

Status Report

TRAINING OF SMALL TEA GROWERS

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ABSTRACT

Small scale cultivation of tea in the Eastern India has started rather late. From a few enterprising cultivators in the early eighties, the sector has achieved a stupendous growth in between and at present there are about 100,000 small growers in the region contributing 30% to the total production of the region. Limited scientific knowledge is an impediment faced by the small growers for achieving sustainable tea productivity. The growers need to be trained in all aspects of tea culture to improve their production of quality leaf. Training must also be imparted to these farmers on judicious use of pesticides and MRL issues. Smallholder training provided by the Tea Research association through STGAC is effective but has been able to cover only 20% of the growers, leaving a big gap in meeting the training needs of the smallholder growers in this region. Suggestions have been mooted in designing new/additional mechanisms to meet the requirements.

The Tea Industry, since its inception in the 2nd quarter of the 19th century, has been predominantly in the hands of private sector. The British, while introducing tea growing in Assam, transformed the traditional Chinese way of its cultivation to an organized agro based industry by planting tea in large areas which were eventually termed as Estates. Modern methods of tea husbandry were innovated to achieve higher productivity. Epoch making changes were incorporated in tea processing where machines were developed to replace the manual methods. Modern concepts of business management and marketing of tea were introduced to convert the unorganized small business into an organized industry.

Interestingly, it took almost 150 years to break the inertia and for cultivation of tea to hold the fancy of the farmers of Assam. though it was practiced so close to them. But the Assamese farmers remained alien to its cultivation in their fields, although cultivation of tea in small holdings did exist in many parts of the world,

including several States of India viz. Tamilnadu, Kerala, Himachal Pradesh etc. The first effort to popularize cultivation of tea in small scale in Assam was made in 1977 by Sri Soneswar Bora the then Agriculture Minister of Assam. His intention was to utilize the available fallow high lands and attract the young generation to agriculture sector and thereby to solve the widespread unemployment problem. In the early eighties, during his tenure, a group of enterprising cultivators from Golaghat, Jorhat, Sibsagarh, and Dibrugarh area came forward to cultivate tea and established small tea gardens. It is heartening to note that without any support from State Government or the Tea Board, these growers, with their own initiative, could develop their plantations as the only means to earn their livelihood and established that cultivation of tea is very profitable. The general notion that tea is a "rich man's crop" could also be removed from the minds of the common farmers. Gradually tea became popular amongst the other cultivators and spread to other districts also. The growth of the small sector picked up momentum by the end of eighties. In the year 1987 the All Assam Small Tea Growers' Association (AASTGA) was

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formed at Golaghat with 515 members, mostly from Golaghat and Jorhat districts. The sector had experienced tremendous growth in the nineties. AASTGA has reported that at present the small growers are spread in 19 districts of Assam with more than 65,000 growers, and contribute about 29% of the state's tea production. The scenario in North Bengal is also similar with very rapid expansion of the sector in recent past. The small growers' associations of North Bengal have reported that currently the total number of small growers in the four districts of North Bengal stands at 25000 with an area of more than 36000 hectares and an annual production of about 69 million kg made tea, which is about 30% of the total production of West Bengal. In addition to this, there are about 68,000 small growers in South India who operate an average holding of 0.71 hectare and produce about 81 million kg. of made tea i.e. about 35% of the region's total production. It would be worth mentioning that the figures for Assam and West Bengal indicated above do not tally with the Tea Board statistics which records only those growers who are registered with them.

District wise distribution of small tea growers in Assam is presented in Table -1 and the State wise distribution of small tea growers in India is presented in Table 2

Table 1. District wise Statement of Small Tea Growers 2007 in Assam (Source : AASTGA)

Sl.No.	District	No of growers	Percentage
1.	Tinsukia	15561	23.8
2.	Dibrugarh	16972	25.9
3.	Sivsagar	12436	19.0
4.	Jorhat	4962	7.6
5.	Golaghat	11391	17.4
6.	Others	4144	6.3
	Total	65466	100

Table 2. State wise small growers in India (Source Tea Board)

State	Number	Area (ha)	Production (000 Kg)
Assam	42492	41249	62770
West Bengal	8398	9500	32245
Tripura	1068	1338	345
Arunachal Pradesh	23	97	NA
Manipur	316	381	47

State	Number	Area (ha)	Production (000 Kg)
Sikkim	73	127	NA
Nagaland	1105	1800	141
Meghalaya	12	36	NA
Mizoram	43	88	NA
Uttaranchal	2	13	NA
Himachal Pradesh	3655	1625	375
Bihar	980	1850	1200
Total North India	58167	58104	97123
Tamil Nadu	61985	43157	78764
Kerala	5999	4810	1969
Karnataka	16	83	232
South India	68000	48050	80965
All India	126167	106154	178088

Tea is traditionally being grown on an industrial scale with all agro-horticultural refinements on a sound scientific line. For this the planters need sufficient scientific knowledge of cultural operations to maintain a sustained productivity in tea plantations in the long run. The big commercial tea houses are better placed in this respect. Besides R&D feed back from their research organization (TRA & UPASI), they have their own resources to organize various activities of a tea plantation on a sound scientific line. However due to various innate limitations, the small growers do not have such a scientific approach. Most of them are not clued up to the nuances of tea cultivation. Right from selection of soil, planting material, water management, use of fertilizer & chemicals to plucking, their knowledge is basically that of a layman, trying to learn through imitation and hearsay. Hence proper training and advisory services must be provided for the benefit of the small growers.

The Assam Agricultural University, Jorhat, had taken some initiative in the late eighties in this direction by setting up of a "Tea Advisory Cell" which was subsequently funded by Tea Board and was renamed "small tea advisory program" (STAP). The Advisory services were rendered by this cell all these years but with the tremendous growth of the sector, there was a persistent demand from the growers' associations to form an advisory cell at TRA. In the year 2004 the Small Tea Growers Advisory Cell (STGAC) was set up at Tocklai to cater to the training needs of the small tea growers of

the following districts.

Assam :

5 (Five) Upper Assam Districts viz. Golaghat, Jorhat, Sivasagar, Dibrugarh & Tinsukia.

West Bengal :

4(Four) North Bengal Districts viz. Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling & Uttar Dinajpur.

Bihar :

Kishanganj District.

The STGAC Cell was established with full budgetary support from Tea Board, India under 10th Plan Projects.

The mandate of the STGAC includes :

1. To disseminate technical know how of tea culture among the small tea growers of the target area.
2. To motivate the small tea growers to form self help groups to avail the benefits under various schemes of the Tea Board India.

To meet the needs of the huge number of small tea growers located in the target area, the STGAC stationed technical personnel at Dikom (Upper Assam) and Terai (North Bengal), in addition to Tocklai to enable the Cell to reach as many growers as possible, preferably through small grower associations. The small growers associations that operate in these areas are (1) All Assam Small Tea Growers Association, (2) North Bengal Small Tea Planters Association, (3) United Forum of Small tea Growers Associations.

The STGAC Cell, in consultation with the respective growers' associations and in the presence of Tea Board personnel, prepares a detailed schedule for conducting field training-cum-demonstration programs in various locations. The training schedule is circulated to

the office bearers of the respective Regional Committees of the Association well in advance to facilitate arranging the program at convenient locations close to their fields.

In the first few months of its inception, the technical personnel of the Cell undertook extensive visits to the allotted areas of Upper Assam, Terai and Dooars of West Bengal and Kishanganj area of Bihar, to assess their specific problems and to interact with the small growers and their associations.

Training-cum-Demonstration Programs :

The Cell had started its full activities since November, 2004 by way of organizing extensive training cum demonstration programs in various locations in the target area. For convenience two sets of training cum demonstration programs were conducted based on the seasonal activities viz. Early weather practices and Cold weather practices.

The major subjects discussed during early weather practices were :

1. Record Keeping
2. Bringing up of young tea
3. Tipping & Plucking
4. Soil fertility and manuring
5. Integrated Pest & disease management
6. Drainage
7. Weed Control.
8. Nursery raising including shade

The subjects dealt with during cold weather practices were :

1. Record keeping
2. Bringing up of young tea
3. Methods of soil sample collection
4. Importance to soil testing
5. Pruning & skiffing
6. Integrated pest & disease management
7. Drought management.

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Apart from the above subject, any other issue raised by the participating growers were discussed at length and followed by field visit for on-the-spot practical demonstration.

In addition to the target area as mentioned above, the STGAC also extended need-based technical support to the small tea growers of Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon districts of Assam.

Till March, 2008, STGAC carried out 556 Training cum demonstration programs, benefitting 17608 participants small tea growers. During the course of these programs, 6870 fields of small growers were also visited for demonstrating various agricultural practices.

Self Help Groups (SHG) formation : In each of the training programs, the cell's technical personnel discussed the benefits of forming Self Help Groups with the farmers, to avail of Tea Board's subsidy schemes for the SHGs of the small tea growers. As a result, 224 Self help groups have been formed as on March 2008, of which 216 SHGs are from the target area while 8 are from the non target area.

Publications : In order to disseminate the technical know how to the small growers, the Cell published 30 advisory bulletins on various cultural practices in local languages of which 8 bulletins were in Assamese and 22 bulletins in Bengali.

Soil Testing : Small Growers have been allowed to avail the facility of testing their soil samples at the rates applicable for the member estates and around 2500 soil samples were analyzed by different soil testing laboratories of TRA viz. Tocklai, Dikom and Terai.

Visit to TRA : All the three TRA branch offices where STGAC personnel are located are visited by a large number of small growers to seek

advice in connection with the problems faced by them.

During the course of the visits and interaction with the small grower the Cell's official observed the following :

1. Almost invariably the small growers have not been keeping records about their plantations.
2. Most of the small growers are ignorant of the importance of soil testing.
3. Small growers by and large have very little knowledge of cultural practices of tea be it the choice of planting material, upbringing or carriage of leaf to the factory.
4. Instances have come to the notice when the growers have resorted to indiscriminate use of pesticides either in sub lethal or excessive doses.
5. In a few cases it has been observed that the growers have applied over dose of fertilizers.

In order to mitigate the aforesaid short comings the STGAC had included record keeping and soil testing (soil sample collection procedure) as the most important aspects, apart from attention to all other technical subject in the training-cum-demonstration programs. The Cell's officials during the training and visits have always emphasized to the growers that excessive use of fertilizers and pesticides is very harmful for the quality of the tea produced (excess pesticide residue) and to the environment, without any advantage whatsoever. Time and again the farmers have been advised to follow TRA-recommended doses of fertilizer and pesticides in right dilution. They were provided the list of CIB approved chemicals for use in tea.

In fact, the issue of pesticide residue is very dynamic in nature and hence the growers need to be trained periodically about safe use of plant protection chemicals including health hazard

aspects of the pesticides. Good agricultural practices have to be introduced to reduce the chemical load in the end product i.e. made tea. The growers need to be trained for safe and effective handling of spraying equipments and proper disposal of spray wastes/fluids and containers etc. Leaf handling and transportation of the same to the processing units should also get due attention. Training with regard to fertilizer application - both rate and mode of application along with foliar application also need to be imparted. The ultimate aim of all such trainings is to assist the small growers to run their plantations in a sustainable manner and carry on with the business more competitively.

Despite the fact that there are restrictions on further expansion of tea cultivation in some states e.g. West Bengal where the State Government has stopped issuing No-Objection-Certificate, the sector is still growing and the actual figures of small growers would be far more than the figures mentioned earlier. The total estimated number of growers in Assam, Bengal & Bihar as reported by the respective Associations stands at more than 90,000. Over a period of 4(four) years between 2004-2008 The Small Tea Growers Advisory Cell at Tocklai

gave advice to about 17,000 small growers, which constitute about 20 percent of the total growers. Thus about 80 percent of the growers are yet to get any exposure to the trainings and demonstrations conducted by TRA, Tocklai.

CONCLUSION

Small growers are a huge social force providing livelihood to lacs (100,000 +) of people. This sector is still continuing to grow and the unofficial figure of total small growers in Assam alone would be at least 100,000 if not more. The growers are spread in a large number of districts in the region and are heterogenous in nature. Their problems and hence RD support requirements as well as their training needs are different from the organized estate sector plantations located in the same region. With the training infrastructure made available at TRA through STGAC, only about 20% of the growers could be covered so far which leaves a yawning gap between what is needed and what is being provided. It is therefore felt that a separate mechanism must be evolved to look into the overall development of the small growers. A separate Small Growers Development Authority (SGDA) may be established in line with that of Kenya Tea