

Brewing Sustainability: How to safeguard India's Darjeeling tea industry from climate change

By Rajah Banerjee, ET CONTRIBUTORS Jul 09, 2021, 09:45 PM IST1

Rajah Banerjee is chairman of the Selim Hill Collective and former owner of the Makaibari tea garden in Darjeeling. Writing in ET Evoke, he discusses strategies to bolster India's famous tea industry which now faces the impacts of global warming:

For 44 years, I managed Makaibari, my ancestral tea garden, in Darjeeling. During my time there, I converted Makaibari into an organic oasis — by 1988, the estate thrived with dense forest cover and eco-friendly practices, including the planting of leguminous trees within the tea garden to provide nutrition to the soil, composting to create biogas, mulching or using leaves from shade trees as organic fertiliser and being the first tea garden globally to use Rudolph Steiner's biodynamic farming strategies.

These changes brought us rich dividends. By 2014, our abundant produce had won the world's highest price in an international auction for tea. Our organic practices were attracting conscious consumers while Prime Minister Narendra Modi honoured us by presenting Queen Elizabeth a gift of Makaibari teas in 2015. As the benefits of organic farming showed at Makaibari, other tea gardens started to follow suit. I felt delighted thinking numerous Makaibaris would bloom and the ecologically sensitive Darjeeling area would become an organic and sustainable region.

In 2014, I passed on the baton at Makaibari, but some years later, I realised my hopes for the tea region were far from fulfilled. Instead, Darjeeling now faces a large-scale decline. Commercially, Darjeeling tea has been weathering a waning export market, explained by outdated management practices and exploitative middle-men. But there is a far more powerful factor at work now — the region's ecology was already facing deforestation, making the seismically sensitive area vulnerable to topsoil loss and land-slides. Pushing the tea gardens closer to the edge now, climate change is bearing down on tea yields, impacting the livelihoods of thousands in the industry. As emissions rise, intensifying global warming, changes in the melting of the Himalayan glaciers are causing temperature rises in Darjeeling — this has led to insect proliferations which damage the crop. Alongside, a lack of precipitation during dryer winters and unseasonal inundations during plucking seasons have drastically changed our harvesting window, reducing an eight-month harvest period to just six. Uniquely, Darjeeling is the world's only region that produces teas in four seasonal 'flushes' or harvests. While each has its distinctive flavour, colour and aroma, the four flushes share one common thread — the regularity of the seasons themselves. Currently though, between prolonged droughts and unusual rain, tea growers are facing erratic and shrinking yields — production has fallen from 16 million kilograms 30 years ago to about eight million in 2020.

If we don't establish strategies to mitigate such climate impacts now, we risk losing both a large generator of livelihoods and a proud Indian heritage craft dating back two centuries. In this moment of crisis, I believe there lies an opportunity towards sustainability. For some time, I have been mentoring a make-over of the original tea estate model through the Selim Hill Collective.

The Selim Hill garden is one of Darjeeling's larger tea estates. Spread over 1,000 acres with about 550 acres comprising forest cover, it is ecologically vibrant. However, Selim Hill has also been one of the worst-hit gardens in the pandemic, and so, with its young owners, we've created the Collective to build back both social and environmental sustainability. The garden is home to rich biodiversity, including birds like the hornbill, hoopoe, minivet and peacocks, animals from leopards to elephants and multiple kinds of spiders and snakes. Growing urbanisation and the erosion of forest land pose huge threats to such biodiversity but these can be tackled through the institution of the tea garden.

Our site-specific strategy at Selim Hill involves creating a wildlife corridor for animals to roam freely, a large-scale afforestation campaign to improve soil health and lower temperatures and joining forces with NGOs training local community members to become bird guides. With the latter, we hope to make Selim Hill a hub for bird conservation and through avifauna-based ecotourism, to provide a second income source to the community. This benefits all — if biodiversity thrives, so do the plants that depend on it, which, in turn, draw water to earth and bind soil safely in place.

Darjeeling's decline can only be halted through such a paradigm shift and a multi-stakeholder approach that involves garden owners, local communities, conscious consumers and most importantly, the region's ecology. The Selim Hill Collective was created to bring these stakeholders together and reimagine the tea garden, changing traditional colonial hierarchies and attempting a far more holistic and inclusive renaissance for Darjeeling. In this, the environment is not just our resource — it is our ally and guide.

Any regeneration begins with hope. Our Collective is based at a heritage bungalow at Selim Hill called Second Chance House — a moniker that speaks to our aspirations for all of Darjeeling, from its people to its biodiversity. By fostering closer ties between these worlds, we hope to grow more sustainable, even in an era of climate change.

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