



Emergence And Growing Potentiality Of Small Tea Cultivators Towards Employment Generation In Assam

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Abstract

This paper discusses the emergence and growing potentiality of the small tea cultivators in Assam towards employment generation. The tea industry in Assam has traditionally been dominated by large tea estates, but in recent years, small tea growers have emerged as a significant force in the sector. These small growers, often located in remote and underdeveloped regions, have been able to leverage modern technology and better cultivation practices to increase their yields and quality. As a result, they are contributing significantly to the state's tea production and employment generation. This study examines the factors driving the growth of small tea cultivators in Assam and the challenges they face. It also analyzes the potential of this sector to provide livelihoods for a large number of people in the region and contribute to the state's economic development.

Keywords: Small tea growers, development, plantation

Introduction:

The Indian tea industry is around 180 years old and tea is an important trading commodity in India. The industry has grown to own many global tea brands and has grown into one of the most technically equipped tea industries in the world. There are 16 tea-producing states, including West Bengal, Assam, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu, contributing almost 96% of the total tea produced in the country. Teas originating in Darjeeling, Nilgiris, and Assam are renowned for their unique quality.

Assam produces approximately 700 million kg of tea annually, which contributes to around 55 percent of India's total tea production. Additionally, the annual foreign exchange earnings for the state are estimated to be worth around Rs 3,000 crores. Assam's economy continues to be predominantly agricultural, and the agricultural sector employs more than 50% of the rural population. Tea is considered to be one of the main agricultural products of the state and is renowned around the world for its aromatic qualities. The tea sector contributes more than 25% of the state's gross domestic product. It is a labor-intensive industry and highly dependent on a large workforce.

The Small Tea Cultivators are a significant part of the tea production system. Small-scale tea cultivation is a relatively new development in the Indian tea industry. It is associated with the homestead tea garden and agro-based farming. The small tea cultivators are the owner and workers of their small tea gardens. Because of its relatively recent history, the literature on Assam's small tea-growing industry is fairly limited. The tea industry has been playing an indispensable role in the state economy with an extensive contribution from these cultivators.

The following table represents the Small Tea Growers in Assam and other tea-producing states of India enumerated till 31.03.21-

Table 1- Number of identified Small Tea Growers and Area of Cultivation

Sl. No.	State	No. of Small Tea Growers identified	Area (Ha)
1	Assam	118754	110837
2	Meghalaya	777	1027.34
3	Tripura	2886	1391
4	West Bengal & Bihar	34808	26655.87
5	Himachal Pradesh	1166	615.21
6	Uttarakhand	1448	1261.66
7	Mizoram	644	366
8	Arunachal Pradesh	3526	7852
9	Nagaland	3335	8020
10	Manipur	484	347
11	Tamil Nadu	46997	34427.38
12	Kerala	7921	5297
13	Total	222746	198098.36

Source- Tea Board of India, Annual Report, 2020-21

Thus, from the above table, it is observed that Assam has got the highest number of Small Tea Growers, and it alone produces more than half of the total tea production in India.

Growing Potentiality of the Small Tea Cultivators in Assam

The tea industry of Assam was initially colonial, with large-scale plantations and no local participation. Additionally, this was only permitted among the powerful classes and was not open to the general populace. The situation remained the same after independence; due to some legislation, Assamese natives were denied access to this outstanding entrepreneurial spirit. No one was allowed to plant tea on any property unless the Tea Board of India granted them permission in writing. Finally, in 1978, all restrictions were removed by the governments of India and Assam and the homestead tea cultivation process started to spread in Assam because of the prominent role played by Sri Soneswar Bora, the honorable Minister of Agriculture of Assam. He conceptualized the idea of cultivation of tea in homestead gardens by deploying land along with other crops and selling the green leaf to the existing big factories to supplement the family income. He helped and incentivized the growth of homestead tea gardens in rural and urban areas of Assam. He intended to utilize the available uncultivated land and attract the young generation to the agricultural sector and thereby solving the problem of unemployment. Therefore, he is known as the 'Father' of Small Tea Growers in Assam.

The small tea cultivation first started in the Golaghat district of Assam in 1986. The unemployment problem was the reason behind the popularisation of tea cultivation in smallholdings in Assam. Such growers have taken the advantage of appropriate weather for tea cultivation, suitable land, and other infrastructural prerequisites that were easily available and accessible in Assam. Here, it is to be noted that, although Assam had favorable weather conditions, suitable land, and other infrastructure facilities for tea cultivation, but initially, the common farmers couldn't have thought of growing tea on their own, due to a lack of necessary skills and knowledge required. Therefore, the task of examining the viability of growing tea on a small scale and developing a project on it was

given to the Assam Agricultural University by the then-ruling Janata Government. A group of farmers from the Golaghat and Sivasagar districts started growing tea in the highlands on plots ranging from 0.13 to 3.0 ha with the support of the government. However, government patronage also vanished after the Janata government was overthrown. Both social and financial obstacles had to be overcome by the pioneers.

At that point, the Assam Agricultural University's Department of Tea Husbandry & Technology stepped forward and began offering those cultivators technical advice. The Assam Agricultural University is the first institute to have a department of Tea Husbandry and Technology that provides formal education on tea, which gives it a special distinction. This department came into existence in the year 1968 to provide a completely new curriculum of customized multi-disciplinary courses of study. It was created in collaboration with the Assam Government, the Tea Board of India, and various Tea Producers' Associations. To meet the needs of India's leading agro-based tea industry, which has been playing a significant role in the national economy, Assam Agricultural University has launched a new chapter since 1968.

There were some social changes following the end of the Assam movement in 1985, and many educated young people from various districts of Upper Assam expressed interest in the tea industry. Moreover, the struggling growers started going to the department for seeking advice. Many young people became involved in this new agrarian movement, not voluntarily, but by chance, and went on to succeed as successful tea entrepreneurs. Assam's tea industry has completely turned around as a result of the adoption of the crop by thousands of small farmers. The establishment of the "All Assam Small Tea Growers Association" in 1987 marked a turning point for the expansion of small-scale tea cultivation in the State. Since then, the Small Growers' Association and the Assam Agricultural University have collaborated to promote tea in the small sector. Small Tea Growers' Advisory Programme (STAP), formerly known as Tea Advisory Cell, was established in 1991. The Assam Agricultural University's Small Tea Growers Advisory Program has had a significant impact by offering small tea growers not only technical advice but also by acting as a focal point for promoting small-scale tea cultivation among farmers.

It has been discovered that the Small Tea Growers are contributing their potency towards accelerating the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the state and have bumped up its economic development. The contribution of small tea cultivators to tea production at the national level too is growing significantly and the production share is projected to be 50.29% in the year 2020–21. It is a very encouraging and commendable happening in the present economic history of Assam that the unemployed educated youth have come forward and planted tea bushes in their small landholdings.

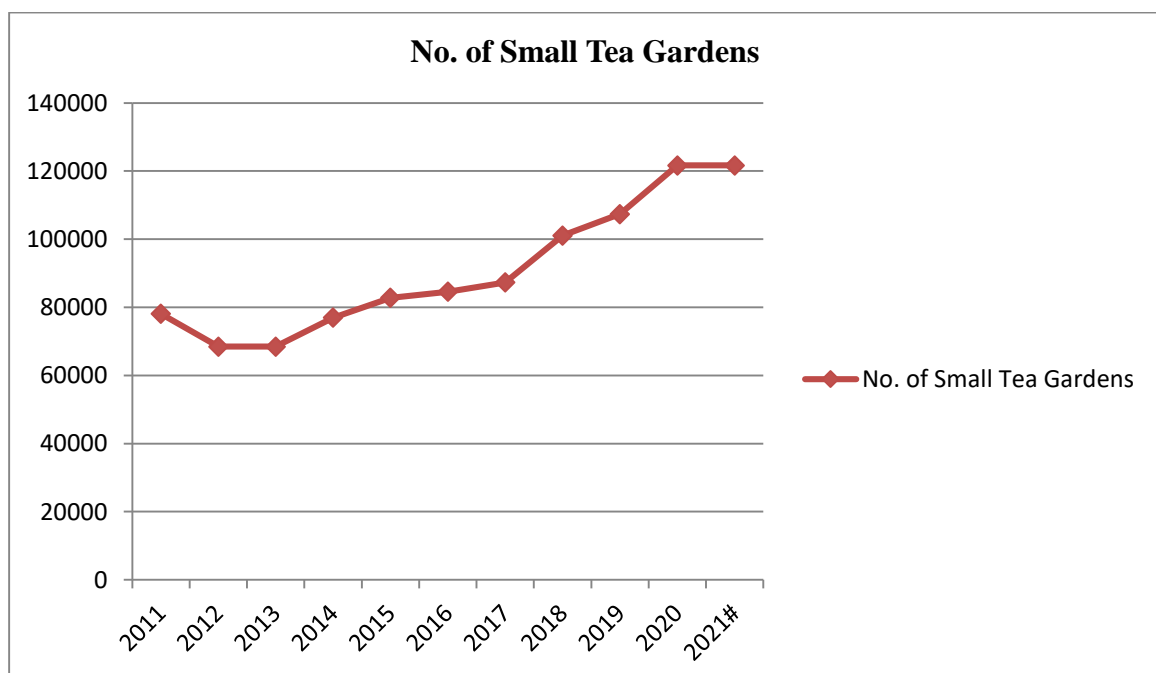
The table below shows the growth of Small Tea Cultivation in Assam since 2011 with the available data-

Table 2: Growth of Small Tea Cultivation in Assam

Year	Small tea growers (upto 10.12 hect.)		
	No. of Gardens	Area (in ha.)	Production (in '000 kg)
1	2	3	4
2011	78091	88674	-
2012	68459	88674	-
2013	68459	88674	-
2014	76949	71871	144254
2015	82805	83880	139491
2016	84577	78203	182360
2017	87318	81754.51	187360
2018	101085	105291	304490
2019	107371	104965	321410
2020	121675	114801	285190
2021#	121675	114801	177730

#Upto August '2021; *Provisional

Source: Statistical Handbook of Assam, (Years-2011 to 2021)

Figure 1: Line graph showing the number of Small Tea Gardens

From the above table and figure, it can be observed that the number of small tea gardens has been growing in an increasing trend, especially, over the last five years.

Currently, the small tea growers are spread in almost all the districts of Assam. However, most of the small tea gardens are located in five upper Assam districts viz. Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Charaideo, Sivasagar, Jorhat, and Golaghat. This is evident from Table 3 below, the data for which was compiled from the Statistical Handbook of Assam (2021). It shows the district-wise distribution of small tea growers registered with the Tea Board of India in Assam (Upto 31/03/2021).

Sl. No.	Name of the District	No. of Small Tea Growers
1	Kokrajhar	466
2	Dhubri	81
3	Goalpara	221
4	Barpeta	Nil
5	Morigaon	2
6	Nagaon	2190
7	Sonitpur	3877
8	Lakhimpur	3006
9	Dhemaji	1669
10	Tinsukia	23511
11	Dibrugarh	26724
12	Sivasagar	4952
13	Jorhat	8713
14	Golaghat	13578
15	Karbi Anglong (East+West)	2672
16	Dima Hasao	4
17	Cachar	204
18	Karimganj	30
19	Hailakandi	9
20	Bongaigaon	581
21	Chirang	30
22	Kamrup (R+M)	2
23	Nalbari	Nil
24	Baksa	341
25	Darrang	32
26	Udalguri	7519
27	Biswanath	10739
28	Charaideo	10522
29	Hojai	Nil

30	Majuli	Nil
31	South Salmara	Nil

Source: *Statistical Handbook of Assam, 2021*

Thus, we can observe that the number of Small Tea Growers is highest in the district of Dibrugarh, which is the Tea City of India, with 26,724 growers. It is followed by the Tinsukia district with 23,511 growers. From the middle Assam, Biswanath district (then district) has the highest number of Small Tea Growers which counts for 10,739. And from lower Assam, the district of Udalguri has 7,519 growers with small landholding, which is the highest, as of the year 2021 (Upto 31st March).

Small Tea Cultivation in the process of Employment Generation

The socioeconomic environment of rural Assam has changed as a result of the expansion of small-scale tea cultivation. Small-scale tea production has created a vast array of business opportunities and offered many people decent employment. During the past three decades, Assam has been going through a social revolution in the area of small-scale tea production. Because Assam is one of the best regions in the world for producing tea, the farmers made this deliberate decision. The demand for tea as a commercial cash crop is rising both domestically and internationally. In Assam, natural elements like the soil and climate are very suited for growing tea. The biggest advantages for local entrepreneurs are the availability of infrastructure such as factories for processing tea, auction markets for made tea, land available for tea production, inexpensive labor within and around tea growing regions, technical and other requisite technological know-how, and incentives that the government offers for small tea cultivation. Many youngsters without jobs in rural areas are strongly encouraged by these prospects to start growing tea on small plots of land.

Tea cultivation is a family-run business when it is done on small holdings. The garden is actively maintained by family members; these gardens only use seasonal laborers on a temporary basis. Tea can be grown on small holdings with very little initial investment because only the plantation is needed. Assam frequently experiences crop failure in the agricultural sector due to factors like inadequate irrigation, flooding, outdated production technology, etc. However, crop failure in the tea industry is sporadically caused by pest attacks and natural disasters.

The emerging phenomenon of growers having smaller holdings could be viewed as a benefit for the Indian tea industry. The establishment of small production facilities would give the local rural youth fruitful opportunities for self-expression and improve their material well-being. Younger generations in Assam experience frustration because they lack confidence that their education, as well as their other skills and talents, will be fully implemented. Therefore, encouraging these young people to engage in small- to medium-scale tea production will strengthen the foundation of the rural economy and reduce social unrest.

Difficulties encountered by Small Tea Cultivators in Assam

In order to survive as a small operator in any sector of industry, there are many obstacles to overcome. This is true as well for the small tea-growing sector. Despite playing a significant role in Assam's economy today, the small tea plantation sector has its fair share of difficulties. Small Tea Cultivators face various issues and challenges in the process of tea production. One of the major difficulties that they deal with is that of the lack of availability of laborers. Due to their size, the small tea gardens are exempted from the Plantation Labour Act's provisions. Because of resource constraints, they are unable to offer the hired laborers housing and all the amenities afforded by the large tea estates. Yet, due to the scale of the plantation, the growers engage laborers.

Another primary issue associated with it is the labor price's frequent fluctuations. The Small Tea Growers do not agree with the laborers' demand for daily wages. In this case, the fact that green tea leaf prices fluctuate seasonally is noteworthy. This sector's uncontrolled growth in Assam has generated the problem of green leaf market price volatility. The cultivators have difficulties selling green leaves for fair prices. The price rate increases to 17 to 25 rupees from March to August. After October and November, the price ranges between 7 and 15 rupees. Hence, with the price of tea leaves shifting as much as they do, the desire for a high wage is not justifiable.

The presence of middlemen is another issue. The green leaf must be processed within twelve hours of being harvested because it is a perishable product. The small tea industry must rely on customers, such as large tea garden owners, Bought Leaf Factories, etc., given the absence of an effective marketing channel for green leaf. Presently, some new brokers have arrived to serve as a bridge between tea factory owners and tea growers. The price of green leaves eventually drops due to a lack of market information, inadequate storage facilities, transportation issues, etc. Several Small Tea Growers began growing tea in the secluded regions of Assam without first going through the marketing and economic holding processes, which ultimately results in the unequal development of this industry. The majority of producers cultivate tea on government or ceiling lands without a legal claim to the property. The land Act of Assam prohibits the transfer of ownership authority to tea planters. The small tea growers in Assam are quite concerned about it. Also, since there are many smaller tea growers in the present times, the production is likewise of varying quality. Setting a standard price for the production of small tea plantations becomes exceedingly challenging.

It has also been discovered that the majority of small tea growers lack the necessary technical skills or expertise in tea cultivation. These untrained farmers are having difficulties in areas like pest control, manuring, darning, etc., which are crucial skills for the expansion and development of this industry. The Tea Board of India, corporate tea producers, and the Tea Research Authority should undertake responsibility for providing small tea growers with training on several aspects of tea cultivation in order to address their technical issues. The farmers' technical knowledge will increase as a result.

Another problem is that of low productivity in tea cultivation. There are various factors that affect the productivity of tea cultivation, some of which includes agro-climatic conditions, proper use of inputs, soil suitability, the efficiency of labor force skill, planting material quality, bush population, cultural practices, management effectiveness, appropriate plucking, and trimming circle, etc. Yet, the majority of Assam's small tea growers had begun planting tea in a reckless method. As a consequence, these gardens are underproductive.

The small-scale tea industry's growth is totally dependent on the initiative of individual producers. There is very little institutional funding for this industry. Small tea growers do not have access to institutional financing and assistance from the Tea Board of India, which are barriers to the sector's expansion along with a lack of land ownership, non-registration of tea gardens, etc. The producers are also compelled to develop plans for irrigation infrastructure because of the recent irregular nature of rainfall, especially during the Non-monsoon period. Yet, it is not cost-effective to build provisions for irrigation infrastructure given the size of the holding.

Conclusion

Despite facing significant challenges in the areas of finance, marketing, technical management, education, etc., small tea growers are assisting the Assam government in addressing the state's unemployment issues. One of the most important developments at the beginning of the 21st century was small-scale tea cultivation. The initiation of small-scale tea cultivation had a favorable effect on Assam's rural economy. It has changed rural Assam's socioeconomic environment, particularly the occupational structure. In addition to providing the opportunity for self-employment, small-scale tea cultivation has established a wide range of business opportunities, giving many stakeholders stable employment. In fact, the small tea cultivators in rural Assam have been leading a silent economic revolution by making efficient use of idle land in an eco-friendly manner, along

with reducing unemployment. So, to maintain this socio-economic revolution, support should come from all sides.

If the government takes adequate action to optimize the current procedures for leasing and land allocation, authorizing financial grants from financial institutions, reducing the rate of interest at least for the early years of tea cultivation, providing power subsidies, tax exemptions, etc., the small tea growers would continue to thrive at a faster rate. Moreover, tea growers must abandon traditional practices of cultivation and adopt scientific techniques of tea production for their progress.

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