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## Small farmers perk up the Dooars tea economy

Rina Mukherji



Green shoots: Most of the tea bushes owned by small farmers in the Dooars are *The Hindu* not more than two decades old, giving them the advantage of quality over older bushes elsewhere. Photo: Ritu Raj Konwar

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*After a slump in the '80s and '90s, the tea industry in this salubrious part of Bengal gradually revived as small growers grouped and set up their own processing units*

The Bengal Dooars in the foothills of the eastern Himalayas have been home to tea gardens from the days of the British Raj. This region is characterised by rains through the year, and undulating slopes. Winding rivers, abundant greenery, fertile soil and copious annual rain make it ideal for tea cultivation. The Dooars produce is similar to that of the Brahmaputra valley in Assam, but not perceived as superior in quality. Hence, major tea companies have always blended the Dooars variety with Assam CTC ('crush, tear, curl' method of processing plucked leaves) for their packet tea.

Today, many of the region's tea companies are running losses. This is being blamed on ageing bushes, the absence of investment in maintenance, and the rising cost of minimum wages after Independence. During the '80s and '90s, as tea began selling well in India, many manufacturers bought more land to cultivate, and even leased additional land from local cultivators. They set up 'bought leaf factories' to process tea leaves purchased from small tea gardens. This was reckoned easier and cheaper to manage, than maintaining huge estates with integrated processing facilities. This, in turn, saw many small cultivators turn to tea production from the mid-'90s, instead of growing perishables like vegetables or fruits, which commanded only a small market locally.

India currently exports around 220-230 million kg of tea, while the domestic market consumes over 1,200 million kg. Over the years, there has been a three-four per cent increase in domestic demand.

### **Teething troubles**

The farmers in Dooars who made the switchover to tea cultivation say they found little support from the authorities. "In fact, the State government did all it could to discourage us," says Bijoy Gopal Chakraborty, a member of the Confederation of Indian Small Tea Growers' Association (CONISTA), and one of the region's first small tea cultivators. The previous Left Front government, on realising that acres along the Teesta were being given over to tea cultivation, decided that lands converted after June 2001 would not be regularised by the Land & Land Reforms Department. Although it was argued that the land was not totally suited for tea, the cultivators believe the government was actually worried that food security would be threatened if farmers stopped growing anything other than tea.

The cultivators, however, admit that their lack of expertise was equally to blame. "We had never cultivated tea before, and didn't know when the leaves ought to be picked or how the bushes should be pruned," one of them said.

Moreover, tea cultivation is a specialised affair, vastly different from the work involved in growing paddy, pineapple or vegetables. Since several paddy farms were converted for tea cultivation, the standing water often proved a bane. Babul Pal's 10-bigha (1/3 acre approximately, as standardised under British rule) farm at Madhavdangi, for instance, was ideal for growing paddy, which needs standing water. But his decision to grow tea in seven-eight bighas proved his nemesis, as tea demands perfect drainage

Climate change has added to their woes, in the form of erratic rainfall and higher temperatures, leading to a spike in pests. Loopers, red spiders, thrips, and mosquitoes multiply rapidly when temperatures rise after March. This forced many cultivators to use chemical pesticides in a big way. However, on realising that a crop laced with pesticides would be rejected in the international market, the Tea Board in 2005 issued a Plant Protection Code (PPC), which stipulated that only certain chemicals can be used by the tea growers.

Consequently, many cultivators rediscovered the advantages of field manure in controlling many pests, rather than the use of stronger chemicals. As small-time cultivator Sandip Kumar Gope, who switched from paddy and pineapple cultivation to tea on his Chaulhati farm near the international border, says, "Organic cultivation can actually control many pests, I now realise. It can also improve the quality of the crop."

The small farmers did not also have the means to buy harvesting equipment. That's when the idea of organising themselves into groups took root. With help from the Centre for Education and Communication (CEC), Traidcraft and European Union, several societies were formed to help tea producers access the training, workshops and financial help provided by the Tea Board. This has equipped cultivators with the information needed to tide over a host of teething problems in tea cultivation. A few other factors too favoured them, including the launch of the Soil Health Cards and the Krishi Sinchai Yojana (agricultural irrigation plan), which helped them assess the nutrient-level on their farms and plan the right mix of crops, besides arranging for irrigation in times of need.

Where all these efforts faltered was in the crucial matter of ensuring the right price for their produce. "We had to sell to private 'bought leaf factories' that refused to pay us as much as they would the brokers. Right now, a primary producers' society is given ₹1-2 per kg lower than what a broker gets. It forces many members to sell to brokers rather than the group," laments Tarak Bose, secretary of Johuri Talma's Loknath small tea farmers' group. This problem has, in fact, directly resulted in the break-up of several Dooars small tea producers' groups.

### **A factory of their own**

To tide over pricing troubles, some groups decided to set up factories with financial aid from the Tea Board. In Bhotepatty, in 2012, the Jai Jalpesh primary producers' society set up a tea processing factory run by cultivators. From 300 members initially, the Jai Jalpesh group now boasts over 500 and employs staff in two shifts, including an experienced manager and supervisors to oversee operations. This two-line factory, partly funded through contributions from members and partly by the Tea Board, also owns two vans to transport the ready tea to the auction house in Siliguri. The running costs are met from a corpus created by retaining a part of the payment that is due to the cultivators. Jai Jalpesh secretary Birendranath Roy and executive committee member Bhabendranath Roy explain that the amount is returned to the individuals every year-end.

Very recently, Tea Board cards were introduced to help cultivators access finance and other benefits. As members of primary producers' self-help groups, they can use the card to apply for bank loans, as also sell directly to all factories. They can also make use of implements such as weighing machines and harvesters provided by the Tea Board to the cultivators' groups. Currently, only a few cards have been issued. Only 45 of the 200 members of Madhavdangi Kshudra Cha Chashi Samiti have them. At the Amguri Himalayan Small Tea Growers' Society, 110 of the 200 members have the cards.

Even as the cultivators learn the finer techniques of tea production through regular workshops and Tea Board-sponsored visits to other tea-producing regions in India and abroad, the effect is noticeable in the economy. Freed from the constraints of selling perishables in a limited market, where a bumper crop often forced cultivators to bury their

produce rather than sell at a loss, they now flaunt motorbikes and other paraphernalia that reflect their improved socio-economic status.

Some problems refuse to go away easily, though. Unfamiliar with the prevailing prices for their produce, the cultivators often receive lower prices. Private factories and brokers entice them to sell to them at higher rates. Besides, since the primary producers' societies take 15 days to pay the cultivator, the needy ones prefer brokers who pay cash on the spot.

Moreover, not every block has factories that cultivators can sell to. Dictated by demand, factories come up where the soil is most suited for tea. For instance, Maynaguri block has the maximum number of factories. Whereas there are hardly any in Dinajpur and Siliguri. Rather than struggle to transport his produce to a far-off factory, the grower will choose to sell to a broker or any private factory close by.

### **Reading the tea leaves**

For now, the move to organise and promote small tea growers has met with considerable success. The Panbari primary producers' group, the first to appear in the Dooars as far back as 2008, runs one of the biggest factories here. In spite of a capacity to process 20,000 kg of tea leaves to produce 4,500 kg of tea, it does not accept fresh leaves from anyone other than its 340 members and cultivators from the Kawagap Kshudra Chashi Swanirbhar Goshti (Kawagap small cultivators' self-help group). "We just do not have the capacity to handle anything more," says secretary Madhusudan Roy.

The Dooars small cultivators' tea bushes are not more than two decades old. The quality is good, and the soil is not depleted yet. Those cultivating on slopes along riverbanks are particularly at an advantage. It remains to be seen whether the tempo can be sustained, and the bushes nurtured to maintain their quality. If the bushes are not replaced beyond 50 years, the quality and, hence, sales can suffer badly.

The Tea Board has its task cut out — to keep the cup that cheers refilled in Dooars.

***Rina Mukherji*** is a Kolkata-based journalist

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