LIVELIHOOD IN SMALL TEA CULTIVATION: A CASE OF WEST BENGAL IN INDIA
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ABSTRACT

India is the second largest producer as well as the consumer of tea globally. In India a considerable quantity produced by the Small Tea Growers (STG) segment, they account for almost 37% of the total tea production. The Tea Board of India defines ‘STG’ as a person who has a tea plantation area of up to 25 acres, but lion portion of them possess less than 3 acres of plantation. Small tea cultivation provides ample avenues for self-employment generation of educated as well as uneducated youths. The high profitability coupled with the prospect of getting steady income with minimum effort has attracted a large number of traditional farmers in the region. Furthermore, this can be considered as a key force for economic growth of a region. The tea cultivation in small holding which empowering many people in the rural areas is the green revolution of northern part of the Bengal. However, on the contrary, the small tea growers are also confronting a large number of problems because of their scattered nature, lack of organization among grower and some legal pitfalls killing their entrepreneurial capabilities. They are deprived of getting benefit from different schemes of the Government. Due to absence of the factory of their own, they are deprived of the real price of the green leaves. In the study, an effort has been made to shed some light to explore the opportunity of livelihood in small tea cultivation and its importance on the poverty alleviation, employment and empowerment in that particular region of India.

Key Words: empowerment, legal pitfalls, opportunities, self-employment, small tea cultivation.

INTRODUCTION

“If you are cold, tea will warm you;
If you are heated, it will cool you;
If you are depressed, it will cheer you;
If you are excited, it will clam you.”

------- Gladstone

Tea is called as the ‘Queen of Beverage’ and tea is consumed after water. The origin of tea in China is long and complex as well as a controversial issue, for the Chinese has enjoyed tea for millennia. According to legend tea was accidentally discovered by the legendary Chinese emperor and herbalist, Sheh Nung, in 2737BC (D.Mitra, 2010). The discovery of indigenous tea in Assam in 1823 led to the origins of the tea industry in India. However, the Calcutta Agricultural Society differs from the above opinion (G. Banerjee, S. Banerjee 2009). Tea cultivation is confined only to certain specific regions of the world due to specific requirements of climate and soil. Majority of the tea producing countries are located in Asia continent where China, India, Sri Lanka are the major producers of tea.
India is the largest producer and consumer of tea in the world and the tea industry provides employment for more than 2.5 million farmers and workers. In India, tea industry is one of the oldest agro-based well organized industries. Traditionally one of the important and profitable industries contributes big amount to the national income. In the global tea market China, India, Kenya, and Sri Lanka are the major producers and also play a major role as exporters of tea.

In India, tea industry is one of the mature and oldest agro-based well organized industries. Till date, it is bearing its heritage. Tea industry in India comprises of two components – 1. Set tea estates; and 2. Small tea growers; Set tea estates or Estate Gardens are those tea gardens having an area of plantation beyond 10.12 hectares or 25 acres of land also having factory of their own within the premises of plantation. On the other hand, Small tea growers means those having an area of plantation within 10.12 hectares or 25 acres of land (Tea Board of India); STGs don’t possess its own factory for processing tea from the leaves and they have to depend on the bought leaf factories (BLFs) and set garden factories. Small tea growers’ contribution in India’s total made tea production is 33.85% (2015-2016).

ORIGIN AND GROWTH OF SMALL TEA PLANTATION

The concept of small tea cultivation came into existence when Kenya (1950’s) had decided to produce tea for export. The experiment taken by Kenya (1950’s) succeeded and a modern trend of small tea holders or growers arose in developing and developed countries to produce cash crop like tea. Since then there has been a steady shift in tea cultivation from big plantation to small holdings. But in India the emergence of Small Tea Plantations is of very recent. This is because whatever suitable land was available for tea cultivation was already occupied by the Large Tea Plantations (LTPs) in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. These can be called the traditional areas of tea cultivation whereas Small Tea Plantations have emerged beyond the traditional tracts of tea cultivation (Hannan Abdul 2006). Though, the Small Tea Plantations emerged in early 1960s in India, their concentration was mainly found in South Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka. It is only in late 1980s or early 1990s their spread confined in the two leading tea producing states of Northern India in Region and West Bengal. There are 1,67,353 small tea in India and 30,000 in North Bengal.

Table 1: Tea Industry in India at a glance (2014-15)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of gardens</th>
<th>Area under production (in hectare)</th>
<th>Total production ( million k.g)</th>
<th>Employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small Tea Garden</td>
<td>167353</td>
<td>1.70 lakh</td>
<td>394.50 mkg</td>
<td>1 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Estates</td>
<td>1686</td>
<td>4.18 lakh</td>
<td>1197.18 mkg</td>
<td>2.3 million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Combination of Tea Board of India and other sources.

REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE

Several studies have been conducted on the various aspects of tea industry by the scholars. These are mainly on industrial relations, financial and geographical aspects of the tea industry. A limited effort has been made on small tea growers. Here are some review of those studies:

Percival Griffiths (1967) on “The History of Indian Tea Industry” described a limited to the historical growth of Indian Tea industry and its different aspects like production, labor recruitment, ownership, etc. In his study there was no separate discussion about the Industrial Relation and Productivity.
Dr. Biswas Debasish and Roy Nirmal Chandra (2013) “Problems and Prospects of small tea growers in India” states that the STGs is facing multidimensional problems including Financial, Marketing, Transportation, Argo-technical, etc. also suggested that the Tea board should look into the matters relating to the problems of STGs.


Kaberi Borah, Dr. Ashim Kr Das (2015), in their study “Growth of Small Tea Cultivation and Economic Independence of the Indigenous People of Assam”. The paper attempted to explore the opportunity of tea entrepreneurship and its socio-economic importance in the state. Further they find out the major constraints and the policy recommendations.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

From the extensive review of the existing literature the following objectives have been framed:

- To showcase the importance of small tea cultivation on the poverty alleviation and generation of employment opportunity.
- To explore the various challenges of small holding tea entrepreneurship of the region.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The present study is descriptive in nature and solely based on secondary sources of data. Small tea cultivation as in the form of entrepreneurship in the northern region of West Bengal has been examined in three dimensions: 1. Importance of small tea cultivation, 2. Entrepreneurship and employment opportunities in small tea cultivation, 3. Constrain of the small tea cultivation in the North Bengal region. Finally, give some policy recommendations.

I. IMPORTANCE OF THE SMALL TEA CULTIVATION

The humble green leaf, the source of our daily morning cuppa, is changing the lives of many inhabitants’ of North Bengal in different ways:

Firstly, The Small Tea growers of this region were traditional framer and cultivated paddy, potato, pineapple, jute, etc. These farmers are aware of the micro ecological and other environmental conditions of the area. This can be useful in carrying out new experiments like Small Tea Plantations in the region. Cultivation of tea in small form provide employment opportunities to the unskilled manual workers throughout the year. Villages become self-sufficient, as owners of small land holdings too are able to raise tea plants on their fields. There is an existence of mixed farming in the region as the small growers also practice paddy cultivation in low-lying areas. Female work force in the Small Tea Plantations is an added advantage to the family income of workers (Hannan Abdul 2006). School and college goers from the poor farmer family of this region are also engaging in the process.

Secondly, the Small Tea Plantations encourage the emergence of BLFs in the region. These BLFs are supplied green leafs by the small growers. The processing, packaging, and management in these BLFs also generate huge amount of employment. With these BLFs the ancillary activities like sale, purchase and use of fertilizer, pesticides, essential day-to-day needs, transportation facilities services at Hats

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(rural market centers) etc. are also developed in the rural areas, which provide employment to a sizeable number of workers in the region. These multiplier effects in the region have immense impact on the household economy in the study area and peoples participation at the grass-root level. Today, Small Tea Plantations can be considered as non-enclave economy, as ownership pattern, production structures, labor employment, and above all social relations as these exist there in villages is certainly different than traditional estate gardens. The land owning class and laborers engaged in Small Tea Plantation participate common social gathering and festivals in the villages and share distresses of market fluctuations. (Hannan Abdul 2006). Pressures from the money lender has reduced of the STGs and earnings have been increased as a result of that suicidal tendencies have been eroded.

II. ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES IN SMALL TEA CULTIVATION

Entrepreneurship in small tea cultivation
Entrepreneur is an economic agent who plays an important role in the economic development of country. For the purpose of economic development, establishment of small business or small manufacturing units are important in a developing country like India. It would provide opportunities for the unemployed youth for their self-expression. It requires low capital and low level of barriers to entry and even less competition. In the northern part of the Bengal, besides unemployment the economy is depriving many other problems like poverty, illiteracy, poor health, etc. To overcome these unsolved problems tea cultivation in small form is relevant.

Cultivation of tea in small scale is said to be the outcome of the entrepreneurial ability of a group of local youth in the latter part of 1970’s (Goswami, M. 2006). The private initiatives taken up by small teagrowers shall cultivate the spirit of entrepreneurship. Encouraging the youths in taking up small/medium level tea cultivation would strengthen the backbone of the rural economy as well as curb social unrest in the economy (Barker, 2007).

Most of Small Tea Plantations in this region are owned by the local people who were farmers and cultivated pineapple, paddy, potato, etc. These farmers are aware of the micro ecological and other environmental conditions of the area, which can be useful in carrying out new experiments like Small Tea Plantations in the region. Moreover, they also provide employment opportunities to the unskilled manual workers throughout the year. Villages become self-sufficient, as owners of small land holdings too are able to raise tea plants on their fields. There is an existence of mixed farming in the region as the small growers also practice paddy cultivation in low-lying areas.

Source of income and employment to the rural mass

Small tea cultivation provides ample avenue for self-employment for the rural educated unemployed youths besides engaging family labors (Barua B.P, 2011). 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. Today, the rural unemployment has almost ended in most of the region as tea cultivation on small holding gave the people avenue to earn livelihood. In the last 15 years, around 50000 small tea gardens have come up in this region by the local people. Almost in every garden, 3 or 4 people are self-employed and 4 or 5 people are employed by the grower in their garden and other related activities. Female workforce in the Small Tea Plantations is an added advantage to the family income of workers.
Establishment of bought leaf factory (BLF)

BLF is an arrangement to manufacture tea bought from only 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 (2009 statistics) which produces around 30 per cent of the total tea production of region. 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, attracted the new generation of region towards tea cultivation. Hence, the cultivation of tea on small holding is the green revolution of the region which empowering many people for the first time and rejuvenating of the economy.

III. MAJOR CONSTRAINTS OF SMALL TEA PLANTATIONS

Presently the Small Tea Growers of this region is going through a variety of hurdles, these are discussed below:

Technical know-how

Comparatively the technical know-how is low among the small tea growers in India. Recently most of the tea importing country denied to import tea from India due to several issues that are relates to blanket use chemical, fertilizer, etc. Tea is a perennial crop and the leaf is plucked almost thorough out the year. It has seasonal occurrence of pest and diseases, additional water requirement, scientific ways of pruning, plucking and bush management, optimal use of manure and fertilizer, leaf procurement and proper shading, etc. All these activities require extensive farming knowledge and STGs are lacking all such skills. It has a serious implication on production, quality management, and cost of production and profit margin of a grower. It is expected that within two- three years the Indian tea industries strong pillar i.e. STGs will be in a situation of turmoil due to technical know-how. It is suggested that further research is needed to evolve region-specific guidelines on agricultural practices and other relevant factors involves with small tea cultivation. The small growers of this region also faced difficulties in the management of the plantations, since there was no concept of Small Tea Plantations in the historical past, so the present system of technology, modes of cultivation, labor recruitment, processing, marketing, land policy, etc.

Raising cost of production

The tea plants have to feed and nurtured well in the form of manure, irrigation, spraying foliar, control of pest and disease, and so on almost all over the year. The chemical pest control, manure are specific and specialized nature. These days the prices of such specialist and specific chemicals and fertilizers are much high. Arranging for irrigation is another costly dimension in this region. As it is labor intensive in nature round the year expert labor is also required. Consequently, cultivation of the small tea is costly affair.

This is interesting to note that the price level of the tea leave is in decreasing trend on the other hand the cost of production is on increasing. Regarding the price of chemical fertilizer issues the action of the appropriate governments’s is passive. If this trend of cost and price remain unchanged, the STGs will be confronted on a question of existence in the future.
The production cost per kilogram of the green leaf has presented here - the puckers have to pay Rs.3 to Rs.4 per kilogram, the collectors or middlemen’s share Rs.1.50 to Rs.2, for manure and pesticides Rs.2 to Rs.2.50 per kilogram and other associated cost is around Rs.2, including all the cost varied Rs.10 to Rs.12 per kilogram of green leaf in this region (Roy Nirmal Chandra, 2016).

Recognitions of government

To avail many benefit schemes, STGs must have recognition of Tea Board of India (TBI). To get recognition with TBI, a STG from West Bengal must produce a No Objection Certificate (NOC) issued by the State Govt.

But West Bengal Government provided NOC to STGs established before 30th June 2001 only. Naturally, over 1, 00,000 plantations developed afterward were deprived of all benefits; even bank loans. (The Economics Times, July 4th, 2015). This NOC system is not there in Tamil Nadu or Kerala. Some of the official of TBI stated that regarding the NOC issue that it is as per the West Bengal governments request to TBI not to recognize any STG without this land related NOC as land is a state subject.

Financial problems

Whatever growth the small tea cultivation has, it entirely depends upon private initiative of individual growers. Institutional finance to this sector is not entertaining. This problem is due to lack of ownership of land, non-registration of tea gardens etc. Lack of these documents, the institutional finance and help from Tea Board of India is not enjoyed by the small tea growers, which hinder the growth of this sector.

Marketing of green leaf

Green leaf is a perishable product which needs to be processed within twelve hours of plucking. In the absence of proper marketing channel of Greenleaf, the small tea sector has to depend on the buyers, like big tea garden owners, BLFs, etc. Recently, some agents are coming as new intermediary between tea growers and factory owners. Lack of market information, absence of proper storage facilities, transportation problem etc. ultimately bring down the price of green leaf.

CONCLUSION

The present conditions of the small tea growers in West Bengal due to the absence operational infrastructure more over regulatory supports have to depend on the variety of external factors. The erratic nature of rainfall in the recent years and lack of irrigation facilities affect the yield in their plantations. On the other hand, the absence of regulations on price front creates anxiety to sell their produces.

The training supports are required in the areas of pesticide residue and overuse of fertilizers, knowhow of growing tea, shade trees, etc. because at present the question is being raised on the quality of tea plucked in the small tea gardens. It is often reported that, the small growers do not use fertilizers and pesticides rationally, largely because of lack of knowledge. The buyers at the international as well as national markets are now quality conscious, look for organic products and test the presence of residuals of fertilizers and pesticides.
The paramount emphasis should be given on the formation of the Self Help Groups. The schemes of the Tea Board of India are confined only to the registered growers and only a small fraction of the small growers in West Bengal are registered with the Tea Board. Tea Board has provisions of subsidy for setting up of leaf collection centers, purchase of weighting scales, leaf carrying bags, plastic crates, purchase of transport vehicles, and purchase of field inputs like fertilizers, plant protection chemicals, pruning machines, etc. Moreover, relaxation of land holding policy should be done by the state government of West Bengal.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The small tea growers of North Bengal are a major economic force within the tea industry. Now the existence question came into light of the small tea growers. So to protect and promote them the following policy may be considered.

1. Fertilizer should be easily available at cheaper price. Guideline should be attached with the fertilizer packet about the correct dose and method of application. Chemical and other fertilizer should meet the standard criteria of quality.
2. Irrigation facility and other infrastructural aspects should be developed so that small tea growers might not face any problem related to the cultivation.
3. Field level crops insurance should be incorporated in order to minimize risk of the STGs.
4. By providing No Objection Certificate (NOC) the small tea growers should be registered under the Tea Board of India.
5. The Tea Board and other agencies should organize the training program in order to enhance the technical skills and scientific way of cultivation.
6. The STGs should be aware to be in the organized form, i.e. Self-help group (SHG) to protect them self.
7. More research should be done to evolve disease resistant varieties and good quality of plant only for the STGs.
8. The appropriate authority should act as an arbitrator to mitigate the tussle on price of green leaf issues between the STGs and BLFs.

**REFERENCES**


