





THE CHAI PROJECT

By DANIEL B. HABER



Starbucks
subsidiary helps
Indian tea worker
communities.

*The Pussimbing tea estate
in Darjeeling is among the areas
that have received assistance under
the CHAI Project.*

Tea is like the soul, the essence, and the clay cup is like the body,” explained Sanjay Gurung. The manager of the Darjeeling-based CHAI Project, Gurung recalls how his American audience—some 3,000 Starbucks store managers—were spellbound by his demonstration of the eco-friendly, one-time-use clay cup commonly used on Indian trains and his analogy between a cup of tea and a human.

It may seem strange to have an Indian speaking about tea to Americans, a nation of coffee drinkers, and to its largest corporate retailer of coffee, Starbucks. But the Seattle, Washington, coffee company also has a tea company subsidiary called Tazo Tea, based in Portland, Oregon. In 2003, Tazo teamed up with a Portland-based aid group called Mercy Corps and the Darjeeling Ladenla Road-Prerna, a development organization, to form “The CHAI Project.” It’s an acronym for Collaboration for Hope and Advancement in India. And, of course, as every Indian knows, *chai* means tea.

Tazo, a buyer of Darjeeling tea since its inception in 1994, has worked with its partners, such as Starbucks and tea suppliers of the region, to provide close to \$1 million for community development in the tea-growing regions of Darjeeling, improving the lives of some 12,000 people in 24 communities. This year it is set to expand to Assam, where it will help to diversify economic opportunities for tea-growing residents within Tazo’s supply chain of partner plantations. Mercy Corps, which is administering the project, is better known in Asia for its relief work in areas hit by natural disasters, but is now geared more toward development aid.

While the world enjoys sipping the finest tea, produced in Darjeeling and Assam, few people realize that many of the plantation workers—those who pluck the fabled “two leaves and a bud”—live impoverished lives on the margins of society.

When tea cultivation was first introduced in the Darjeeling Hills by the British in the 1800s, the area was sparsely populated and migrant laborers from neighboring Nepal were offered jobs. To this day, ethnic Nepalese form the major population of the Darjeeling Hills.

Although the CHAI Project was originally conceived for the Darjeeling tea plantation communities, field assessments indicated that there were some adjacent villages that needed help as well. Of the 24 communities in the area involved in the CHAI Project, 10 are tea estates, eight are agricultural communities and six are forest communities. The participants engage in what is termed Open Initiatives, meaning that they decide for themselves what kind of development is most important for them. “It could be a road, water system or biogas,” explains Gurung.

On a crisp sunny day in November, Gurung takes me to visit one of the remoter communities known as “Parment,” short for “permanent settlement,” where CHAI has a successful project. After breakfast at a café facing the famous Batasia Loop of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, a World Heritage site, we undertake a jeep journey of two hours over twisting hairpin turns. We travel from Ghoom, which is the world’s second highest train station, at 2,550 meters. We pass hills of emerald, jigsaw patterned tea bushes on the Takdah Tea Estates down through what look like pre-historic gorges and valleys where one might have once expected to find dinosaurs roaming.

Surprisingly, nestled in the woods, we discover hidden citrus groves and we pass women with dokos (baskets) on their back carrying the juicy oranges destined for markets on the plains—another source of income for the Darjeeling tea communities.

“This is what Darjeeling looked like before the Britishers converted it to monoculture tea plantations,” explains Gurung, who previously worked with the Veterinary Department.

As we near the Parment village, we meet the 65-year-old headman, Padam Bahadur Mangar, known as “Mondal Daju,” and his 23-year-old assistant, Santa Kumar Thapa, who are adjusting a water pipe that serves the community below. Walking down to the village of about 20 families, Thapa points out trees and shrubs—teak, sal and broom, which as its name implies is the raw material of brooms, a source of income for the community. We also pause at several honey-producing beehives.

One of six in his family, Thapa has no intention of leaving his village. Until a few months ago, his family’s income depended entirely on the pension of his late father, a retired soldier in the Indian Army, and sustenance farming. Thapa joined the CHAI Project in its early days and now serves as secretary of its Youth Club.

Later, Gurung meets with the villagers in the one-room school house and discusses the feasibility of setting up a biogas unit. Several villagers feel that they wouldn’t have enough cow dung to make it feasible, and a lively discussion ensues. I use one of

the newly constructed latrines and experience firsthand how the CHAI Project has benefited the community.

Before leaving Parment, we meet with Rekha Thapa who, in her early twenties, is its newest and perhaps youngest entrepreneur. With a small loan of Rs. 5,000 provided by the CHAI Youth Program, she recently established a shop where she sells items such as salt, soap, spices, rice, cooking oil and eggs. She runs her business with the help of her husband, Prakash, and earns about Rs. 200 a day, which is not bad for a small enterprise in her rural



A grocery store at Dairy Gaon, in Darjeeling district, is run by a self-help group with assistance from the CHAI Project.

Nepal's Coffee

Makes Its Way into American Mugs

If Darjeeling is world famous for tea, neighboring Nepal is reaping the benefits of another plantation crop, coffee. Commercial coffee production in Nepal began in 1976 with the import of Arabica coffee from South India. At present, coffee cultivation is scattered over 17 districts of Nepal's hill regions.

Even though coffee production is still minuscule in proportion to the demand, with only 65 tons exported in 2005, private companies such as Highland Coffee Promotion Company Ltd., Everest, Plantec and Gulmi Cooperative are exporting processed green coffee beans to the United States, Japan and some European countries. Last year Highland Coffee shipped 23 tons of coffee to Holland Coffee in the United States, a major supplier of

Starbucks, the U.S. retail chain.

In 2002 USAID allied with Winrock International, a nongovernmental development group based in the U.S. state of Arkansas; the Nepal Highland Coffee Promotion Company, the Nepal Coffee Producers' Association, the Specialty Coffee Association of America and other Nepalese organizations.

Their aim was to generate employment and alleviate poverty through environmentally and socially sustainable development of the coffee industry. Their strategy is to improve product quality at all levels: farmer production, rural processing and marketing.

Beneficiaries include farmers like 64-year-old Timlisina, who grows coffee along with other crops. His annual income has already



A coffee cultivator at Kavre, one of the coffee-growing districts in Nepal.

increased by about \$200. His is one of the 12,000 Nepalese household farms producing coffee and tea which have benefited from the alliance. Luke A. Colavito, agriculture program coordinator in South Asia for Winrock International, says the plan is to facilitate new production by some 6,000 smallholders within two years and set the stage for more than 100,000 households to become tea and coffee producers in about 10 years. "This will provide strong examples of commercial markets benefiting poor, small farmers, and helping a vulnerable state like Nepal in a period of crisis," says Colavito. —D.B.H.

community. She feels confident that she will be able to return the loan within the one-year time frame. Before Rekha set up her shop, the villagers had to walk 90 minutes to Simbong just to buy a box of matches. As Rekha puts it, "I am now optimistic about the future and have plans of expanding the business with the profits. Through the Youth Revolving Loan Fund, people like me can be self-reliant and benefit not only themselves, but also their families and communities."

Since large families exceed the tea plantations' employment capacity, young people are left with few options to secure a job and diversify their skills. Yet they are the future of the community.

"We discovered that unemployment among the youth in villages is very high," says Gurung. "Our aim is to impart leadership skills and to train them in a vocation which would be useful and remunerative within the community itself, so that they don't have to leave their own villages to find a useful role in life."

Given a grant of only Rs. 5,000, youth groups have planned debates, sports and traditional events that united 2,000 of their neighbors, some from across the border in Nepal. This soon evolved into inter-village networking activities, where young participants reported an increase in their self-esteem, advocacy skills and ideas for transforming their environment.

Today, CHAI is also supporting more than 300 young people

in pursuing vocational apprenticeships based on market demands, and establishing small businesses in animal husbandry, bee-keeping, electronics and others.

During the 10-day annual Darjeeling Carnival, I met Ajay Edwards, chief carnival organizer and owner of Glenary's, a famous Darjeeling restaurant. "When the tea industry first came to Darjeeling it was both a blessing and a curse," explains Edwards as we sip Apoorva Tips organic tea. "Although it provides employment, it has always been a hand-to-mouth existence. Our concern is that we want to make the tea garden communities economically viable. If the local people are earning a decent living they [the local youths] won't be creating any problems in town. We are very grateful for the work that the CHAI Project is doing for the community."

Darjeeling tea is famous worldwide, and even in some Hollywood movies, characters sometimes used to say, "Can I pour you some Darjeeling?"—meaning the finest tea. Americans find that same Darjeeling tea in Tazo blends, and can have pride in the fact that the tea company, rather than exploiting the tea plantation laborers, is helping them to improve their lives. □

About the Author: Daniel B. Haber is a freelance writer based in Kathmandu.