristfacilities which meant anincrease in the number of tourists.

The colonial Bungalows on tea estates are preserved to this day. The cottages have been replaced with new tall buildings and many floriculture nurseries have evolved to sustain the region. After 1950, the Government of India also paid more attention to the growth of the tourist industry. With improved transport facilities, Darjeeling has now become accessible even to the less affluent middle class. The main tourist destination now includes Mirik, Mungpoo, Tinchulay, Lava, etc.

So, we see that colonial rule has a huge impact on the economic history of Darjeeling. If not for the Britishers the Queen of Hills would forever be a sandwich between Nepal and Sikkim disputes. The small decisions made by the Britishers for their profits completely change the place, Darjeeling. Their need to escape from the brutal heat of the plains made them more interested in cutting down the virgin jungles and turning them into what we have now a beautiful hill station. Their want to break the monopoly of the tea trade in China gave us the World famous‘Darjeeling Tea.The inflow of tea garden workers most importantly the Nepalese from Nepal hills changed the culture of the place. Even today the schools in Darjeeling follow British customs. Hence, the colonial room did not just impact but created the whole of Darjeeling’s socio-economic history.

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