Chapter 8

Conclusion

If we look back to the preceding chapters we will explore the fact that the Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling districts despite of being a small area in the tea atlas of India, had drew forth the concentration of the British for several reasons. The early tea planters of India were a colourful, varied and totally inexperienced collection of men, who usually had no idea where were the best places to plant tea bushes, let alone how to cultivate them and process their leaves. Many of whom were young men fresh from England who generally had no knowledge whatever of the business in which they were engaged. The men who tackled this task had to be the hardiest of the tea pioneers, for they had no precedent to follow and were the first Indians to try to settle in these initially inhospitable areas. The major intention was to utilise the pleasant weather and scenic beauty of the only hill station of colonial northern part of Bengal, Darjeeling by making it a sanatorium for the Europeans in the year 1835. Dane Keith Kennedy in his book “The Magic Mountain: Hill Station and the British Raj” argued that the hill stations were the most favourite places to the Memsahib’s of the European Managers. He further stated that “... to establish sanatoria within the sub continent where European invalids could recover from the heat and diseases of the tropics”.

Hence Darjeeling was the most favourite hill station across the whole undivided Bengal where the aspirant British officials got opportunity to make contacts that accelerated the tempo of their career, for pensioners to enjoy their retirement and for the invalids to seek their health. Literary to say, Darjeeling hill originally earmarked only as a recuperative sanatorium for civil servants and the military. The hill station must be considered not only in terms of the social history of the British but of the Indians as well especially the Bengali elite class of undivided Bengal. The first Indians to establish some sort of presence in the hill station were the Princes. Drawn by the prestige and political might associated with these stations, a number of wealthy princes began to take up seasonal residence in the early twentieth century. The princes, however, were not the only Indians to enter the hill station. A growing number of Bengali elites put their feet at the Darjeeling hill station in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The favourable weather, soil, temperature and rainfall suitable for tea plantation instigated the Europeans in laying out the
foundations of tea gardens times without number in various parts of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling districts.

The unprecedented success of the European tea planters staunchly inspired the Bengali youths migrated there from various parts of Eastern and Southern part of undivided Bengal to take initiatives in this extensive field of economic venture. They have been found to be emerging from a particular social group. This group of people have common origin and uniform social behaviour and unique relation among them. They have similar economic objective that is how to set up a number of tea gardens of their own in spite of hindrances created by their alien counter parts. All these things contributed to a large extent to unite them as a class. In the atlas two types of entrepreneurs were there like Hindu and Muslim, though most of them were belonged to the Hindu Community.

Nevertheless, throughout our period the legal practitioners remained the single largest occupational group followed by the service holders, Jotedars and merchants. Despite the challenges thrown up by the Muslim entrepreneurs by virtue of their advantageous social and economic position the Hindu entrepreneurs continued to dominate the industry. In this respect formal education had very little impact on this group.

With the development of railway as a part of advanced communication for tea business and military services there was a huge demand of timber to set up the railway lines. The European contractors were there but not to the satisfactory level as par the demand. This situation obviously welcomed a group of educated youths from various parts of undivided Bengal to supply the timber. In addition to that, the creation of Jalpaiguri as a new administrative headquarter generally opened up some new opportunities on a hitherto unprecedented scale which attracted numerous educated Hindu gentry from various parts of East Bengal to work there as clerks and lawyers. The upper caste Hindus by virtue of their academic qualifications were said to have swallowed up the opportunities. By doing so they had to earn affluent wealth and developed immense connection with various tea companies, British officials. This scenario actually helped them in getting leases from the Government and thus they became successful entrepreneur after laying the foundation of numerous tea gardens in the proposed area of our study. To cite an example we can mention the name of
They started with very small capitals which they could gather as none could subscribe a large portion of the capital. Practically it was an association of poor men to do a big thing. In addition to that the entry of the native Jotedars in the tea industry of the proposed area of our study was truly a landmark in the history of Bengali entrepreneurship. The availability of land under the Zamindary of the Raikots of Baikanthapur drew them in laying out various tea estates such as Baikanthapur Tea Co. Ltd. (1916) with Bhandepur and Shikarpur tea estates. The Rahut family also did not lag behind in this field. The Anandapur and Kailashpur tea estates are deserved to be mentioned here. Lastly the active participation of ex-tea garden employees (Bengali Babus) as an entrepreneur in this field no doubt accelerated the tempo of Bengali entrepreneurship. Actually the pattern of business organisation and most importantly, strict discipline and strive to complete any work within the stipulated period of time made them a successful entrepreneur in the contemporary Indian tea industry.

However, situation was not always favourable to them as they faced unbearable challenges from their European counterparts in this field in many respects such as difficulty in drawing loans and other assistance from the Indian Tea Association. This resulted in the creation of their own tea associations such as Indian Tea Planters Association, Jalpaiguri (ITPA, 1915), Teari Indian Planters Association, Siliguri (TIPA, 1928). This nationalism was also spread out in India’s freedom struggle. The rise of nationalistic movement in colonial North Bengal was a complex politico–sociological phenomenon that characterises the history of the nineteenth century. The role played by our Bengali entrepreneurs provided the life-blood to the political movement of the northern part of North Bengal in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

The Bengali entrepreneurs enjoyed a great social distinction in the contemporary society of both the Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling districts. The Bengali Hindus among them were predominantly upper caste Hindus; the Muslim also too enjoyed social distinction and were highly conscious of this fact. However, both of them formed an exclusive group placed on the highest stratum of the contemporary society. Their dress code was an exhibition of aristocracy. The Bengali tea planters left their mark in the field of sports and culture. And they were also renowned as accomplished hosts. Their distant relatives or people from their native village came to
their houses at any time without any hesitation. They took shelter there and the tea planters themselves helped them to get some employment or engagement. Voluntary donations were one of the main ingredients of the life style of the Bengali entrepreneurs. They were very cordial and open minded. Our Bengali entrepreneurs also kept interest in politics and some of them later acted as MLA, MP. This high esteemed position naturally helped them to make contribution to the socio – economic development of North Bengal.

Apart from the entrepreneurial activity, the Bengali entrepreneurs also played an unprecedented role to foster the educational and cultural spirit in the proposed area of our study. The upsurge of the Bengali renaissance which engulfed Calcutta in the nineteenth and twentieth century also took long strides and reached at Jalpaiguri town under the initiatives of the contemporary Bengali tea industrialists such as Tarini Prasad Ray, Jogesh Chandra Ghosh, Sasi Kumar Niyogi, DR. Charu Chandra Sanyal, Hriday Nath Bagchi, Satyendra Prasad Ray, Birendra Chandra Ghosh, Jogodindra Raikot and so on. The Arya Natya Samaj, Bandhab Natya Samaj is some great examples of their literary pursuits at colonial Jalpaiguri town. In addition to that they built up number of schools and colleges not only in the various nook and corner of the Jalpaiguri town but also in the neighbouring places which were adjacent to the gardens so that all the children could get some sort of education to bring a ray of hope for the younger generation. Such sort of benevolent and cultural activities are indeed very difficult to find out among the present days tea garden owners of the region under reviewed. They are extremely intended to earn the profit at an apex level rather to look after the staff and workers of their garden. Exceptions are there but not to a satisfactory level.

The most important feature in studying the Bengali entrepreneurship in tea plantation industry of colonial Bengal was the presence of women from the Bengali tea planters’ family. They played an exordium role to run their family business smoothly in the contemporary period. References should be made to Ila Paul Chaudhury of Mahargaong Gulma tea estate, Begum Rahimennesha, daughter of tea industrialist Khan Bahadur Rahim Baksh. They also nurtured a strong feeling of women education and was said to have established educational institutions for the cause of education such as Ila Paul Chaudhury Tribal Memorial High School, Begum Rahimennesha Primary School. However, this trend is being followed as yet in
Bengali owned tea gardens. Srirupa Banarjee, Director of Makaibari Tea Estate; Nayan Tara Pal Chaudhury, Director of Mahargaong Gulma Tea Estate are deserved to be mentioned here. Both of them today are standing as a pole star in the atlas of Indian tea industry.

The golden days of the Bengali entrepreneurship in Indian tea industry began to change during the third or fourth generation of the Bengali entrepreneurs. We cannot see such predominance holding by them over the tea industry of North Bengal which was set up long before days by their forefathers. The third generation Bengali entrepreneurs always favoured to spend their life in a Zamindary or feudal style. They did not collect everyday news about their garden, even not tried to increase the controlling power in the board of directors that is to increase the number of shares under their names. As they were so much involved in leading an undisciplined aristocratic lifestyle in Calcutta, so it was not at all possible for them to pay heed to their own gardens situated in the far – flung area from Calcutta like in Dooars and Assam. Thus they regressed at a great pace in this sphere. This practice was ultimately culminated in creating a massive gap between the management and the Bengali owners which set the sun of Bengali entrepreneurship in twenty first century.

The luxury lifestyle and other uncalculated expenditure made a massive ulcer in the repository fund of their gardens. Furthermore, the high rate of dividends declared by the Bengali – owned companies of Jalpaiguri town made debentures to the fixed income. All these factors hit the Bengali - owned gardens strongly in 1990s when the tea price fall drastically. The rapid fall of price did not affect much the Big Tea Houses like Goodricke, Tata Finely, Duncans Goenka as they had a well established system of direct selling. They usually used to import, export, buy and sell in different names. But the Bengali tea companies did not enjoy such privileges. The inability of the third or fourth generation Bengali planters to draw loans from the nationalised Banks due to the non – payment of their previous loans proved as a crucial factor in this turmoil situation as well. The Central Government controlled Tea Board cannot shriek from the responsibility in this backdrop. This was resulting in the deterioration of an all round development of Bengali owned gardens. This resulted in transferring the ownership of Bengali owned gardens to the other Indians among them the Marwari and Gujrati ranked first.
In pre – independence days, we find one type of political scenario. Discontent between labourer and management was there but it was never took the shape of political disturbances through which plantation and other indispensable works were disrupted. But in post – independence period the workers movement led by various trade unionists has radically changed its motto. They are now highly intended to earn huge money as possible from the management by showing threat in the name of their respective trade union movements. Now a day’s lock out, strikes became a nominal feature of tea industry. This feature is also common in other tea planting areas of India but not to an optimum phase which we see over the years in Bengal. What we find from our earlier discussion elaborated in the previous chapter is that during the late eighties of the twentieth century man days lost due to both strikes and lock outs took its optimum shape. Number of strikes hiked more rapidly than the number of lock outs. The improvident attitude of the trade unions as well as the inability of the garden owners to run their tea estates arbitrarily was highly responsible for this political turmoil prevailed in the tea industry as well.

We find a dramatic change in the mental makeup of the grandsons, granddaughters of our pioneer Bengali entrepreneurs. The third or fourth generation Bengali tea industrialists owing to have their luxury mentality could not cope much with the present day’s political and economic climate. As we know that in post - independent India, not only in tea industry but in business of any short in any sphere is very much complicated one. This also happened with other Indians but professional mentality made them efficient to accept the challenges. Literary speaking, the non – Bengalis are more realistic and can compromise with any hazards for the sake of their business. This made the gap between Bengali tea industrialists with other Indians.

The trade unionism in post independent Bengal, if we ever carefully study their agenda, it is different from those of the major industrial hub of today’s India like Maharastra, Gujrat. Protest movements led by their respective trade unions are also there but these are all supportive to the industrial development. In case of West Bengal, we find a complete different picture. Man days lost here due to both strikes and lock outs is a usual feature. No industry in the country has undergone such turmoil situation.
Therefore we can put our remarks that certain crisis prevailing in their gardens generated by continuous threat of strikes, demand for workers full days wages by working only 3 to 4 hours and huge donation demanding from the management definitely compelled the third generation to ponder over the ongoing stalemate and to decide better to sell the tea estate rather than going ahead with risk and liability.

If we seriously examine the decline of Bengali entrepreneurship in all spheres of post – independent Bengal like tea, jute, timber business we will see that social aristocracy and lack of strong psychological mentality of the Bengali people greatly hampered the industrial development. The joint family system has already disappeared. Neither could they retain their unity in family life nor in business. Family – feuds is also an adding factor in this field. As we know, family feuds is a very common matter in our society and this resulted in creating fissures in family business of other Indian also. It may be rude to hear but this is the grim reality.

The major factor which accelerates the decline of the Bengali entrepreneurship in tea industry was the partition of Bengal. In one chapter we showed the existence of Bengali entrepreneurs in tea industry exclusively but the partition of Bengal indirectly brought the element of disintegration in family life which also put her long strides in Bengali owned tea industry also. This did not happen in case of other Indian industrialists as well. Had the India been not partitioned, the Bengali domination in Indian tea industry would have definitely sustained? Alas! That was not happened. So the decline of Bengali entrepreneurship in Indian tea industry was historically inevitable because time and territory would not favour her fate. Here time means politics and territory means partition.

But the happy thing is that in the beginning of the twenty first century a few gardens are still running under the management of Bengali owned companies. A few of them stand like a stalwart in the globe of Indian tea industry. References should be mentioned to Dipankar Chattarjee under whose ownership seventeen to twenty tea estates are being controlled across the whole of India. The Makaibari Tea Estate which he recently bought from its earlier owner Swaraj Banarjee, another esteem figure in international tea World is still famous in international market for the astonishing flavour of its tea leaves. In addition to that new energetic educated
Bengali youths are now coming exclusively in Indian tea industry as small tea growers. A few of them have already established tea factories in various area of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, North Dinajpur districts and playing a major role in import – export business of Indian tea. This is not a sign of recovery but a sign of good hope.

One major setback to the tea industry was the rise of militancy. Militants targeted the tea industry. With their guns they created havoc in the once tranquil tea producing areas of North Bengal. From the chairman of the company to the managers as well as workers, a large number of people were killed. No industry in the country has been under such organised threat in recent years. Due to the lack of protection of life, though the constitution guaranteed it, planters were forced to pay protection wealth. It is indeed a matter of shame that in independent India, a group of enterprise had to raise its own protection force at an abnormal cost, when there is an elected Government in the country.

Professional persons run its Associations yet it has almost no voice in the corridors of power at Delhi. The Associations resort fire fighting when a problem grips the industry. Could the tea industry have a sincere rapport with the Commerce Ministry and the State Government? Planners of the country are unaware of the contributions made by the tea industry of North Bengal.

For Bengal’s tea to regain its lost position, Govt. agencies, marketing agencies and workers unions must think and act unanimously to produce best quality of Indian tea. The health drink concept is really important but it would be more important to make it attractive to younger generation as a sporting and fun drink. Perhaps it would be appropriate to popularise tea as a lifestyle product. The introduction of a highly visible logo and the rating system would be vital for the tea industry of North Bengal to enable it to compete in the international market. This is a time for Indian Govt. to develop a brand image of Bengal teas as a marketable commodity of the twenty first century.