

Industry-College Partnership helps prevent female trafficking in closed gardens



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Over a conversation between the legendary tea planter Mr Rajah Banerjee of Rimpaocha Tea Siliguri and Campus Minister at Salesian College Sonada Fr. C.M. Paul on the impending peril of adolescent females being trafficked from the closed tea gardens in the Darjeeling Hills was born the Industry-College Partnership to provide skill training.

“Education and skill training is the only solution, to prevent them [girls] from falling easy prey to stalking flesh traders who lure the unsuspecting girls with false promises of quick bucks and better future outside,” says Salesian College Principal Dr. (Fr.) George Thadathil.

Mr Banerjee who calls Makaibari the first tea estate to go organic his Karmabhoomi and Rimpocha tea his dharma says, “It is a fact there are already 4 tea gardens in the Darjeeling hills closed down, and some other gardens are sick and on the verge of closure.”

“Rimpocha is not just tea, but a philosophy of life which stands on five pillars of sustainability: healthy soil, economically-empowered women, biodynamic compost & fuel from the holy cow, fair price & trade for marginalized growers and technological assistance for direct marketing of their produce,” explains Banerjee.

Salesian College established in 1938 situated in Gorabari village at an altitude of 6,500 feet above sea level and just 2 kms before Sonada town on NH 55 (Hill Cart Road) between Kurseong and Darjeeling has more than 95 percent of students from the hills.

Mr Banerjee says, “I am willing to donate 40% of all online sales of our products Rimpocha Compendium Box of nine exotic varieties of tea, as well as the 11 stand alones) for the month of December 2019 at www.rimpochatea.com.

North Bengal today has about 450 tea gardens spread out in the Darjeeling Hills, Terai, and Dooars regions that are registered as sellers in the Siliguri Tea Auction Centre. The youngest tea gardens are Chinchula Tea Estate, Raimatang Tea Estate and Kalchini Tea Estate all of which are 72 years old.

Currently there are 83 operational tea gardens in Darjeeling district covering an aggregated area of about 19,000 hectares (i.e. 46,950 acres) under tea plantation. The tea gardens in Darjeeling presently employ about 52,000 permanent workers including both garden and factory workers.

Besides the woes of migration and trafficking that stalk the idyllic tea gardens, the low wages prevent higher education of girls compelling them to move out for better wages.

NGOs working to prevent trafficking estimate that “over 400 girls are trafficked every year from tea gardens, mostly those that have stopped functioning.”

The traffickers obviously target the shut tea gardens where hunger and poverty are high compared to functional [tea gardens], and higher educational opportunities, health facilities and ration at subsidized rates are nil.

CM Paul

Former HoD, Dept of Mass Communications at Assam Don Bosco University, Guwahati, C.M. Paul was editor of The Herald weekly in Kolkata and director of Don Bosco International News Agency (ANS) based in Rome. He did MA in Journalism & Mass Communication from FORDHAM University, New York.

BY CM PAUL

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