

ANUGYALAYA DARJEELING DIOCESE SOCIAL SERVICE SOCIETY

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Darjeeling Area Statement

Darjeeling, the northern most district of West Bengal, is the only Hill district. The three hill sub-divisions of Darjeeling District, Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong, comprise of an area approximately 2417 square km and post 1988 come under the Autonomous Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council(DGHC) within West Bengal. The DGHC covers a land area of 2,476 sq. km with 2,433 sq. km rural and 43 sq. km urban.

The *Lepchas* are the original inhabitants of Darjeeling and are animists by tradition. They have their own language but is not widely used. The majority of the people are *Nepali* who are again divided into various groups. These groups have their own dialects and *Nepali* is the common binding language. The Nepali community can be divided into two groups, one with the *Lamaistic* tradition and the other of the *Hindu. Tibetans, Sikkimese, Biharis, Bengalis and Marwaris* make the minority communities. Ethnically the people of Darjeeling are different from the rest of Bengal.

The total population of DGHC is 6 93 793; rural 5 33 413; urban 1 60 380; female 2 59 882 and male 2 73 531. (1991 primary census abstract[pca])

The district of Darjeeling covers a total area of 2,38,669 sq. km with a total population of 12,99,919; 6,20,596 female and 6,79,323 male. Urban population is 3,96,060; 1,84,061 female and 2,11,999 male covering 69.28 sq. km area. Rural population is 9,03, 859; 4,36,535 female and 4,67,324 male covering 1, 967.80 sq. km area. The sex ratio of 914 females per 1000 males is higher than the state figures of 917:1000. The figures clearly show a male dominated population structure indicating gender bias.

The literacy rate of 57.95 is slightly higher than the state average of 57.70. The literacy rate of 67.07 male and 47.84 female shows preference for the education of the boy child. The literacy rate of 47.07 for the rural population shows bias towards urban education. Experience shows that preference for boy child education is higher in the rural areas. The education process is also literacy based and not life skill and child centred.

76.88% of the population are rural with 53.99% small and marginal farmers.(1991 pca). Most have very small land holding and practice subsistence agriculture. Major food crops - maize, potato, radish, pulses and vegetables. Major cash crops - ginger, orange, cardamom and broom sticks. Floriculture is also an important industry especially with orchids.

More than 40% of the area is under forest. 4.56% of the population live in forest villages and forest fringe areas.(1991 pca). Darjeeling is rich in non-timber forest products like - *Rubia cordofolia, Piper spp., Daphne cannabina, Panax pseudo ginseng, Swertia chirrata, Aconitum spp., Lycopodium spp. Pycorrhiza spp., Costus spp.,Kaempteris spp.,Morindia spp.,Thysonaelia spp.* The hills have a vast reserve of unexplored medicinal plants.

More than 20% of the area is under plantations and 41.45% of the population are plantation workers, tea with 35.78% and cinchona with 5.67%. (1991 pca). At present there are

87 tea gardens in Darjeeling. The plantations are in the two sub-divisions of Kurseong and Darjeeling only as Kalimpong already had agricultural holdings and reserve forests when the plantations were introduced to the hills by the British. Approximately 20% of the population of a plantation are employed on a permanent basis. Of it, 89% work as daily rate wage earners and 50% of them are women. (Plantation Workers in WB, Labour Gazette 1994). The remaining population is employed as casual labourers whenever required. Tea forms one of the most important industries in the region providing directly and indirectly to about 50% of the population of the district. 80% of the total produce is exported. (Darjeeling Planters Association Records 1995).

23.12% of the population in the urban areas are engaged in the service sector. (1991 pca). A sizeable portion of this population depend on tourism. Tourism is supported by the climate and the natural beauty of Darjeeling which boasts of the glorious sunrise at Tiger Hill and Kaffer and the view of Mount Kunchenjunga, the third highest peak in the world. There are also a number of heritage sites, notable among are - Batasia Loop, Ghoom Station and the Toy Train, Governor's House and the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute.

Darjeeling is rich in its biodiversity due to various factors such as physiographic, edaphic, climatic, biotic and altitude. There are a number of nature parks and reserves and is notable for the Red Panda, the Himalayan Salamander, the Himalayan Pheasant and Rhododendron to name a few.

In the relative development index (India = 100) Darjeeling District stands at 78 when the state of West Bengal is 97. Thus Darjeeling is considered a backward area. The hill-sub divisions lack basic infrastructural amenities like communication facilities, hospitals and higher educational institutions. Darjeeling's development needs and concerns have never been properly articulated. The implementation of development programmes formulated by the Government has been done without taking into consideration the geographical and socio-cultural differences from the plains of India.

A problem pertinent to Darjeeling is the population growth which is higher than the state average. Decennial Population growth rate 1981-91 West Bengal +24.73; Darjeeling +26.91. This puts an extremely high pressure on the delicate ecosystem of the hills which has a lower carrying capacity compared to the plains.

The rural areas of Darjeeling are far flung and communication infrastructure pitiable. Thus access to the market is extremely difficult. This has led to an accentuated exploitative structure which is prevalent in most parts of rural India. Remuneration for agricultural produce is extremely low as individual farmers find it difficult to take it to the market. Farmers sell their products to the middlemen who come to the village. The middlemen also dole out money to the farmers during the lean season thus at the time of harvesting the farmers are bound to sell their products to the middlemen at their rates irrespective of the market price. In many villages these middlemen have shops selling essential goods to the villagers where the profit percentage is very high. The villagers also take credit from the informal sector at extremely high interest rates which range from 60% to 120% per annum. Thus the farmers of the hills are in a constant cycle of debt and low remuneration which entraps them in poverty. In the land with enormous amount of rainfall water crisis is a nagging cliché. More than 70% of the energy needs of the rural people is provided by firewood adding to the factors of deforestation.

The Tea Plantations present a unique situation where at the macro level they are extremely profitable yet the share of profits hardly reach the labourers. This is one industry where 50% of the workers are women. Each plantation has a permanent set of workers who live within the plantation. Of them, only the permanent workers (20% of the population) are entitled to benefits from the management such as housing, drinking water, children's education, health facilities, subsidised food, clothing, provident fund and other fringe benefits according to the Plantation Labour Act, 1951. Because of these benefits the low daily wage seems to be justifiable. But the Plantation Labour Act, an unjust act, leaving out 80% of the population as it is applicable to the permanent workers only, is not implemented properly. One can safely say that there is no garden in the hills of Darjeeling where it is implemented in letter and spirit. To make matters worse, many gardens in Darjeeling are closing down or are sick due to mismanagement and lack of reinvestment by the tea companies. Tea garden workers have been working for several generations as landless labourers and have no decision making role nor capacity. The employment status has remained static over the years, the problem heightened by the increasing population and no other alternative employment. Unemployment is rampant in the tea gardens and even in employment there is seasonal, under and disguised employment. All this is further aggravated by non-resident owners. Tea gardens also exert tremendous pressure on the forest due to their need for firewood.

The adverse effect of the tea gardens in the environment have not being documented properly. But there has been noticeable symptoms of excessive use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides in that morbidity rate amongst the pesticide sprayers is higher than the others, aquatic life is being depleted, weeds and pests are attacking the plantations with virulence leading to the increased use of chemicals. The plantations also use a large amount of firewood for the workers. Also, tea is grown as a monoculture and is exotic to the place having its fallout on the environment. The clearing of the land when tea was introduced to the Darjeeling Hills is yet to be subjected to analysis.

The people in hills due to the geographical factors need a higher calorie intake than the people in the plains. Malnutrition and its subsequent problems are highly prevalent. This geographical factor as well as the economic condition makes the people highly susceptible to TB which is rampant in the hills. Besides TB, common preventable diseases assume alarming proportions due to poor health delivery system and awareness. Health issues get more accentuated when it comes to women due to preference to nutritional bias to the male. Pre-natal, ante-natal and post-natal care is not easily available in the rural areas adding to the ill health of the women. Immunisation programmes are not properly co-ordinated and does not reach all corners of Darjeeling.

Alcoholism is rampant in the hills especially among the men, proving to be one of the serious killer diseases. Alcohol consumption also leads to the degeneration of the entire family. It eats into the income of the family and the fallouts are seen in the health and opportunities for the family. Chemical and substance abuse is also a very big problem in the youth especially amongst the urban youth.

The Darjeeling Hills are a highly vulnerable area with regards to HIV/AIDS. The backwardness of the region leading to high unsafe migration, floating sex worker population, awareness focused in urban areas only are cross cutting factors resulting in the vulnerability.

The Himalayas are a very young mountain range so is very sensitive. The Eastern Himalayas of which Darjeeling is part of is a designated biodiversity hotspot. There is a rapid loss of habitat and biodiversity in the hills and the Red Panda, Himalayan Salamander and the Himalayan Flying Fox are in the endangered list. Deforestation is an important problem that the hills are facing and the fallouts like water crisis, land slides and soil erosion, energy crisis and even micro-climate changes are already being felt. Darjeeling today has 41.2% of the land under forest, of this more than a quarter of the forest has undergone degradation to less than 10% canopy cover. (Sanskritayana 1997). Deforestation is a complex problem and cannot be attributed to a single factor. Some of them are: malfunctioning of the administration, corruption, energy needs and unemployment. This has led to serious problems of landslides during the monsoons and water scarcity during the summer months. A recent trend is the influx of wild animals in the agricultural fields due to loss of their habitat.

Forest villages form unique communities in the hills with their own problems. These villages are isolated with no infrastructure and information. These areas are plagued with ill health and lack of education. As in the tea gardens these areas have existing legal hurdles for development and have a static employment status.

Tourism proves to be a blessing and a curse for Darjeeling. Due to unplanned tourism, we see a concrete jungle forming in the urban areas as one of the fallouts. The urban areas due to unplanned growth has no proper sewerage facilities. The urban areas reel with problem of lack of sewage, domestic waste and water crisis. The additional tourist on an already broken down system questions the fruits of tourism. The latest entrant of the diesel vehicle has added to the never heard before air pollution to the so called clean air of the hills. Noise pollution is also a new phenomenon and the excessive use of poly bags in addition to its existing problem of carcinogens and clogging of water ways is leading to landslides in the hills.