

Economics of Small Tea Grower's in Assam: A Study of Production Trend and a Silent Movement

Umesh Ch. Sarma¹, Prof. Debotpal Goswami²

¹*Ph. D Research Scholar, Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva Viswavidyalaya, Nagaon & Associate Professor, Department of Economics, Mangaldai College (Autonomous), Darrang, Assam.*

²*Research Guide, Department of Economics, Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva Viswavidyalaya, Nagaon*

Abstract: The small tea cultivation is a highly studied section in socio economic history of Assam. Many intensive studies have been held in varying discipline in various countries of the world on the small tea industry but historians have been able to provide very limited contributions on the importance of small tea cultivations in Assam and also in other areas of the country. This was also quite significant to the socio-economics of Assam as these small tea practitioners generate economic contribution and job opportunities. It's also played a huge role in transforming the region's socio-economic development and land use pattern. There was a need for growth in the number of small tea producers, if hopes and sources of income were to be given to many thousands of young unemployed youth, and to hasten extreme poverty reduction. The small tea grow in Assam changed the economic, social and cultural life of tens of millions in the rural areas and beyond. It got better and diversified jobs, made a whole new awareness among rural living people toward life-style, one of which is a better kind of being. The small tea growers come from the poor communities and as such, have succeeded in seriously denting the rural economy of Assam. Hence it is a useful field of research the role it played on the mindset of the people about the occupation structure, also brought better economic conditions as well as employment-oriented work opportunities for the unemployed farmers of Assam.

Keywords: Tea, Cultivation, Employment, Poverty, Economic.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, among the beverages that people drink, tea itself is one of the most drunk and most consumed. Tea's history in India dates back to 1823 when Robert Bruce met Beesa Gaum, a Singpho chief of the Singpho Upper Assam (Sadiya) region with the

assistance of Maniram Dewan. Beesa Gaum gave a sample of tea plants that were growing wild there. Bruce shipped the tea sample to Calcutta Botanical Garden for an experiment, presented by the Singpho Chiefs. Robert Bruce's discovery did not receive immediate approval from the scientists of the Calcutta Botanical Garden. So, it remained unknown as to the potential of Assam's forests. Almost a decade later Lieutenant Andrew Charlton of Assam Light Infantry discovered the tea.

The expansion of tea plantations occurred not until the suggestion of waste lands grants. David Scott had proposed a scheme of giving waste lands as early as September 1827, by which a grantee should bring one-fourth of the allotment into tillage by the third year, another fourth by the sixth year and another fourth by the ninth year from the expiry after which the grantee shall have entitlement to hold the land in perpetuity on payment of usual rent upon three-fourth of the whole. When applicants had to pay a security equal to the first two years revenue and default on payment at the expiry of the fourth year, the agent's object would be defeated and his holding was liable to be resumed. In remedying the flaw, Robertson permitted the occupying people to hold these lands rent free for three years and the rent was to be paid in a graduated way every year for a series of payments until the tenth year, when three fourth of the area was to be assessed at full rates.

Another one of the second major factors to grow a tea plantation was the introduction of Fee Simple Grants in 1861. Land sales with this grants ranged from Rs.2 to Rs. 5 per acre. Grants were auctioned from 1862 onward. The sale of fee simple land was halted since 1876 and a new system of thirty years leases which

used a new lease of thirty years, based on liberal terms, was implemented.

Therefore, we can say the British Government policy of Making Waste Land Grants Rule and Fee Simple Grants was a huge influence on the tea plantation economy in Assam. Many indigenous groups of people came out to go a little individually to take the lead in tea plantation. The original countryman who cultivates tea of Assam was Maniram Dewan. Despite this, the British were not satisfied that a "native" would want tea plantation equal to theirs and faced many challenges. Maniram Dutta Baruah was a man of the land, a man of great patriot and character. He successfully set up two tea lands despite everything, Chinamara and Senlung. Maniram Dewan was hanged by the British in 1858 for being part of the Indian freedom movement of 1857. From the end/beginning of Assamese to the 1900s, a few pioneering Assamese people became involved in the cultivation of tea although the execution of Maniram Dewan represented a backward step for Assamese people. Rasheswar Barua, Hemadhar Barua, Rai Bahadur Jagannath Baruah, Krishna Kumar Boruah, Col. Sibram Bora and Sarbananda Barkakoti were among the foremost Assamese tea planters.

Well, until the 1980's, the plantation of tea in Assam was dominated by the big companies or estate owners. A new trend of cultivation tea began in Assam after the 1970's. It began the trend after some of the local people started growing tea in their homestead land at a small plot of land. So it was in the early 1980s that the small tea cultivation movement was initiated.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THIS STUDY

- The main objective of this paper is to trace the history of small scale tea cultivation in Assam.
- To discuss the role of different organizations and individual in the growth of small scale tea cultivation.

III. METHODOLOGY

The research is descriptive in nature, being based on several primary and secondary data types of the small tea grower's research and also made the author make use of various information sources available to small tea growers. The major sources; Souvenir, government letter etc. are analyzed during the entire study. In

addition to this, interviews and in addition face to face chats and contacts with the small tea growers have also been given.

Small Tea Growers in Assam:

The small tea growers (STGs) in Assam are a local people of Assam who primarily focus on producing the green tea leaf, they are a type of small group (the small tea growers) are referred to as STGs. After 1978 they came into the tea industry of Assam. These small producers of tea sell their green tea leaf to the tea manufacturing factories which are owned by the big tea estates or others.

Small tea growers land-holdings have very small size property, as compared to those of the big tea estates. The government of Assam only recognizes an individual tea grower to be considered a small tea grower by virtue of producing green tea leaf on land holdings, under a land plot of less than 5.4 hectares. The tea board of India and Small Tea Growers Advisory Programmed on the other hand describes small growers producing tea leaf on land area less than 10.12 hectares. They are rewarded for operating with funds from the government of Assam and Tea Board of India.

However, at the moment a grower who grows tea leaf and possess land area less than 33.33 hectares is listed as a small tea grower, who does not belong to and enjoy facilities offered by the government. Some arguments point toward a revolution in small tea production, which are often controversial. Due to the many growers and other statistical facts, it was known that the first small tea growers were also Mr. Gangadhar Saikia, who was the founding executive and first president of All Assam Small Tea Grower's Association in 1987. Contrary to this, some individuals and some reliable evidence has also provided against the name of Mr. Soneswar Phukan of Sivsagar district, who started the small tea growing commercially from 1976, on small-sided plots of land. However the spirit of small tea cultivation to farmers in Assamese flourished in its youth, the emergence of the little tea cultivation had only occurred on the dawn of the age after a proclamation of former Agricultural Minister Soneswar Bora in 1978, after the establishment of AASTGA. The growers in this section believed that a big problem of theirs in order to cultivate tea was the availability of the land after AASTGA was established. Then they pushed the

government, who was unutilizing the land to cultivate tea but could do so. Many un-utilized lands have been created on hill of Assam, which cannot grow other agricultural crops but tea so far. So they started asking the Government to give them their unused space for tea cultivation from the start of AASTGA establishment. The Government of Assam also reacted positively to the land requirements of small tea establishment. In 1989 the Government of Assam had passed a Land Policy Act, stating that those undertaking the same job as small tea farmers will be provided 30 bighas of Government land to them. The Government of Assam's Act inspired a lot to the native People for starting small scale tea cultivation. Yet the concept for small-scale tea had been introduced by the colonized in Assamese society.

The people of Assam have long regarded Maniram Dewan as the very first tea planters in Assam. Accordingly we could also consider him the first small tea planter in Assam. Due to the fact that he established his plantation through a small plot of land and also lacked the plantation of tea manufacturing factory. Another claim is that Singpho Chief Ningrola be the first tea cultivator of Assam, in contrast Maniram Dewan which came from Singpho National Council. They spread information and data to ensure his name. In an essay, an American Baptist Missionary and Mr. Bruce believed Ningrola, a Singpho Station on the Buri Dehing have a direct intercourse with the Hankong Valley, it could become a control station for Tea business in the countries of India, proposed this Baptist Mission in this location. Another major historian of Assam, Amalendu Guha explains that 95 tea boxes were exported to the outside of Assam at the first time and out of those boxes, 35 boxes produced tea by the Ningrola. However, Ningrola had been working mainly with British Capitalist. Consequently, the chief had very little involvement in its production with the British incentives to promote British benefit and so little control over its production by them as he made no profit.

Another small tea grower Sri Purna Chandra Bora also stated as first small tea cultivators in Assam (produce certificate from Assam Agricultural University) with produced certificate and being a tea grower since 1976 (although teaching primary school), him commercially producing tea through tea-growing and selling green leaf near the Meleng Tea Estates factory by carrying his bicycle.

Before the establishment of AASTGA, there were a few other Associations of small tea growers in some places of Upper-Assam, viz. 'All Assam Green (Tea) Leaf Producers Association of Tinsukia and Dibmgarh districts', 'Charaipoong Self employed Tea Growers' Association' and 'Rural Tea Growers Association, Bhawani Bill, Barhat' etc. All these associations were dissolved thereafter and subsequently small tea growers of Assam were amalgamated into the 'All Assam Small Tea Growers' Association from 1987 onwards. The first meeting to develop this Association in 1987 drew 32 small tea growers. By taking a stand for small tea growers, these founder's group members helped expand small tea in Assam. To be organized in small tea growing districts and regions, the committee of the 'All Assam Small Tea Growers' Association was formed.

From small tea farmers in Assam, the trend in growing tea may be roughly grouped and described in terms of three stages:

1. 1978–1987: This is the earliest period of small scale tea cultivation in Assam. The tea plantation has spread to most of the upper Assam districts during this period, with very small-scale holdings. Mr. Soneswar Borah of Golaghat district, the former agricultural minister of Assam, took a collaborative approach so the government gives permission to small tea growers. He is the founder of small tea cultivation in Assam. In a single collective force the growers came together to battle and to make their demands known through their Association. In 1987 the Golaghat District Small Tea Growers Association came into being. Being the founder district of small tea growers, the association became formed the All Assam Small Tea Growers Association.
2. The period of 1987-1997: This was the most prosperous period during which the number of growers, area under small scale tea cultivation, production, hectorage yield etc. have skyrocketed. The price of green leaf soared, and many new growers started growing small-scale tea as a new way to earn money and to generate income. The government of Assam in 1987 stated that the small tea growers would not have to pay sales tax, income tax of agriculture raised to 30000, earlier which was 12000, and it reduced to 3 bighas from 76 bighas to register them with Tea Board.

Furthermore, it also stated that upon registration with Tea Board, it will give them Rs. 21,000 to people who are also being started in the plain area for tea plantation, and Rs. 28,000 to hilly area. The government had provided different training schemes on regular intervals, and who started their garden under the Pradhan Mantri Rojgar Yojna program have taken an amount of 2 lakhs as loan. The initiatives offered by the government had had a great effect on the native population.

3. 1997 Onward: A period of developing and recovering performances supported by Government support through the Tea Board of India's Development Schemes to small tea growers. New areas of tea farming and more processing units have been introduced; the Bought Leaf factories and Cooperative Factories have been born. So, a lot of how local people were included in the more than one and half century old tea industry.

In 2000, there existed 29 bought leaf factories. The growers, in a single factory, had established cooperatively at Barhat, Sivasagar one of them. In one letter to Assam government for protection of Big Tea garden, Assam branch of Indian Tea Association confirmed there have been 170 bought leaf factories in Assam till mid 2005. The outbreak of small tea growing fast was now threatening the big Estate owner greatly. It was felt within the first two letters of the ABITA (Assam Branch Indian Tea Association).

Some of the portions of the letter have been mentioned here precisely:

“Today over 170 bought Leaf factories have been set up in Assam producing about 60 million kg tea. These bought leaf factories, which source mainly green leaf from the small grower sector, are a serious threat to the established tea estates. Due to lower operational cost and production of inferior quality teas, the image of Assam tea brands is adversely affected. These bought leaf factories have low cost structure and are able to produce teas on average Rs. 20–30 lower than the established tea factories and are therefore able to sell their teas at a much lower price, which impacts the market and price realization for the conventional factories.”

The British tea gardens, first established by the British in the early 19th Century, were akin to some isolated islands of alien ways of life within a traditional society. The entrance of small tea growers in the tea industry in Assam constitutes a major economic development for the state. Assam's small tea growers number is estimated at over fifty thousand and they are practicing tea cultivation. They use 60,000 hectares to cultivate their goods and produce nearly 90 m.kgs of tea annually. The small scale tea plantation accounts for approximately 20 percent of total tea production in the state of Assam. The spectrum of small tea growers in Assam is such that in the month of March-April in 1978 Assam late Soneswar Bora, the Agriculture and Cooperative Minister, Golaghat District, made an appeal to start tea plantation by indigenous people at least by 1.5 hectares of land at the Assam Legislative Assembly platform. The Minister, who carried no institutional higher education but precious practical knowledge; furthermore, he said that the Government will not be opposed to planting tea on a small plot of land. The announcement was responded to by a large scale of people of Assam.

Late Hiralal Phukan and the economist J.B. Ganguly's seminar held on 22-23rd November 1975 about the expansive scope of small tea garden in Assam shared, expressed their opinion in a seminar they gave. Another senior intellectual and renowned Assamese writer Homen Borgohain conducted an essay on "Ghare Ghare Chah Bari" (tea garden in home to home) that talks about the considerable possibilities of small tea garden in Assam. But organized nature of small tea cultivation is introduced by Former Chief Minister Assam Late Sarat Chandra Singh and former Agricultural Minister Mr. Stoneware Borah during Janata Government. Another generation of middle class young people took big actions to establish green revolution through the small tea gardens and a new entrepreneur class had finally emerged. Everyone knows that tea, as a beverage in its whole process has two stages: agriculture and industry. Selection of species, nurseries, land preparation, land testing, plantation, shade tree usage, drainage, managing, and pest and weed control, plucking, pruning and so on for their agricultural activities. On the other hand - withering, rolling, roasting, packing, transporting and warehousing etc. involve industrial activities. The Minister also considered all these aspects of tea plantation. He asked the established big tea estates of

the state to provide the necessary aid for the small tea growers. That was done so that the large tea estates located near the local tea growers were the markets for the green leaf made by the growers.

It can be noted in all of these statements that large tea estates also played a strong part in the creation of small tea growers in Assam. Although not all large estates of the state came forward, the main helping resources for the tea plantation and the tea culture needed were offered. The Minister also went to the Tea Board of India, Calcutta, for allowing the indigenous people to continue cultivating tea on small plots. He also talked with the scientists of Assam Agricultural University, Jorhat and found out how small tea producers could prosper. Until the late 1980s, the weaker indigenous section of the people of Assam believed tea plantation was a capital and land-intensive business and therefore taking up tea cultivation was a challenging task. So they had been doing their own efforts to plant traditional crops like rice, maize, jute etc. on low land and orange, areca nut, sugarcane, ginger etc. on high land. The majority of the highlands were lying in wastelands that were grazing lands of different flora and fauna.

After the 1980's the situation changed very rapidly. A large segment of rural people including youth developed curiosity, knowledge of tea plantation on small holdings through their hard work, determination to become self-employed and self-confidence of others to do well in tea plantation and manufacture. The farmers who tilled traditional high lands began tea plantation as projects. Mr Gangadhar Saikia, the first small tea grower in Assam, Mr. Jibeswar Borah, Late Phatik Saikia, Late Tulshi Kurmi of Golaghat district of Assam, etc. are the names of small tea growers that are to be mentioned first. Mr Gangadhar Saikia had structured a course for tea plantation of his little estates which had belonged to sugarcane cultivation in the early 90s. His friends were in agreement with Mr. Saikia's plan for tea cultivation, which he then proceeded to initiate by planting some tea. They have also paved the way for local poor people to cultivate tea. Their measures are somewhat similar to those of the Tea Committee founded by Lord William Bentinck.

IV. CONCLUSION

The emergence and growth of tiny tea growers has caused a significant, but largely unseen, change in

Assam's economic and social history. A minor endeavour by a few indigenous producers on small homestead plots gave rise to a broad movement that challenged the long-standing dominance of massive colonial and corporate tea estates. In the late 1970s, small tea growing started to open up new self-employment prospects for rural households, particularly for young people and economically disadvantaged populations. This contributed to a decrease in unemployment and poverty in rural areas. The movement was strengthened by favorable government policies, institutional backing from the Tea Board of India, and the united efforts of organizations like the All Assam Small Tea Growers' Association. These programs expanded the rural economy, encouraged the productive use of wastelands, and altered land-use patterns. The rapid expansion of bought-leaf factories allowed small growers to join the tea manufacturing chain and enabled a decentralized, regionally based style of tea farming. Despite challenges like price instability, dependency on factories, quality problems, and labour insecurity, small tea growers now account for a sizable share of Assam's tea production. More importantly, the movement has improved rural entrepreneurship, bolstered local communities, and altered public attitudes towards agriculture. Because of this, the history of Assamese small tea growers is a silent but important movement that changed rural society and contributed significantly to the state's economic development.

REFERENCES

- [1] Arya, N. (2013), "Growth and Development of tea Industry in Assam", International Journal of Scientific and Research, Vol. 4, Issue-& pp-226-231
- [2] Awasthi, R.C (1974), "Economics of Tea Industry in India", United Publisher, Panbazar, Guwahati. PP.1-248
- [3] Baruah, P. (2008), "The Tea Industry of Assam, Origin and Development" EBH Publisher, Guwahati, PP.1-312
- [4] Choudury, R.D (2010), "Tea industry comes out slump", The Assam Tribune, Nov. 27, 2008, Guwahati, PP.6-7
- [5] Choudury, R.K (2006), "India's Tea and Industry and Assam", NENA Special Report, Vol.-3, Issue No-15, PP.5-28

- [6] Department of Industries & Commerce (DIC), (2010b), Directory of Small Tea Growers of Assam, Volume 3, Department of Industries & Commerce, Govt. of Assam. Dispur, Guwahati-6. P. 254. 2.
- [7] Dhar, P.K (2005), "The Economy of Assam including Economy of North East India", Kalyani Publisher, Ludhiana, PP.201-245
- [8] Gogoi, J.K. (1999, November 12-13). Boom in Indian tea industry and small tea growers of Assam, Paper presented at the National Seminar on Plantation Economy of the North East with Special Reference to the Small Tea Garden Movement in Assam, North East Foundation, Guwahati, Assam. p.7. 3.
- [9] Karmakar, K.G. & Banerjee, G.D. (2005). Tea Industry in India : A Survey, National Bank of Agriculture and Rural Development. PP.1. 4.
- [10] Patowary, A(2010), "State Tea Production Up in 2009", The Assam Tribune, February, 2010, PP.4-5
- [11] Report of Assam Govt: Economic Survey of Assam, 2013-2014; Statistical Handbook of Assam (2014); Tea Statistics, 2013-2014 Published by Tea Board, Kolkata and NEDFi Databank.
- [12] Saikia, G.K., Saikia, S. & Baruah, S. (2003). Utilization pattern and productivity of land of small tea growers in Assam. Journal of Plantation Crops, 31(2). pp. 65 – 67.
- [13] Sen, B.B (2008), "Origin and Development of Tea", EBH Publisher, Guwahati, India, PP.45-178
- [14] Sharma, G (2013) "A Historical Tea Background of Assam", An Online Journal of Humanities and Social Science, Vol-1, Issue-IV.
- [15] Sonowal, D (2014), "Assam Tea and its Contribution to the Economy at a Glance", The Sentinel, Daily English Newspaper, July, 21st, 2014, PP.3-4