

[Darjeeling tea](#) has so far failed to live up to consumers' hopes of staging a comeback after a year because the sector is beset with problems such as stagnant production and prices, labour shortage, and the loss of buyers in [Japan](#) and [Europe](#).

According to sector executives, in January-April this year, production, which primarily accounts for the first flush of tea, stood at 1.35 million kg (mkg), at par with last year. Prices have been Rs 600-650 a kg, stagnant as compared to last year.

“However, excessive rainfall and lack of sunshine have hampered the production of the second flush of tea. If the weather doesn't improve, production will be hit,” said Kaushik Basu, secretary, [Darjeeling Tea](#) Association, adding that during the first fortnight of June, production had been hit by 40 per cent.

The second flush is the most prized of all varieties of tea in [India](#) and one of the costliest in the world.

The income from this flush, which begins in late May and lasts till early August, makes up for 40-60 per cent of any estate's annual income and helps it defray the expenses during the season when there is no production.

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On the other hand, excessive rainfall, according to Prateek Poddar, director at Darjeeling Impex, which owns the famed Namring tea estate, will affect the quality of the tea in the second flush and its prices in international [markets](#).

Moreover, company executives suggested that in the face of labour shortages, the gardens were increasingly resorting to mechanised plucking and shear plucking.

Nearly 50 per cent of the permanent labourers have vacated the gardens after the Gorkhaland agitation took a toll on their livelihood for over 100 days last year. Workers are usually paid every week.

Usually 80 per cent of the 8 mkg of tea produced in Darjeeling is exported in a normal year. The [Tea Board of India](#) data says 3.21 mkg of tea was produced in Darjeeling after the Gorkhaland agitation led to garden closure from June last year and stalled the production of the second and rain flush.

Exporters said during the sale of the first flush teas, private enquiries from buyers in [Germany](#) (the largest importer of Darjeeling tea), the UK, the US and some other countries had been normal but there was hardly any enquiry from Japan, which buys some of the most premium produce at high prices.

“One of my crucial clients in [Japan](#) is still not buying Darjeeling tea,” said Sugato Dutt, director, Subodh Brothers.