

# SUSTAINABILITY OF SMALL TEA GROWERS: A STUDY OF THE NORTH BENGAL REGION

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## Abstract

Tea traditionally was a product from the large plantations. But, recently these big tea estates suffered from various problems like low productivity, rising input costs, uneconomic age profile of tea bushes leading to the decline of the industry and drastic expansion of the small tea growers. The present study focuses on how small tea growers operate in the region of North Bengal and their role towards restoring the conditions of the tea industry in the region. Though the number of small tea growers in the region is rising, their total production is fairly low both in terms of quantity and especially quality. They constitute an unorganized sector and are deprived of various benefits that the tea estates enjoyed. They are exposed to massive volatility in the green leaf market. It seems that only through an upward shift of the small tea growers in the value chain that they can sustain themselves both economically and socially.

**Index Terms:** STGs, BLFs, sustainability, productivity, consumption, exports.

## Introduction

Tea or “Chai” (as it is commonly called) is probably one of the most widely consumed beverages in the world and is accepted and acclaimed everywhere because of its zero alcohol content, stimulating effect and aroma. Many types like black, green, orange, flavoured, golden etc. grades of tea are available in the market. Black and green teas are only products obtained on a large scale from the tea bush. Tea can be placed both under agriculture as well as industry. It involves both agricultural and industrial operations. Agricultural operations like cultivation, plucking, manuring, pest control help in growing the tea. The final product of tea comes through various processing and manufacturing stages like withering rolling, fermenting, drying, weighing sorting, cutting, packaging and transportation which gives it a shape of an industry. Tea has occupied an important place in the Indian economy with respect to production, consumption and exports for several decades. In addition to these, the tea industry holds a place of importance in the national economy of India as an earner of foreign exchange, contributing to total revenue, providing gainful employment to a large number of people and being a supporter of allied activities.

India was the leader in the production and consumption of tea till 2005 but at present the scenario is a little different. India occupies the second position in production of tea next to China globally. The major tea producing regions in India are Assam, West Bengal, Tamilnadu and Kerala. In West Bengal tea is mainly produced in the northern half, i.e in the hills of Darjeeling, the Dooars of Jalpaiguri and the Terai region. Tea from these regions was traditionally a product from the large plantations also known as estates. But recently these big tea estates suffered from low productivity, rising input costs, low level of labour input, change of ownership, uneconomic age profile of tea bushes, and social issues related to low wages, health and safety of the tea workers. All these had contributed to the decline of the industry. Many tea estates were closed down or abandoned which affected workers and resulted in the drastic expansion of the small tea growers. Against this backdrop, the present study is an attempt to explore how far the small tea growers could sustain themselves and

operate effectively towards restoring the conditions of the tea industry concentrated in the Northern half of Bengal.

### **Literature Survey**

The small tea growers (STGs) in India were earlier confined to Tamil Nadu, but of late have remarkably increased in West Bengal and Assam in terms of acreage and production. But still there are not enough studies on STGs especially in the region of North Bengal. Bhowmick (1989) made a comprehensive study on small holders and co-operative tea factories on the emergence of small tea growers in India. Hannan (2007) tried to understand the policy initiatives meant for the tea growing sector in general and the STGs in particular adopted by Tea Board and Governments at different levels. He argued that the existing policies were either meant for the big plantations or it is not reaching the small tea growers and hence there is no improvement in the conditions of the small growers. Thapa (2012) analyzed the human development status in terms of education, health and basic amenities of the tea plantation workers classified as permanent, casual, self employed and small growers. She observed that permanent workers inspite of having relatively better employment status than casual and small growers, their asset ownership position and hence their standard of living was relatively poorer than small growers. Hannan (2013) analyzed the changing structure of the size of holdings in tea plantations over time and examined the effectiveness of new organizational innovations like bought leaf factories (BLFs), primary producing societies (SHGs) in solving problems associated with small tea growers. Hazarika and Borah (2013) examined the prospects of small tea cultivation as a source of self employment in Assam. Biswas (2015) has highlighted the condition of the small tea growers in India and West Bengal in particular.

Unlike the above studies the present study focuses on the factors that has lead to the growth of small tea growers in North Bengal, the conditions under which they operate, and how far they have been successful in maintaining balance with the tea estates that existed in the region.

### **Changing Market Scenario for Indian tea**

The market for Indian tea (Black, Green and Instant) had been changing in the post liberalization period. It is observed that total production of tea had been generally increasing with two dips- one between 1998- 1999 and the other between 2001-2002 (Tea Board Statistics). This period reflected the inception of the crisis which in a way challenged the “Plantation Model Economy”, and retarded the growth of production. There was a paradigm shift from the big tea estates to the small tea growers. The change in production is more prominent in case of the small tea growers in relation to the big tea estates and their significant contribution to total production of tea during the period 2003 to 2007 also corroborated the fact. After this, like world tea production, Indian tea production continued to increase excepting for 2010 & 2015, when tea production in India turned down. During the ten year period, 2005 to 2015 the production of tea in India increased nearly by 26 percent. Domestic consumption of tea is also found to be consistently rising over the decade reflecting the fact that tea continues to be the most favourite drink for the Indians. Interestingly, the percent increase in consumption over the decade was near to 50 %. However, the rate of increase had gradually slowed down over the years. On the other hand, exports of tea in the economy demonstrated no systematic trend. Unlike increase in production and consumption, percentage increase in exports of tea was far less over the decade under consideration. A similar picture is observed in world exports of tea as well. Over the years, the Indian tea industry experienced a shift in the proportion of exports to domestic consumption of the total tea produced in the country with domestic consumption rising far more than exports. However, the proportion became almost constant after 2011, implying that the increase in consumption was at par with increase in exports. With regards to the demand and supply of Indian tea, market matching did not exist. It is true that the increase in consumption over the ten years period was far more than that of increase in production over the same period. However, at each point of time, absolute total production exceeded absolute total consumption. Added to this, the marketable surplus could not fully be exported to other countries. The Indian tea market reflects lack of effective demand from abroad.

The pertinent question that arises here is that whether the small tea growers of North Bengal (henceforth NB) contributed to the changing tea market of the economy.

The basic objectives of the study is to appraise

- the growth of small tea growers vis-a vis large estates in NB region in terms of change in production ,size of holdings and productivity.
- problems faced by STGs
- how far they could cater to world market (exports)

In a way, the study looks into the sustainability of small tea growers in North Bengal region from two different perspectives, viz. economic sustainability and social sustainability. Profit or income of the small growers has been considered as the economic indicator of sustainability. Overall employment in general and female employment in particular has been taken as the indicator of social sustainability. Based on these two indicators, two hypotheses have been designed.

- The STGs in NB cannot compete with the big estates in terms of size, production and hence profit.
- The STGs do not help in generating continuous employment.

### Data and Methodology

The study is a descriptive one and uses mostly secondary data from the Tea Board Statistics supported by little primary survey information. The approach used is deductive reasoning. Initially, existing theory relevant to the study is referred to; based on it two hypotheses has been considered. The observations are backed by necessary data which ultimately leads to final conclusion.

### Growth of the small tea growers in the region of North Bengal:

To assess the growth of the small tea growers in North Bengal region, the period 2000-01 and immediately thereafter is given due consideration; when a drastic shift in the structure of tea production was taking place all over India. It is very interesting to observe that there is absolutely no expansion in the land used for tea in the state of West Bengal for a period of ten years, 2000-2010 since the area under tea cultivation remained constant at 200570 hectares, (as estimated by the Directorate of Economics & Statistics, Ministry of Agriculture, and GOI). Thus, the annual growth rate of expansion is equal to zero over the said period.

However, the region wise data reveals that there was a sharp increase from 1999-2000 to 2000-01 especially in the Terai region covering the districts of Coochbehar and Uttar Dinajpur followed by Dooars and Darjeeling (Table 1). The operating positions in West Bengal since 2001 indicates that the area used by the STGs for tea cultivation was increasing although no extra land was brought under tea cultivation in the region (table 2). It triggers a question that from where did the small tea growers get the land for cultivation. The growth seen in (table 2) reflects the expansion of the tea plantations outside the traditional peripheries of the estate sector.

**Table1: Area under each tea growing district in West Bengal in hectares(1999-2010)**

District	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
Darjeeling	63590	70519	70519	70519	70519	70519	70519	70519	70519	70519	70519
Dooars	67010	122219	122219	122219	122219	122219	122219	122219	122219	122219	122219
Terai	540	7832	7832	7832	7832	7832	7832	7832	7832	7832	7832
Total	131140	200570	200570	200570	200570	200570	200570	200570	200570	200570	200570

Source: Directorate of Economics & Statistics, Ministry of Agriculture, GOI & Small Tea Growers Association, WB, compiled

**Table2: Net change in estate sector (total –small tea grower segments) in West Bengal 2004-2008 (in hectares)**

Major Districts	2001 (in hectares)	2009 (in hectares)

	Total	STG	Estate sector	Total	STG	Estate sector	Estate Sector Percentage change(2001-2009)
Darjeeling	70519	2077	68442	70519	3782	66737	-2.49
Jalpaiguri	122219	7084	115135	122219	9691	112528	-2.26
Total (WB)	200570	23532	177038	200570	35999	164571	-7.04

Source: Directorate of Economics & Statistics, Ministry of Agriculture, GOI & Small Tea Growers Association, WB, compiled

Whatever suitable land was available for tea cultivation were occupied by the large tea plantations. The large plantations, estate factories and buyers had enjoyed unrivalled supremacy for a very long time. The history of the small tea growers (STGs) in West Bengal could be traced back to the 1980s. A significant inducing factor was the interventions by the Tea Board of India (henceforth TBI) to increase production in order to cater to foreign markets, mainly the erstwhile USSR during the early 1980s. The TBI tried to promote the small tea growers primarily because of the decline in quality and production of tea in the estate sector. It was during this period that the nucleus tea gardens emerged in the vicinity of the large estates in districts such as Jalpaiguri and Uttar Dinajpur in West Bengal (Raisily 2013). But widespread development of STGs began in post 1990s, the period which experienced the deepening of the tea crisis in plantation sector. Although North Bengal is among the oldest tea growing regions of the country, the small tea growers segment is relatively a new entrant in the industry and it could never find its rightful peace, despite several attempts in the past. The existing lands were brought under tea cultivation by the STGs. Since there is less cultivable land area, the possibilities of conversion towards the end of 1990s was less in Darjeeling as compared to other tea growing regions of North Bengal. The number of estates remained relatively steady over the period; however, the area planted with tea declined by 1705 hectares between 2001-2009. In other words the estate sectors lost around 7% of their land to the STGs. During this period, the small and marginal farmers took to tea cultivation mainly in the Terai region and also to some extent in the Dooars region (ref to percentage increase on land across the regions; Table 1). The Small tea grower sector in India which was earlier confined to Tamil Nadu increased remarkably in West Bengal, particularly in the region of North Bengal and Assam both in terms of acreage and production (Hannan, 2006). The findings of (Table 2) also corroborate this fact. The small gardens or 'new gardens' included vested land, bazgalpatta land, tribal land, and land belonging to departments such as Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation, Irrigation and Waterways for tea cultivation (Raisily 2013). Officially individual growers holding up to 10-12 hectares of tea area were considered as small tea growers, but, majority of the small tea growers held less than a hectare of land.

### Reasons for the growth of STGs

The small tea growers in the region of North Bengal were earlier farmers engaged with the cultivation of pineapple mainly in Uttar Dinajpur and few parts of Jalpaiguri as well as Darjeeling; wheat, potato, jute and paddy randomly across the entire Dooars. Due to paucity of available market, high cost of cultivation, lack of the genuine prices of the product and on top of that pressure of the money lenders exposed them to different types of risk. Unable to cope with the vulnerable situation, many farmers in every year committed suicide. The bitter experience in crops cultivation is one reason for switch to small tea cultivation by the farmers in this region.

Secondly, the idea of growing tea as an alternative cash crop in the proximity of the traditional tea growing areas of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts also gave the marginal landholders the opportunity for crop substitution. They had the choice to grow another cash crop instead of growing a single crop, which would fetch them something extra than the bare minimum generated by subsistence cultivation.

These small tea growers could provide employment opportunities to the unskilled manual workers throughout the year (table 3). Moreover, villages would become self-sufficient, as owners of small land holdings too were

able to raise tea plants on their fields. Tea industry has had a predominance of women workers (known for their dexterity in picking) in the organised estate sector. They could extend to the unorganised STG sector as well. Further, female workers in the Small Tea sector got an added advantage to supplement their family income.

**Table 3: District wise estimated average number of labour employed in Tea Plantation in West Bengal:**

District	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Darjeeling	51515	51938	52671	52547	53363	53412	53492
Terai	38420	38874	39426	40165	39897	39925	39680
Dooars	163524	164757	167085	167624	169412	169325	168867
Total WB	253459	255569	259182	260336	262672	262702	262039

Source: Tea Board of India

Labour employment consistently increased in Darjeeling with marginal decrease between 2002 to 2003. Similar picture is reflected in the Terai region, however with a slow growth after 2004. Among the tea growing regions of North Bengal, the maximum employment was generated in the Dooars region; though average number of labour employed in the Dooars region increased till 2004 and decreased thereafter till 2006. Although the region of Terai recorded the highest conversion of cultivable land for small tea cultivation in percentage terms, the average number of labour employed in the region was the least compared to other tea growing regions of Bengal. This is indicative of the fact that the change in the land utilization pattern within the tea grant land is associated with the displacement of large resident work force and their dependents. However, the land to man ratio decreased across all the regions. This is due to the fact that there was no change in cultivable land but people seeking employment increased at the same time. The annual average compound growth rate of labour employed during the period 2000-2006 was 0.56. which was higher than what was recorded in the period 1990-2000, i.e 0.21. Since the period 2000-2006 marks the reorganization of the production process from estates to STGs, the changes in the labour employment may be attributed to the STGs.

Female work participation in the tea plantations has been traditionally high and the period 2000-2006, undergoing structural changes is not an exception. Though the tea plantations indicate presence of feminized labour, however, irrespective of gender, average daily employment decreased between the period 2001-2004 and increased thereafter.

**Table 4: Gender dis-aggregated data on average daily employment in tea plantations in West Bengal**

Year	Male	Female
2000	97,485 (48.42)	103,832 (51.58)
2001	98,047 (48.10)	105,809 (51.90)
2002	82,266 (47.61)	92,413 (52.90)
2003	76,487 (47.15)	84,168 (52.39)
2004	62,405 (47.38)	69,955 (52.85)
2005	72,673 (47.38)	80,719 (52.62)
2006	-	-
2007	77,166 (46.32)	89,445 (53.68)
2008	77,065 (45.58)	92,025 (54.42)

Source: Tea Board of India

### Performance of STGs

The performance of the STGs is judged in terms of their numbers, average farm size, and productivity. The performance of the STGs was remarkable in terms of production as well as productivity during the period 1998-2004. In a span of 6 years production increased more than five times whereas productivity increased 1.65 times in terms of absolute magnitude implying that increase in the cultivable land with the small tea growers did not match the increased yield from that land. Concentrating on the proportionate trends, in West Bengal around 5%

increase in the share of the area of the STGs resulted in 15% increase in the share of production. Taking into consideration the regional scenario, in the North and North east India, 8.65 percentage increase in the shared area produced almost 20 percent increase in share of production. The rate of increase in production with respect to increase in area was slightly higher in North Bengal relative to the entire region. The increased percentage share in total production, area and number indicates that the small grower operations expanded and the average size of the big tea estates declined. The fact that the percentage increase in production of STGs is more than the percentage increase in area reflects that the estates were losing fast in terms of production than area. This might be because of the ageing of the tea bushes which ultimately reduced the net yield. At the same time it can be said that most of the increase in regional production has been sourced from small growers. Considering that tea plantation in the West Bengal region is not mechanized, the productivity gains noticed in these years are unlikely to have resulted from application of upgraded plant stock and technology combined with better land management, since these are equally accessible to the estate sector. It is more likely that these productivity increases reflect increasing labour invisibility on the small grower plantations.

**Table 5: Number, Area and production contribution of STGs in West Bengal**

	1998	1999	2003	2004	2009
No. of STGs	809	1145	8398	8398	20352
Area(HA)	2996	5614	9500	10590	25708.06
Average farm size (HA)	3.70	4.90	1.13	1.26	1.27
Production(*000 kgs)	8170	14565	32245	47513	
Productivity(Kg/Ha)	2726.97			4486.59	
% share of STGs in total holdings	0.94			6.59	
% share of Area(Ha)	4.37			9.56	
% share of production	8.38			23.53	
				36.3(2015)	

Source: Tea Board of India

However looking at the recent percentage production in 2015, it is obvious that the percentage increase of the STGs also decreased. In other words, rate of increase in production of the small growers gradually decelerated. There may be several reasons for this:

The small tea growers cultivated on small pieces of land. Around 84% of the small growers had holding size of less than 2.43 hectares of which 47% had less than 0.80 hectares. On the other hand, only six percent growers had a holding size of more than 4 hectares and 10% between 2 to 4 hectares (as reported by the Dept of Commerce and Economics, NBU).

The STG gardens depended more on local labour, and they are more prone to face labour shortages compared to estate gardens. However, they were compensated with very high doses of unpaid family labour, which remained invisible. At times too much of labour on fragmented pieces of land resulted in diminishing returns to a factor leading to a decrease in the rate of production.

The small growers were also deficient of the right kind of technical knowledge. They bought pesticides at low prices and of low quality and did not have proper information of how to apply them. They also had to pay more for inputs as they never bought them in bulk. Tea is a perennial crop, and the leaf is plucked almost throughout the year. It has seasonal occurrence of pest and diseases. It requires additional water requirement, scientific ways of pruning, plucking and bush management, optimal use of manure and fertilizer, leaf procurement and proper shading. All these activities involve extensive farming knowledge, and STGs are lacking of all such skills, which ought to have a serious impact on the production, quality, cost and profit of a grower.

Moreover, the problem of unregistered growers also existed. In North Bengal, only 7% (appx) of the growers were registered with the tea boards in 2010. Most of the growers being unregistered, they faced difficulty of insufficient funds for proper maintenance; lack of association and networks compelled them to behave like an isolated group. They also failed to avail financial assistance and subsidies from the tea boards and other government institutions.

All these factors together, along with poor access to infrastructure and market information lead to increasing cost- and lower production of STGs.

#### Cost-Benefit ratio

The second most crucial stage in the production of tea is processing of tea leaves into made tea. The STGs went for plunder plucking to increase their volume of production. Once the tea leaves were plucked from the bushes, and then it was sent for processing, blending and packaging. Unlike the big tea estates that produced tea in their own factories by processing the tea leaves, the small tea growers supplied the leaves to the bought leaf factories or BLFs and in some cases even to estate factories. The Blending process began from the BLFs itself. BLFs did not have their own tea plantations but depended on small growers for tea leaves to produce 'made tea'. Hannan (2013) notes based on a small sample study, that the dependency level of STGs to the leaf agents was 18.3 percent in West Bengal, 44.2 percent in Assam, 26.1 percent in Tamil Nadu and 8.3 percent in Kerala. The actual economic exchange between the cultivator and industry seemed to happen in the BLFs. While a total of 162 BLFs were producing 67.01 million Kg of made tea in the country as a whole; the number of BLFs in West Bengal stood at only six, out of which four were located in Dooars and two in Terai. By 2000 the number of BLFs increased to 46 collectively producing 16.9 million kg of tea. In 2002 it had nearly doubled to 33.57 million kg from 62 BLFs. In another two years the corresponding number of BLFs and production increased to 79 and 49.5 respectively. The rate of increase of tea produced outside the traditional estate sector was pretty fast in the state till 2002 after which it slightly declined. Within the state it was fastest in the Terai region where the quantity of made tea then being produced in the BLF sector amounted to nearly half of the production of tea in traditional estate factories. At present around 167 BLFs are present in the region producing approximately 130 million Kgs of tea. However there are several problems with the BLFs.

The time taken to carry the green leaves from the garden to the BLFs was inversely related to the quality of the leaves. Being perishable, there was a chance of the green leaves getting damaged or even losing flavour during the transit to the factories located in far of places. Thus, the small growers were not able to keep the quality of tea leaves intact and hence failed to get remunerative prices from the BLFs. Moreover, the STGs most of the time depended on the local leaf agents for mere transportation of the green tea leaves to the BLFs. These suppliers of transportation took the advantage of acting as intermediaries between STGs and BLFs who exploited them and fetched them low returns. As production by a single grower is insignificant for the BLFs, so these agents collected the green leaf from a number of small tea growers and sold it to the BLFs. The price and quality of the leaves were determined by the agents who took away major share of profits. It is true that with the BLFs coming up, the STGs had a market where they could atleast sell their tea leaves, but at the same time the BLFs had encouraged the growth of the leaf agents or middlemen in small tea growing areas to exercise control over the local market.

Unlike the estate sector which followed an integrated process from production of tea to processing of tea under a single management system (Hayami and Damodaran, 2004), the system consisting of independent small growers and independent factories was rather decentralized. Though the BLFs basically competed in terms of the volume of green leaves, but this decentralized system of tea production at times compelled the BLFs to keep close contact with the STGs and monitor standards to maintain quality so that their tea fetched higher prices in auction.

#### Cost of green leaf production and price realized by the STGs

Often, it is cited to the STGs that the green leaf price is related to the market price of made tea; however it is not reflected in reality. According to Tea Board statistics 2007, the cost of green leaf production varied between

Rs.7.00 to Rs. 7.50 in West Bengal. STGs in Assam and West Bengal are paid Rs 6.00 to Rs 7.00 per kilogram of green leaf, while the average price of made tea ranges from Rs 65 to Rs 75 per kilogram. Leaf agents act as middlemen between STGs and BLFs, and an additional cost is borne by the STGs ranging from Rs 0.50 to Rs 2.00 for per-kilogram green leaf. In Assam and West Bengal, STGs are fully dependent on BLFs, and the latter has monopoly over the green leaf market. In terms of catering to the world market, Dooars and Terai teas, distinct from Darjeeling, do not command any significant export market with price averages well below tea price levels of Assam. Darjeeling tea which are mostly a product of the tea estates and not STGs are largely export oriented and given their distinct quality and character command higher prices compared to teas from other regions in North Bengal. It may be noted, however, that the cost of production in Darjeeling is also substantially higher threatening profitability and developmental programmes. Furthermore, Darjeeling being a hilly area is unable to embark on uprooting and replanting programmes because of terrain and soil profile.

### Conclusion

As, tea required little investment, and the risk of disastrous crop failure was fairly low; small farmers were switching to tea cultivation without paying much heed to the gainful selling of tea. The traditional tea industry was production oriented. Apparently it seemed that the STGs in the region of North Bengal could compete with the estates in terms of production and area under cultivation, but a close look reveals that the percentage increase in area and production gradually decreased. Tea, being a perishable commodity, the economic viability of the tea industry depended on the profitable disposal of the products which required organized marketing system. Marketing of tea involved blending, packaging, advertising, wholesaling and retailing. In case of STGs as producers were not the actual marketers in the tea industry, they had to face several problems. Moreover the production process being cost-ineffective and at the same time the quality of production being inferior, the STGs were unable to compete in the world market. Tea provided work and income throughout the year, with female employment exceeding male employment. However, the rate of increase in employment represented a downward trend. Thus, the two hypotheses is confirmed and it can be inferred that the STGs are neither economically sustainable nor socially sustainable. If the small tea growers owned small garden factories, then their dependence on BLFs could be reduced and at the same time their revenue and profitability increased. What seems necessary is an upward shift of the small tea growers in the value chain for sustaining themselves and thereby stimulating the conditions of the tea industry in the north Bengal region.

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