

The Deplorable Work Conditions Behind Harrods' \$7,000 'Ambootia Snow Mist' Darjeeling Tea



Photo: Counterview

In 2015, after you were done gawking at the [statue of Princess Di](#) in the world's largest department store, [Harrods](#) in London, you could head on over to the world-famous food halls where you could buy, among other high-priced indulgences, a type of tea branded "Ambootia Snow Mist."

At [\\$7,864](#) per kilogram—enough to make about 300 cups—Snow Mist regularly made appearances on listicles sporting headlines like "[21 Gifts that Prove Harrods Has Finally Lost Its Fucking Mind](#)."

Sold exclusively by London's high-end department store for about a decade starting in the late 2000s, the tea was grown on the Happy Valley Tea Estate, a 400-plus acre plantation nestled in the Himalayan hills, near the third tallest mountain in the world and the large town of Darjeeling.

Happy Valley is located in northern West Bengal, the same state as Bangla-speaking Kolkata, but the lingua franca in the region is Nepali. Locals known as Indian Gorkhas (to distinguish them from Nepali Gorkhas) have been agitating for almost four decades to get their own [state called Gorkhaland](#).

The second oldest of Darjeeling's 87 tea plantations, Happy Valley was established by a Britishman in 1854, just five years after Harrods. Happy Valley passed into the hands of an elite Bengali in the early 1900s. From there, it changed hands several times until it was abandoned, lying dormant up until the early 2000s (it is not uncommon for tea gardens to be semi-frequently abandoned by their owners, leaving workers, staff, and even managers in a lurch).

Many tea plantations have been taken over by investors looking for short-term profits but who lack a long-term vision for the tea industry. The standard playbook for this "promoter class" of new owners goes something like this: take out a huge loan against the tea land, siphon the capital to other businesses, and drive workers to further pauperization. It is well known in and around the industry that these owners routinely fail to pay legally required pension contributions and evade land taxes.

Importantly, the land itself is owned by the state of West Bengal, not by the owners of the plantations, who lease it long term.

These promoters also tend to abandon the tea plantations during the annual bonus period, allegedly due to worker protest and discontent, while also failing to clear all back pay that is due. The annual bonus period falls at the end of the calendar year and marks a time when employers and unions negotiate a bonus that workers get for regional holidays. Although it is true that there are more workers protesting during these periods in a perennial bid to negotiate higher bonuses, the claim by owners that said protests are the primary reason they must abandon their plantations doesn't hold up to scrutiny.

Later, with the help of the government and even the tea workers' own unions, these owners will often reopen the plantations and gardens under conditions that require workers to accept lower wages than what they previously earned, accept further casualization, and take lost jobs on the chin.

In the mid-2000s, Happy Valley, along with about a dozen other Darjeeling estates, became part of a company headed by businessman [Sanjay Bansal](#). Bansal was not supposed to be one of *those guys*, one of the plantation owners who games the system at the expense of workers—his initial approach led many to believe he would handle business differently. Bansal was an "incredibly successful... international player for a decade," says Sarah Besky, a cultural

anthropologist and associate professor at Cornell's School of Industrial and Labor Relations. But even major figures in the tea industry engage in unsavory practices.

Besky has spent a great deal of time studying Darjeeling's tea industry and workers. "Anybody who knows anything about Darjeeling tea knows about Makhaibari and Ambootia," Besky told TRNN. "The symbolic importance of Ambootia is huge."

Ambootia, the name of [another tea plantation](#), was the brand name behind Harrods' Snow Mist and other teas produced by Darjeeling Organic Tea Estates Private Ltd. (DOTEPL), and it is also the informal name for Bansal's broader company, the Ambootia Group, which owns numerous tea estates in Darjeeling, Assam, and Dooars. In 2015, DOTEPL was worth Rs. 12 billion (\$187 million); in addition to Bansal, investors from Singapore and Europe also had varying stakes in the company at different points in time.

I (Saurav) visited Happy Valley on October 12 of last year, when the tea bushes were between harvests, or "flushes." Rain was pouring down from the sky. Nevertheless, workers clad in galoshes and holding umbrellas are still expected to pluck [two leaves and a bud](#) from the bushes in such conditions.

On that day, though, no leaves were being plucked, because the workers were on strike, continuing a months-long labor dispute over backwages, a legally required holiday bonus, and a general state of disrespect from the bosses. Workers on the plantations in the area, including at Happy Valley, had demanded—and eventually won from the state government—a 20 percent bonus marking major holidays, but the mood at Happy Valley was anything but content.

Several dozen of the workers, most of them women, were huddled along the inside walls of a structure that, judging by the sign above, was meant to be a "fair price shop" for tourists and visitors to purchase tea from the plantation. A few men, the field staff, hovered inside, standing impatiently or animatedly pacing the floor. They, too, were being denied their wages.

One worker—let's call her Chenbagam Rai—told me through interpreters that she worked an eight-hour day, from 7:30AM to 4:00PM, with a break for lunch. Workers typically work six-day weeks for a total of 48 scheduled hours per week. The harvesting quotas they need to meet can range from garden to garden; in

some, it might be 7kg worth of tea per day; in others, it might be 11kg. With the help of the interpreters, Chenbagam relayed that she earned the minimum wage for Darjeeling tea workers of Rs. 232 (\$2.81) per day ([soon to be Rs. 250](#)), not counting minor bonuses for exceeding production goals, but including Rs. 9 per day for food. Not only are these wages insufficient for workers to make a living on, they are also on the low end for workers across the industry. In other parts of India, tea plantation workers make more—around Rs. 400 (\$4.93) per day—than their counterparts in Darjeeling do.

A union official (and one of my guides on the visit), Jatan Rai, told me that a living wage would be about Rs. 500 (\$6.16) per day, plus benefits (like housing, access to medical care, etc.) that management is legally mandated to provide. When I was in Darjeeling, I spent a fair amount of time talking with Jatan, who was brought up as the son of two tea workers on an estate and is now the general secretary of the Hamro Hill Terai Dooars Chiabari Shramik Sangh (Hamro Hill Terai Dooars Tea Workers Union), as well as Saakal Dewan, a retired navy officer and [active poet](#). Both Dewan and Jatan Rai, as well as Rai's union, are affiliated with a local political party called the Hamro Party (unions generally tend to be affiliated with political parties in India). In India, apart from the railways, tea plantations are the largest organized sector.

In other parts of India, along with higher average wages, tea workers also tend to receive more of the benefits they are legally entitled to under the [Plantations Labour Act](#) of 1951, which instituted a slate of laws meant to secure universal standards for working conditions on Indian plantations. For instance, housing, water, education, healthcare, and other basic needs—all are supposed to be provided by plantation owners. “It is there in the rules—[the] Plantations Act,” said Jatan Rai. But the problem is that there are no real nor consistent enforcement mechanisms; as a result, the reality for workers is very different from what the Act spells out.

According to Rai, things used to be better: “workers used to get multiple benefits. About 20 years back, 30 years back, the garden owners used to provide everything... Now, these days, it is totally gone.”

A staple of the Hamro Party platform is the demand for better conditions for workers in the tea industry. Party leaders are looking for what they describe as a “win-win” situation for owners and workers: an industry that is modernized and

run ethically. While such messages sound good on paper, they can only really go so far to reform the tea industry, the entire political economy of which has been built around what Besky argues are deep structural and historical factors that render meaningful reform impossible.

“Many of the people I work with find undermining the system futile because the system is a monster. It is unchallengeable,” says Besky.

“Within [the plantation system’s] kind of DNA, its internal logic [is]... cheap labor, cheap everything. That is the logic of oppression,” she says. Since its integration into the global trade market, that is, cheap, hyper-exploitable labor has been the foundation of the tea industry; any attempts to seriously and systematically address tea workers’ needs for living wages and humane treatment would threaten the structural integrity of the industry itself, as it currently exists. This, Besky explains, is why efforts to reform the industry, including the Plantations Labour Act of 1951, have only borne modest, if any, positive results.

“What’s [most] remarkable is the lack of change... The most striking thing about the industry, whether it’s 10 years or 150 years, [is that] the mode of production is the same.”

To illustrate this point, Besky offered one story of a sick Happy Valley worker who sought urgent medical care—she estimated that it took place around the time Harrods was starting to buy from the estate.

“Every plantation operates their ambulance also as a taxi. Someone actually died waiting for the ambulance that was roaming around town,” she says.

The story of tea is a story of interconnected continents and expanding systems of capitalist and imperialist exploitation stretching their tendrils across the globe over the course of hundreds of years—and the people bearing the brunt of it all have always been the workers on the plantations.

Tea is now the second most popular beverage in the world after water, with two billion cups consumed each day globally. But it was only incorporated into the capitalist world system in the early 17th century.

As demand grew in Britain and across Europe, there was money to be made. And [boy, was it ever made](#), especially by the entity that would eventually emerge as

the monopoly importer: the British East India Company (and its shareholders).

There was a proverbial fly in the ointment, though: [China, the world's only significant exporter of tea](#), didn't want anything that the British East India Company had to offer. As a result, the empire turned to pushing Indian farmers to grow opium, which the British merchants and the East India Company then smuggled into China to trade for tea. The British East India Company, simply put, was effectively a drug cartel. When the Chinese government attempted to crack down on its destructive trade, one consequence was the Opium Wars.

Another was the British deciding that they would try to take over the process of tea production for themselves. In an infamous act of corporate espionage, a botanist [named Robert Fortune](#), originally from Scotland, was sent by the British East India Company to steal tea plants and agricultural know-how from China to see if the company could grow the plant on the hills of Darjeeling and elsewhere in India.

All things considered, the experiment was successful, and as India's tea estates proliferated in the 19th century, the colony—and then the country—replaced China as the world's largest producer of tea for a century. Even today, it remains the second largest producer and fourth largest exporter of tea in the world.

Tea plantations became an important part of the colonial economy. From the beginning, owners separated the estates into enclaves where the law of the land barely works. And from the beginning, owners have tried to keep wages as low as possible. The estates require huge tracts of land, and cultivating and harvesting on that land is very labor intensive because the delicacy of the crop necessitates that it be picked by hand, rather than with mechanized devices.

Conditions at Happy Valley are not unique, Rai says later when I (Saurav) followed up with him from New York. "Every tea garden... in Darjeeling is having [the same] issues," he says.

Because of the conditions on the farms, most young people in the Darjeeling area choose to migrate out to a big city or go into a different line of work, in Darjeeling or nearby; even a construction laborer building roads in town makes Rs. 500 (\$6.16) per day, almost twice that of a plucker. Many fear the tea industry in Darjeeling is on its last leg as a result.

But there are still around 55,000 workers on Darjeeling's 87 licensed plantations for now, about 20 percent of whom are daily wage laborers, while the rest are permanent. They range in age from 18-60.

I visited another plantation with Dewan, the 950-acre Chongtong estate, which, at the time I visited, was also owned by DOTEPL. It's only about eight miles from Darjeeling, but it takes an hour to get there due to the bendiness and low quality of the roads winding through the hills.

When the estate is up and running at full capacity, 985 workers work there, and total tea production amounts to 200,000 kg per year. But Chongtong is definitely not running at full capacity these days; more than half the workers have fled for neighboring plantations because they are not getting paid. There used to be one supervisor for every 25-30 pluckers; now, there are far fewer people to supervise.

This kind of situation, or worse, happens at gardens throughout the industry. In gardens where the bushes are not as productive or as high quality as they once were—so-called “sick gardens”—management will simply vanish without paying workers, without even processing the harvested tea. According to Dewan and Rai, this kind of sudden abandonment is sometimes part of a front operation to transition the grounds [to a tourism site](#).

The global tea trade—and the hyper-exploitation of tea workers—has continued well into the present, [worth \\$200 billion in 2020](#) and expected to rise to \$318 billion by 2025. A 2019 report by [Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung](#) on tea exports from Darjeeling to Germany showed that pluckers tend to keep less than 3 percent of the money generated by the products they harvest. An [Oxfam report](#) the same year found that supermarkets and brands receive 93.8 percent of the final price of a tea bag in the United States, while workers receive 0.8 percent. The situation is only marginally better in India and European countries.

In India, the northern states of Assam and West Bengal are the largest producers of tea in the country. The states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka in the south also grow significant amounts of the crop.

As a high-end product, Darjeeling tea tends to not sell at large volumes, but the tea stands out due to attempts by the Indian government and the Darjeeling industry to market it internationally and protect its brand.

Regarding Happy Valley and Chongtong, web searches and shipping records show that several Global North companies specifically source from these two plantations, even though the working conditions described throughout this report are well known throughout the industry. These buyers include the French upscale outlet [Mariages Freres](#), which sells Happy Valley tea for the price of €486 (\$505) per kilogram. It also sells tea from Chongtong. [Lipton](#) has sold tea from Chongtong in recent years.

The century-old American tea importer GS Haly [markets Happy Valley tea by the dozens of pounds](#). The German wholesaler The Tea Co. GmbH & Co Kg has sourced from Chongtong, while the German brand Lebensbaum has sourced from Happy Valley. In the UK, [Teahouse Emporium](#) sells Happy Valley tea.

Dozens of other Global North businesses are sourcing from the company as a whole, but we were unable to determine whether the plantations they are doing business with are Happy Valley and Chongtong or others from DOTEPL's past or present array of tea-growing estates.

That array includes many estates that play up the “organic,” “fair trade,” and “people-friendly” practices of the plantations, like the small U.S.-owned, Darjeeling-sourced brand [Alaya tea](#). Meanwhile, Chenbagam Rai and the 55,000 other tea plantation workers in the region are earning less than \$3 a day, if they get paid at all.

Even though they weren't on strike, the workers at Chongtong—again, mostly Indian Gorkha women—were far more up in arms that day than their counterparts at Happy Valley had been. The pluckers hadn't been paid for four weeks, averaging around Rs. 2,000 (\$24.65) of lost wages in total. The mid-level supervisory staff also haven't been paid—for three months. The pluckers told me they had been given assurances that they would be paid their wages eventually, but they didn't believe the owners' promises. Workers had reached the point of selling domestic animals—pigs, hens, and other poultry—to sustain themselves and to supplement the free rations they receive from the government.

Even in the best of times at Chongtong, the average income for a household with school-age children is about Rs. 5,000 (\$60.72) per month, while average expenses range between Rs. 12,000 (\$147.92) and Rs. 14,000 (\$172.58). Families make up the difference through remittances they receive, with one earner

traveling to cities like Delhi or Mumbai to work and send money back home.

“We are helpless,” Ashima Tamang, a pseudonym for one of the women assembled outside the fields of the Chongtong garden, told me. “Those who are capable—they go to other cities. We don’t have any capacity.” This is the only way to come close to staying financially afloat, workers said, because there’s no other work available to them in the area, and the work that is there does not pay people enough to live on.

It’s not as if the workers have just sat on their hands and obediently accepted these circumstances either. When they are called to attend protests, they show up; but they feel that all their efforts have gone in vain. Speaking through Dewan, in Nepali, the pluckers told me that they want the government to act against the head figure at DOTEPL, Bansal.

At one point, they animatedly demanded that the tea estate be sold to another owner—a wish that would be granted at the end of October.

When it comes to ensuring better wages and working conditions for tea harvesters, “fair trade” and other certifications are commonly understood as ineffectual at best. At Happy Valley, Rai and Dewan explained, fair trade fees are actually used to reimburse plantation managers for the equipment and other goods they’re supposedly, but not actually, providing workers.

“Most of the gardens... are fair trade certified,” Rai told me later. But “those guidelines of fair trade policies are not being strictly followed; there is a big gap with the reality.”

Besky’s assessment of the fair trade economy is even harsher: “Fair trade and all of these bourgeois means [by which] tea is sold fail because they don’t understand what [the] plantation is.”

There is a complaint box for workers outside the division’s management office at Chongtong, near the spot where the tea is weighed. I was told by my companions, including KS Tsapa, a retired head supervisor of 48 years, that “it is just a formality.”

We have given here a mere snapshot of the present in one corner of the tea industry, but it is worth considering the future for a moment—because the tea

industry in Darjeeling may not have a future at all. In the age of finance capital, the incentive structure driving everything toward the end of making fast money has led the tea gardens to the precipice of an existential crisis. For it to prosper, a tea plantation has to go through gradual and diligent processes like replanting after 60-80 years; the bushes have to be maintained for four months during the lean period (winter season); etc.

It is only after steps like these are carefully and painstakingly taken that planters should even consider making a profit, but today's capitalists are not that patient.

The owners nowadays have primary interests in leveraging their assets for maximum profit, even if leveraging said assets has little to do with reinvesting in, sustaining, and improving the tea industry itself; showing tea gardens as property asset holdings, for instance, may serve the primary function of helping owners get a hold of bank loans, but the resulting money will be invested elsewhere, not back into the tea gardens themselves, after the loans are secured. This practice is one of many that have become increasingly common among tea plantation owners over the past 30 years.

State governments have underwritten the owners' land grabs on tea plantations by introducing "tea tourism" policies enabling them to use tea land for tourism purposes. In West Bengal, for instance, the owners can use up to 15 percent of tea garden land for tea tourism. Even before the concept of "tea tourism" became commonplace for every tea plantation, the case of [Chandmoni Tea Estate](#) in the Terai area of North Bengal bellows from the past a harbinger of what would come to pass in the industry in the name of development.

When tea plantation lands are given away for tourism and township projects, the workers are left with less or no work in their areas, and so far no one has come up with a sustainable answer to the various social and economic crises that result (unemployment, discontent, mass migration, etc.).

So what is to be done if fair trade policies, changing modes of production, unions, lawsuits, the land rights movement, etc. aren't improving conditions for tea workers on Darjeeling's plantations?

The workers on the plantations have tried everything—including selling household animals and vegetables on the side to make do—and their children are fleeing from the region.

“The global community has to build up pressure, because they don’t know the darker story,” says Rai.

This story, with the support of the [Bertha Foundation](#), is part of The Real News Network’s [Workers of the World](#) series, telling the stories of workers around the globe building collective power and redefining the future of work on their own terms.

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Source: Globetrotter

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