

# *Darjeeling Hills in the Era of Covid-19*

Aspects of Society, Polity and Economy

**TWO DAY  
NATIONAL LEVEL VIRTUAL CONFERENCE**

**JULY 20 & 21, 2020**

**11:00 AM-12:30 PM**



**SOUTHFIELD COLLEGE**

**DARJEELING**

# The Theme

## *Darjeeling Hills in the Era of Covid-19: Aspects of Society Polity & Economy*

It would be axiomatic to state that Covid-19 has become a watershed for humanity at large affecting every facet of our lives in innumerable ways. Although there's hardly any region on earth untouched by the virus, its impact varies from one country to another. Countries like New Zealand, Germany, Iceland, Finland, Denmark and others have fared better in handling the crisis than countries like the United States of America, United Kingdom, Brazil and others. The latter has witnessed a large number of deaths apart from the country where the virus originated, that is, China. This variation is true for a geographically expansive country like India where some states have handled the crisis better than other states. A case in point is the state of Kerala, which had the first case in January itself, but has managed to keep the number of infections and deaths low. This is despite the fact that Kerala is not only a tourist state but also a state with a large number of its citizens working outside India, who sought to return to their homes once the virus started spreading in Europe and Western Asia. Similar quick, precautionary and preventive actions were taken by the state of Sikkim, which closed its tourist destinations like hotels, restaurants and cinema halls on March 4th itself, twenty days before the national lockdown. This proved to greatly help the state in its battle against the virus.

As with all disasters, natural and human-made, the impact of the virus is varied depending upon how the states and its institutional bureaucracies handle them. However the fact remains that in a crisis, like a pandemic in this case, people across the strata are affected differently. It has severe adverse consequences for those groups of people who are already at a disadvantageous position in the structured society. Greater is the calamity for the lower class and caste, especially women. When majority of the middle and upper classes were discovering new hobbies and ways of keeping themselves occupied during the lockdown period in India, the migrant workers, being out of job, out of food and accommodation were walking to their villages hundreds of kilometres away. Simultaneously, the National Commission of Women was raising concerns with regard to the rise in the number of cases of domestic violence during the lockdown. The estimated two million trans-people in India, being already discriminated against by society became one of the worst hit by the lockdown and its consequences. The partition between people living in gated colonies with each flat having a balcony and those living in congested slums across the high wall became pronounced more than

ever before with the government trying to implement social distancing norms.

In this context, this conference seeks to understand how Covid-19 has impinged upon the Darjeeling Hills. Since its economy is hugely focused on tourism, the lockdown has been disastrous for this sector, which includes a whole number of businesses dependent on it. The lockdown also coincided with the timing of the production of the world famous first flush tea of Darjeeling, thereby hurting the income. Most inhumanely, work in the tea gardens were continued for a long time despite the lockdown, putting the workers' lives at risk. There were also issues regarding non-payment of the already low wages in such an area where there have been cases of chronic hunger. What also needs to be factored in is that majority of workforce in tea gardens are women. Unfortunately for the laboring classes, the lockdown became a double-edged sword. Although it served to save them from contracting the virus, the loss of livelihood meant days of hunger and inability to afford basic necessities. The daily wage earners, construction workers, informal labor in various sectors, including small private enterprises bore the brunt of the lockdown in a major way. For this class, lockdown and un-locking became a scenario between the devil and the deep blue sea.

Another aspect specific to the Darjeeling hills was the fact that the pandemic showed us the large number of people who were actually going out of the region to metropolitan cities for purposes of employment and higher education. It can be said that every third home had someone coming back from outside the state before or after the lockdown. At the society level, for good or bad, there were reports of many villages setting up their own barricades and regulating the entry of people coming from outside. In terms of education, both at the school level and higher education, the lockdown forced an online mode of transmitting knowledge. Though this might have been partly successful in the urban localities, students from the rural areas with no access to high-speed internet facilities were severely disadvantaged. In this context, one of the key questions that the conference seeks to focus upon would be the role of the local and state governments in handling the situation with regard to resources allocated, vision and leadership provided. The role of the civil society and various non-governmental organizations would also be addressed. Another important aspect would be the status of medical facilities and infrastructure in the hills.

While the world is learning to grapple with the new normal, we must also find ways to cope with disasters like this, beginning with identifying and attempting to solve the many problems in our system blatantly exposed by the coming of this pandemic.

## Patron

*Professor Dr Anuradha Rai*  
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## Joint Convenors

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## Program

Day 1: 20.07.2020

Professor Shrawan Kumar Acharya & Professor Nivedita Goswami

Day 2: 21.07.2020

Dr. Jigme Yeshe Lama & Dawa Sherpa

For Registration please click on the following link:

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeiffDv-jnS83H6oGYQlpa9t4d2OWThRC0HqvMbAZw81WhyPq/viewform>

To join our WhatsApp Group please click on the following link:

<https://chat.whatsapp.com/D1XE80nCT3q5BYCd4nXC23>



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