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# Majority of Darjeeling tea to go organic

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About 37 p.c. of the total crop grown on the slopes of the eastern Himalayas is organic

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**KOLKATA:** The Darjeeling Tea Association (DTA) has mounted efforts to increase the production of organic tea so that the majority of the champagne of teas is organically produced by 2010.

Industry sources say that at present about 37 per cent of the total crop grown on the slopes of the eastern Himalayas is organic tea, as per certifications given by European and Japanese agencies.

"Efforts are on now to cover at least two more gardens that contribute 13 per cent of the total yield under the organic cultivation norms," a source at the DTA, the apex industry body, told *The Hindu*.

Given the fact that the annual Darjeeling tea crop averages at about 9.5 to 10 million kg in volume terms, India would be offering around five million kg of the brew as an organically grown product. However, initially the crop would be lower as the conversion process reduces output by half.

It takes about three years to convert a garden from conventional plantation to an organic one. This involves not only a total ban on chemical



**EYE CATCHING:** A panoramic view of labourers plucking tea at Lebong tea garden in Darjeeling. - PTI PHOTO

fertilizers and pesticides but there are also restrictions on the use of some natural items. "For instance, use of tobacco extracts for pest control, is not allowed," sources said. Pointing out that the move-

ment on organic production of teas started about 15 years ago, the sources said that at that time it commanded a huge premium in the international market with some of them selling at Rs. 10,000 a

kg. Japan and Germany were two of the biggest markets for organic Darjeeling tea although the U.K. and the U.S. have also been buying this tea.

Countries such as Germa-

ny, which imports about 50 per cent of the total Darjeeling tea output (both organic and inorganic), often re-export this to European countries like the Netherlands and Switzerland.

At present the 'queen of brews' is grown over an area spanning 7,500 hectares in the Darjeeling district in West Bengal with some of the gardens sprawling across steep slopes sometime at a height of 6,500 feet.

There are now 87 tea estates growing Darjeeling tea. However, there is little scope for increasing the output substantially although there is a huge global demand now for teas, especially premium varieties.

In the beverage space as well as a nutraceutical, tea is being re-invented.

The sources said that the good news was that changes in ownership and taking over of sick gardens bodes well for the Darjeeling tea industry especially as manufacturing processes and practices would improve, but crop might not increase sizably even after the Centre's rejuvenation and replantation scheme, the Special Purpose Tea Fund, which has now got under way.