

This spread, clockwise from top left: A tea worker, mid-pick; Rajah Banerjee tastes a cup of his top-dollar tea; pregnancy is no reason for this picker to stop picking; and Rajah examines his crop.



Tea Total

Story by Tom Vater

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Makaibari Tea Estates in Darjeeling have developed sustainable and biodynamic agriculture at high returns - and eco tourists are hot on the trail.

"Life is chaos, the world is chaos. The only constant is change. I like chaos and the way you position yourself in it. Where do we come from? What are we doing here... and where are we going? We need to answer these questions in order to be free. That's what I'm doing in my tea garden," Rajah Banerjee explains.

Not the sort of introduction one expects from a tea plantation owner in the Darjeeling hills; but then Banerjee is not an ordinary man. The enigmatic fourth heir to Makaibari sells the most expensive tea in the world. His top-of-the-range Silver Tip retails at USD 440 a kilo and 85 percent of his tea is sold outside India. The Makaibari Tea Estates produce only organic and biodynamic tea. The green revolution brings high dividends, and other plantations are increasingly taking note.

Darjeeling, once under the rule of the Rajahs of Sikkim became a British hill station in the 1840s; a summer retreat for the colonial gentry from the heat of the Bengali plains and Calcutta. The first tea plantations were founded here, and the British plantation owners employed large numbers of Nepalese workers. Darjeeling, a synonym



Darjeeling, a synonym for tea, has become a popular tourist destination for its magnificent Himalayan views.



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The Darjeeling hills have the perfect sub-tropical climate for tea. A quarter of the country's crop is grown here, and today the livelihoods of almost half a million people are dependent on Darjeeling tea. But all is not well here; the mono-cultural plantations are prone to erosion, devastating landslides are common. Meanwhile, the indiscriminate use of pesticides on almost all plantations is taking its toll on the fragile soil. Political instability in the late 1980s, worker disputes and crippling trade union agitations have further slowed production.

Banerjee is leading the fight to reverse the dire situation. The exuberant tycoon is revolutionising the tea business with a holistic approach: a happy management, workforce and environment.

While many tea estates have become dangerous due to inefficient management, Makaibari is the exception and receives thousands of visitors a year, offering eco-tourists accommodation on the estate; either in delightful British chalets or in small huts in the tea garden. The plantation is also home to 13 leopards and two tigers, as well as wild boar, deer and hornbills.

Every morning, Banerjee walks through his plantation for hours, talking to workers and checking the crop. Permaculture - six levels of vegetation grown amongst the cash crops, has turned Makaibari into a true tea garden. However, the plantation, along with others in the region, has recently been badly affected by a tea bug, *Helopeltis* that devours his plants at an alarming rate. Banerjee is looking for ways to get rid of the pests without resorting to chemicals. Some plantations have sprayed pesticides but to no avail. This year, his profit will be cut by at least 30 percent.

Despite pest attacks, more and more tea gardens are switching to organic farming. Banerjee is well ahead of the pack - economically, culturally and environmentally. "The reason why I am here is simple: making great tea is a craft, not a business. It's an art - and you can taste it in the tea," said Banerjee, smiling. 🍵



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