

# GROWTH OF SMALL TEA CULTIVATION AND ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE OF THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF ASSAM

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## ABSTRACT

*The tea industry of Assam is more than 180 years old by now. The cultivation of tea on small holding is comparatively a recent development. This Small tea cultivation is an integral component of large scale tea industry of the entire state by producing nearly 30 per cent of total tea production of the state. It has the potentiality of the transform of socio-economic condition of rural Assam. It provides ample avenues for self employment of educated unemployed youth besides engaging family members. The high profitatibility coupled with the prospect of getting steady income with minimum effort have attracted a large number of educational youth both rural urban. These private initiatives taken up by small tea growers may cultivate the spirit of entrepreneurship and would strengthen the backbone of the rural economy of Assam. Present paper will try to explore the opportunity of tea entrepreneurship and its socio-economic importance in the state.*

**Key words:** *Entrepreneurship, Small Tea cultivation, Small Tea Growers, Socio-economic development.*

## INTRODUCTION

Tea, the most ancient beverage mankind has been enjoying, is still the most popular non alcoholic drink in the world. The tea industry of India is one of the oldest and perhaps the most efficiently organized agricultural enterprises in the country (Borborah and Gogoi, 2007). In India, tea is grown in an area of 5.10 lakh hectares producing 23 per cent of the global tea production (2010). Since the introduction of tea in India (1823), the industry has been contributing immensely towards the socio-economic development of the tea growing regions. Indian has sixteen tea growing states, of which Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala account for about 95 Per cent of the country's total tea production. Among these states, Assam produces almost 50 per cent (480.286 million kg) of the total production (966.403 million kg) of India (TBI, 2010). The production of tea in India takes place in both large plantation and small gardens. Small Tea Growers (STGs) are defined, as a person or group having plantation area up to 10.12 hectares

(TBI). According to TBI (2006), STGs are producing nearly 35 per cent of the total tea production of the country.

**Table1: Tea Industry in India at a glance (2011)**

	Number of gardens	Area under production (in hectare)	Total production ( million k.g)	Employment
Small Tea Garden	157504	1.62 lakh	260 mkg	1 million
Big Estates	1686	4.18 lakh	728 mkg	2 million

*Source: Tea Board of India*

***Indian Tea industry at cross road:***

Tea industry of India is one of the oldest organised sectors with a large network of producer, manufacturer, retailers, distributors, exporters and employees (Das, 2009). It has an integrated system of production, processing, marketing of their own. Since its inception in India, tea is sold through auction centres in bulk. This industry was an instrument for the development of hard infrastructure like railway, roadways and utilisation of hilly terrain for tea plantation in Assam. Tea industry is said to be the only industry which had provided stimulus to the development process in Assam. Other than infrastructural developments, many ancillary industries like packaging materials, plywood, jute bags etc. were set in the state. Many people are engaged in different layers of supply chain of tea industry from factory to ultimate consumer.

In recent years, big tea estates/planters have now started to lose competitiveness due to - imbalance in demand and supply, old bushes, negligence in maintenance, quality degradation, lack of investments, high cost of production, increase in social costs like - health care, education, housing etc., failure to place tea in upper- end markets, labour unrest, in experienced management. At the same time ,increase in competition in the global market due to inclusion of many new producers in the list of tea producing countries, Indian tea industry lose its position substantially in the export market. World tea production has a growth rate of 3 per cent per annum; on the other hand demand for tea in not growing at the same pace (1.5 to 2.0 per cent only). A very important development in case of India is that it is the second largest consumer in the world (per capita consumption of tea in India 0.73 gram), where about 90 per cent of tea produce is consumed domestically. This development is due to increase in population, greater urbanisation, increase in income and standard of living etc. On the other hand, productivity as well as quality of product is severely affecting due to old tea bushes which have already crossed their economic life i.e.40- 50 years (average age of tea bushes in Assam is 80 years). Scarcity of labour is one of the major problems to the tea industry. Implementation of Govt policies like NREGS and other employment generation and social security schemes, has created acute shortage of labourer in the gardens as these schemes provides higher wages to the tea labourers comparing to the garden wages. Moreover, according to country's legislation, labourers cannot be hired in large number from outside the state, as being done by the British planters during the initial years

of tea plantation. Indian tea industry has lost its export market; it is hardly exporting 150-170 million k.g, the prices of tea at auction is not increasing due to deterioration of quality. All these developments and challenges have led to closure of many tea garden/ estates recently (in Kerala 20, 30 in West Bengal, about 70 in Assam). It is estimated that more than sixty thousand plantation workers have lost their job since 2002 and livelihood of another ten thousand has been affected directly. Many established tea producers like TATA Tea , Hindustan Lever and many established tea producers left production business and exclusively concentrating on tea marketing like packaging, brand building, retailing etc. They find that tea production has no longer a profitable venture for them. Therefore, the future growth of tea industry will be dependent on the growth of small tea gardens only. With the taking up of tea cultivation on small scale by the local people in Assam, will be an incentive for the sustainable development of the tea industry.

### SMALL TEA PLANTATION

Traditionally tea is best known as plantation crop. Tea plantation is often called tea estates/gardens. Plantation comprises a large area, producing a single agricultural product as a commercial venture. This model (plantation) was introduced in Indian tea industry during the colonial period by the planters (mostly from UK). Until 1950's, it was thought to be the only way to produce tea on commercial basis where production to sale (an integrated system developed by British) was controlled by the tea planters. Tea cultivation on small holding belongs to a farm or production unit that allocates its labour, land or other resources for subsistence or semi subsistence from it. The growers produce only green leaves; manufacturing and distribution parts are managed by different persons or groups. The concept of small tea cultivation came into existence when Kenya in 1950's, had decided to produce tea for export. The Kenyan successful experience had created a modern trend of small holders/ small growers in developing and underdeveloped countries. Since then, there has been a steady shift in tea cultivation from big plantation to small holdings (CDPA, 2008). Today, in most of the tea producing countries like China, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Kenya, Bangladesh, Nepal, Vietnam etc., small tea cultivation significantly contributes to the country's total tea production along with the large estates.

**Table 2: World scenario of Tea Industry**

Country	STGs ( % share in total production)	Estate ( % share in total production)	Worker
China	80	20	8 million
Sri Lanka*	74	26	More than 2 million
Kenya	60	40	3 million

India	27	73	More than 1 million
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Source: Tea Barometer, 2010 \* Tea Board of Sri Lanka, 2010

### Small Tea Growers (STGs) In India:

Tea cultivation on small holding is a recent development in Indian tea sector. This concept was initiated in 1930's, beyond the traditional tracts of cultivation in Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu (Chai Time, 2007). It was only late 1980's or early 1990's, the cultivation spread to the other tea producing states of India like - Assam and West Bengal. After independence, during the successive five year plans the TBI has spent all its resources in trying to mobilise big tea estates/plantations to increase production or expand area under tea. Most of its efforts borne little result (Bhowmik, 1991). Even with the Government investment through TBI and other agencies, there has been a marginal increase in production. From the 8<sup>th</sup> Five year plan (1992-1997) TBI has laid down some emphasis on the promotion of STGs. It has decided on this scheme because all other attempts to increase area under tea have failed. Therefore, it is proposed to encourage landless labourers and unemployed youths to take up tea cultivation in the tea growing areas of India

**Table 3: Distribution of Small Tea Growers in India**

State	Number of STGs( 2008)	Registered with TBI (2010)	Area in Hact(2005)
Assam	64597	4561	41,249
West Bengal	9990	1032	9500
others	9354	8865	7355
<b>Total North India</b>	<b>83941</b>	<b>14458</b>	<b>58104</b>
Tamil Nadu	68147	10404	43,157
Kerala	5402	7412	4,810
Karnataka	14	14	83
<b>Total South India</b>	<b>73563</b>	<b>17830</b>	<b>48050</b>
<b>Total India</b>	<b>157504</b>	<b>32288</b>	<b>106,154</b>

*Source: Source: Tea Board, 2010 and All Assam Small Tea Growers Association*

### **The case of Assam**

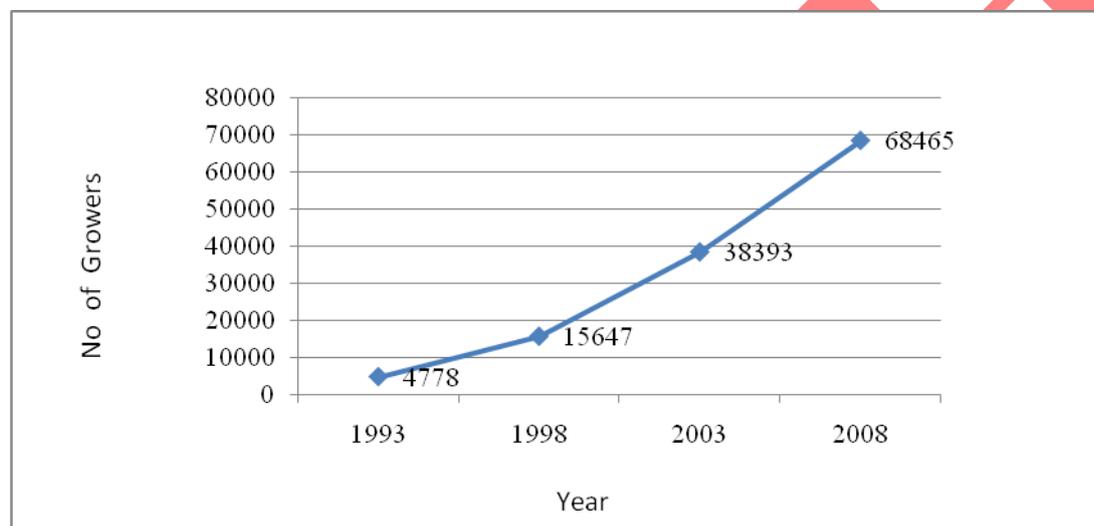
The tea industry of Assam has been a long journey since 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was thought (as early as 1788) that the indigenous tea in India was reported to be discovered in Assam by Botanist Sir Joseph Banks (Spielman, 2009). But Robert Bruce A British official is widely known as the discoverer of tea in Assam in 1823. In the year 1833, the East India Company after losing its legal monopoly of tea trade, began to look for another source of supply. As result the tea cultivation was began in the year 1833 at Sadiya (Assam) and in the year 1839, first boxes of made tea from indigenous leaf were sent to London for auction sale. After the highly favourable report of 1<sup>st</sup> Auction, the tea cultivation started its glorious journey towards an industry without looking back. Presently Assam alone produces nearly 50 per cent of the total tea production of the country and providing employment nearly 2 million people both directly and indirectly (Baruah, 2008).

Though the tea industry of Assam is more than 180 years old, it took almost 150 years to break the inertia and catch the fancy of the farmers of Assam to cultivate tea in small scale (Baruah, 2011). During the initial days, tea cultivation was quite colonial in nature without the involvement of local/native people. This was limited within the influential classes and not permissible to common people (Gogoi, 2011). After positive feedback of London Auction, the Government encouraged British entrepreneurs to invest in tea cultivation. The investors were given land on easy terms and the policy of British was to favour only for their own people. The local people never got prime land for tea cultivation. Therefore; the opportunity for the local Assamese people to enter into this industry was very rear. Moreover tea cultivation was a new concept for the local Assamese at imperial days. They might have lack of knowledge and interest to take tea cultivation, having their own land; they did not want to work as a tea labourer in the gardens. This stigma remained with Assamese people more than 150 years. This mistake of the local people during the initial days of tea cultivation deprived the whole community from the entire industry and they became the silent observers of the growth and development of tea industry of Assam (Baruah, 2008). After the green revolution in India (1960's) also, the agricultural sector of Assam, remained underdeveloped, due to the lack of irrigation facilities, small holding size, lack of investment in modern technology, hilly terrain, poor infrastructure; insufficient government support etc. It compelled the traditional agriculturists in rural areas of Assam to look for alternative livelihood. Tea cultivation on small holding was one of the alternatives they could sustain their livelihood in the long run. In the present context, in India there are limited scopes for the growth of big tea gardens. Because, after independence a lot of changes have taken place in the government legislations to improve the socio-economic framework of the country. So, the alternative for the growth of tea industry in India is left only setting up of small tea gardens (Boruah, 2008).

Finally, the Government of India as well as Assam Government allowed the local people to open small tea gardens by abolishing all the barriers relating to the growth of this sector. (Saikia, 2008). The first effort to popularise tea cultivation in small holding in Assam was made in 1978 by Late Sonewar Bora (the then Agriculture Minister of the state). His intention was to utilize available fallow land and attract young generation to agriculture sector and thereby to solve

unemployment problem (Baruah, 2011). These growers have taken the advantages of congenial weather for tea cultivation, suitable land and other infrastructural facilities that were readily available in Assam. As the published data, the first commercial tea plantation in a small plot of land was started in Golaghat district of Assam during 1978. A preliminary study revealed that in 1990, there were 657 STG (Baruah, 2008) which increased to 70000 (approx) with a land coverage of 1, 18,000 acres in the year 2011; contributing nearly 29 p.c. of the total tea production of the state. On the other hand the acreage under tea estates declined from 4, 09,684 hectares to 4, 01,512 hectares or about 1.99 per cent, during 1991-2006. At present STGs are spread in 27 districts of Assam; but the growth is high in the five districts viz; Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivsagar, Jorhat and Golaghat.

**Figure 1: Growth of STGs in Assam (in number)**



There are some other reasons for such a phenomenal growth in numbers of STGs. It provides them a readymade infrastructure like- technology, processing factory, skilled workers and market for promoting small tea cultivation. People are taking tea cultivation because- it provides sustainable income for a long period with comparatively less investment, use of unutilised/ underutilised land gives long time employment opportunities, etc. the TBI also provide facilities in order to promote tea cultivation in small holding to the registered growers like- subsidised loan for plantation, price subsidy, free training, subsidy for purchasing transport vehicle, setting up leaf collection shed, supply of input as fertilizer, plant protection chemical, sprayer, pruning, etc.

The STGs can take the advantages of tax concession and other regulatory support, leaving the workers engaged in an unregulated environment. Moreover, big tea planters/ estates encourage the growers of nearby STGs by ensuring purchase of green leaves from them. Tea production involves three different costs - cost of cultivation, manufacturing and social costs. STGs are involved with cultivation only, the manufacturing and social costs (under PLA, 1951) are not coming under cost production. Another advantage enjoying by the growers is the average age of the tea bushes (10 to 20 years); which has higher productivity (up to 3,500 k.g/ha). Small holding plantation is un -

organised nature of work which does not come under the domain of Plantation and Labour Act (PLA), 1951. Out-sourcing to the small holdings by the estates sector has two repercussions. On one hand, it restricts the opportunities for work in the estate sector and on the other, limits the burden of providing to workers compulsory pecuniary and non pecuniary benefits set by the PLA (Das, 2012). Last decade; the price of the green leaf increased to Rs 22/- to Rs 24/- per k.g; it also inspire the local people to cultivate tea on a commercial basis. We now see a clear advantage in the tea sector for small holding.

Establishment of small tea gardens will bring a sustainable improvement in the socio-economic condition in the tea growing areas. Active participation by the local youth in this sector will ensure job satisfaction for them. Increase in their number in the economy would strengthen the backbone of the society and also curb the social unrest in the economy. Tea plantation in small holding bears the fruit for the present as well as for the future generation. Thus small tea plantation belongs to the concept of sustainable development. STGs will be self sustainable and will act as a role model for the future generation in the years to come. The suitable weather, vast hill of Assam for tea cultivation will increase the opportunity of tea cultivation in course of time and will create more employment opportunity and results economic up-liftment of the society. More manufacturing facilities will be set up to help processing of green leaf, improve trade and other logistic services will also help to meet the internal demand and maintain an exportable surplus. Establishment of tea gardens in new areas will improve the local and regional environment. It will help to check soil erosion and destruction of natural vegetation since tea plantations would cover land. These developments in small tea cultivation will also create a platform for new opportunist's entrepreneur's culture in the state.

***Scope of economic independence:***

Today tea industry of India is "of Rs 19000 crore industry and expected to be increase Rs. 33000 crore by the year 2015. It is labour intensive industry, which has second largest employers after Indian Railway. Since the introduction of small tea cultivation in Assam, the growth of number of garden is phenomenon (Fig:1). In the last 25 years around 70000 small tea gardens are established by the local people. It is observed that in every garden 2 people (average) are self employed and 4/5 people are employed by the grower as hired worker ( Saikia,2008).

Tea growing in any scale, either big or small is an enterprise since it encompasses all elements of production viz. land, labour, capital and organization (Taparia, 2003). Many studies (Mwaura and Muku, 2007; Amartunge and Shiratake,2002), has highlighted the fact that small tea enterprises are playing a major role in reduction of poverty, generation of employment etc., more effectively than their large counterparts in many developing and under developed countries. In Assam, the cultivation of tea in small scale is an outcome of the entrepreneurial ability of a group of local youth in the latter part of 1970's (Goswami, 2006). There is a large scope for entrepreneurial involvement as it provides employment, generates income, wealth and act as a key force for economic growth of the region. Tea is a commercial cash crop and has a increasing demand in and outside the country. Farmers have opted for tea cultivation because it has innate potentiality to cover risk like crop failure and other features related with agriculture as Assam is the finest place

of producing tea in the world .Therefore cultivation of tea on small holding can be regarded as the beginning of an Indian entrepreneurship in tea sector.

Category	No. of Workers
Engagement of family member	81792
Additional workers (extra of neighbouring tea estates)	145692
Engagement of sub staff categories	11520
Total direct employment	239004

*Source: Statistical Hand Book Assam, 2006*

Small tea cultivation is an integral part of Tea Industry of Assam. It provides ample avenue for self-employment for the rural educated unemployed youths besides engaging family members directly with the enterprise. It is estimated that about 2.40 lakh people are directly employed in this sector out of which 1.45 lakh is ex-tea garden labour or excess number of workers from the nearby large tea estates, specifically women pluckers (Table : 4).The cultivation itself creates many employment opportunities in the field of manufacturing, supply of garden implements, transportation of green leaf and retailed outlets of agro chemical and manures etc. Tea cultivation in small holding is seen only as a means for providing some additional earnings to the peasantry and, thus absorbing rural surplus labours (Das, 2012). Many ex-tea garden employees, service personnel's and government employees also taken up small tea cultivation because of their personal satisfaction and as a source of steady income in future.

The land used by the STGs may be considered as second grade land for growing tea. They grow tea in ceiling surplus land, waste land, grazing land or government lands which were either underutilized or unutilized. The STGs of Assam has successfully utilized 20 million hectare waste land (Khanikar, 2006). Another important development in this sector is emergence of BLFs. It is an arrangement to process green leaf bought from STGs within a tea cluster. It is a welcoming feature as it creates the marketing point for green leaf produced by the STGs. There are 220 BLFs (TBI, Guwahati, 2009) which produces 130 million kg of tea that accounts for 29 per cent of the total tea production of Assam. On an average, 20-25 workers are working in these factories. The urbanized outlook of tea cultivation, the glamour associated with it, the living standard of the managers of the big tea gardens and facilities enjoyed by them, has attracted the new generation of youths towards tea cultivation. Hence, the cultivation of tea on small holding will bring a new socio-economic revolution in Assam by empowering rural people for the first time and rejuvenating the state's economy.

### **MAJOR CONSTRAINTS:**

Tea small holdings are never expected to assume the mode of dominant producers. They are seen only as a means for providing some additional earnings to the peasantry, and thus absorbing of rural surplus labours (Das, 2012). In Assam tea cultivation on small holding is still in nascent

stage. There are some hindrances for the growth and developments of this sector which include – ownership of land, lack of finance, low price realisation of green leaf, unorganised nature of cultivation, etc. Most of the growers are cultivating tea on Government ceiling land without having formal ownership. The Land Act of Assam restricts the transfer of ownership right to the growers. This restricts the growers to qualify for registration under Tea Board, unable to take the advantages of various schemes of Government, financial intermediaries. Whatever the growth has been taken place in small tea cultivation in Assam, the credit goes to the private initiatives of individual growers. Since, STGs do not possess their own processing unit; and have to sell their produce to the big estates or BLFs. being placed in the situation of dependent subcontractors, tea small holding remain in a stage of disadvantaged. Tea small holding have just become a convenient source for outsourcing by the estate sector, which set price for raw tea leaves. Sometimes these factories simply return raw leaves, citing inferior quality or compel small holders to accept the unremunerative price (Das, 2012). Therefore they are bound to sell their produce at whatever the prices, offered by the estates or the BLFs. the deceleration of the price of green leaf so rapid in recent years that the price offered by the large tea estates /BLFs has come down from Rs 21/k.g ( in August) to Rs.4/k.g (in October),2011. BLFs enter into agreement for green leaf mostly with intermediaries like leaf agents or growers for volume of supply of green leaves. As the STGs are un-organised and un- unionised, they have the little bargaining powers with the factories. Lack of market information, absence of proper storage facilities, transportation problem, etc., ultimately bring down the price of green leaf. Moreover, the Government imposes cess like leaf cess (0.20 paisa/k.g), land cess (Rs.22/k.g) on the growers. Other than, this they have to pay a fine of Rs 200/ bighas if they put the tea under government fellow land. Unregulated growth of this sector in Assam has given rise the problem of price fluctuation of green leaf in the market. Without going through the marketing and economic holding etc. many small tea growers started cultivation of tea in the remote areas of Assam enthusiastically without technical knowledge; which ultimately leads to the uneven development of this sector.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATION**

It is observed that small tea plantation may rebuild the socio-economic structure of the rural indigenous people of Assam. The problems which are highlighted like land ownership problem; can be shorted out by the Government taking example from other states like Arunachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal etc. The only thing needed here is the sincere effort from the Government side and look this small tea gardens a new development initiative for the state.

- If we can solve the land ownership problem in Assam, we can also minimize the problem of finance to some extent of this sector; which is one of the most important factors for the growth of an industry. The institutional finance and financial assistance from Tea Board of India is totally based on land ownership of the cultivator in Assam.
- In case of marketing, the All Assam Small Tea Growers Association (AASTGA) can set up co-operative form of cultivation and a standard for production of green leaf and their price before every tea-growing season. For proper price, Government can come to rescue the small tea grower with a minimum support price concept,

which is applicable with other agricultural products. Regulation such as adoption of a formula for fixing the price of the tea leaf to the STGs would suffice.

- Looking into the technical problems of the small tea growers, the Tea Board of India, Tea Research Authority and corporate tea producers should take the responsibility to train different aspect of tea cultivation to the small tea growers. This will improve the technical knowhow of the cultivators.
- To restrict the unregulated growth of small tea gardens, Tea Board of India or the Government of India should set up a *regulatory authority* to look into the uneven growth of this sector. In a liberal economy, a regulator is must for the proper development of a particular sector, who will guide the development process. Recently, the State Govt proposes the idea of separate Tea Board for STGs to ensure institutional supports for the growers.

## CONCLUSION

The emerging regime of small holding by the growers could be considered a bonus for Indian tea sector. Establishment of small units of production would provide fruitful opportunities for self expression and increasing their material wellbeing of the local rural youths. In Assam, younger generation feel frustrated because they do not have assurance that their education and other skills and talent would be fully utilized. Therefore encouraging these youths in taking up small/ medium level tea cultivation would strengthen the backbone of the rural economy and will also curb social unrest. Economic benefits from the tea industry enjoyed by the British before independence and people from outside the state (Assam) after independence. Native people did not get their due share from the development of tea industry. Tea industry of Assam can be termed as oasis in a desert. The first generation cultivators who have taken up commercial cropping of tea are a radical step towards a new social system in Assam. This will empower the people of Assam with dignity. This silent economic revolution by small tea growers in the rural areas across Assam has helped to tackle unemployment problem apart from using unproductive land in an environment friendly manner. There for support should come from every quarter to sustain this socio economic revolution

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