

Siliguri, Oct. 9: Planters have said production of Darjeeling Tea in 2017 might come down by over 60 per cent compared to last year as Darjeeling gardens are yet to be ready for plucking and processing after the statehood agitation.

Although the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha had lifted the shutdown 13 days ago, estates across the hills are yet to resume the production of the renowned Darjeeling Tea.

The reasons: all 87 tea estates which produce the Darjeeling Tea is yet to finish the weeding of tea bushes; machineries at the factories need repairs as they remained idle for a long period; and most importantly, fresh leaves and buds are yet to sprout.

"It would take at least three to four weeks to get a tea estate ready for production. Several works need to be done before the production commences in a full-fledged manner in all gardens. Also, we have to wait for fresh leaves and buds to blossom as we cannot afford to compromise with the quality of the brew," said a Siliguri-based planter who owns a tea estate in the hills.

This year, the Darjeeling tea industry has lost nearly half of its tea till now vis-à-vis the production of last year, show the data published by the Tea Board of India.

The total production in 2016 was 8.13 million kilos, of which, 5.63 million kilos were manufactured from January to August.

Till August this year, only 2.07 million kilos were produced. The production had dropped down to zero for the months of July and August because of the indefinite strike.

"This proves around 70 per cent of tea is produced till August and the remaining 30 per cent in the months of September, October and November. The production starts declining in October because of change in weather and reaches almost nil in December," said the planter.

September this year was a complete washout for the Darjeeling tea sector because of the shutdown.

"It seems the production will resume only after seven to 10 days. We have already lost around 50 per cent of tea till August and apprehend that the production will come down by around 65 to 70 per cent at the end of the year. We feel there will be production of only a few thousand kilos in the remaining months of this year," said the garden owner.

However, Ankit Lochan, a tea exporter in Siliguri, said if there was an additional production of Darjeeling Tea this year, it would help reconsolidate the international market to some extent.

"For the past few months, many exporters had been offering Nepal tea which, we feel, is the best alternative to Darjeeling Tea. It is true that the industry has lost a major portion of production but the additional kilos manufactured in the coming months will help us reconsolidate the international market. Many importers had bought Nepal tea as there was no production of Darjeeling Tea in the past three months," said Lochan.