

## **Farm Size and Trade Relations of Small Tea Growers (STGs) in Assam and North Bengal**

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### **Abstract**

*The current research addresses the nature of farms, holding-size distribution, land rights of Small Tea Growers (STGs) and procedural issues relating to their emergence in Assam and North Bengal. Though they came in existence in early 1990s, yet within a short span of time, they have become an important contributor in tea economy over the years in terms of production and employment in rural areas in both the state. Secondly, it highlights the role of state and how its various agencies have neglected the STGs sector over the years from provincial and national governments. It further focuses on how Tea Board of India has failed to regulate the green leaf market in the tea supply chain and allowed the entry of an army of leaf agents (middlemen) to exploit the STGs in both the states vis-à-vis other Indian states. It also analyses an Industry. The local initiatives and development from below has impacted and surfaced in tea processing and marketing either individually in Upper Assam or collectively in Dooars of North Bengal by progressive STGs and their Associations.*

### **Introduction**

There has been a major shift in tea economy in early 1990s in North and North-East India. The production of tea has become a household economy in comparison to estate economy of yesteryears. Even the hill states of Northeast have taken up tea cultivation which had never been a part of its economy. This has not only boosted local economy but is competing with estate gardens and pose newer forms of challenges to the provincial and national governments and invite policy dialogue. Unlike estate gardens, where labour and capital are imported to the local economy, the STGs are situated and emerged within local geographic setting and many unemployed youth have ventured into small tea growing. Assam and West Bengal are two states which have witnessed spurt in the growth small tea gardens. In West Bengal, the spread of STGs are limited to five districts of North Bengal whereas in Assam they are widely distributed over all the districts.

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In 2017-18, the STGs produced 621.61 million kg tea in India out of total 1325.05 million kg. The state of Assam and West Bengal contributes 493.36 million kg tea which is almost of 80 percent (79.37 per cent) of the total tea produced by STGs in India. Assam STGs produced 285 million kg (42.18 percent) of the total tea produced in the state and in West Bengal STGS with 208.12 million kg production contributed 53.66 percent of the total tea produced. The size of STGs economy is relatively small in South India and it contributed 112.60 million kg (18.11 percent) in India despite its existence since 1960s. Despite a late start, STGs in Assam and West Bengal have grown at a faster pace and have been competing with estate sector in both the states. The present paper is an attempt to understand and explore the variations of farm size, land rights and its procedural problems, trading opportunities in tea supply chain and institutional mechanism which facilitate and support better farm gate prices to the STGs.

## **1.2. Objective and Aim of the Paper**

Against this backdrop, the present paper seeks to address few specific concerns of the sector:

1. Whether all the STGs in Assam and North Bengal are uniform in their farm size as defined by Tea Board of India? What kind of land rights and spatial distribution are found in both the states?
2. What is the nature of trade environment that exist in STGs gardens? What are the policies available in protecting farm gate prices of their product and its changes?
3. How the green leaf market is organized and whether all the STGs receives equal access of market or it varies across farm size? Is there any role of middlemen exist in the supply chain?

## **Section-II: Farm Size, Land Rights and Spatial Dimension of Small Tea Growers**

### **II.1 Assam**

In Assam (2017-18), the STGs contribute 42.18 per cent out of total tea production in the state. The share of STGs in the states of West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka is 50.4 per cent, 55.8 per cent, 17.1 per cent and 5.5 per cent respectively. The overall contribution of STGs sector in India is 45.01 per cent (Directorate of Tea Development, Kolkata: 2017). In 2016-17, the total production of made tea was 1250.49 million kg and the productions of STGs and Estate Gardens were 550.3 and 700.2 million kg respectively. Though the STGs exist in all the districts in Assam, they are densely concentrated in the districts of *Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Golaghat* and *Jorhat* districts. The STG owners in these districts have switched over from production of horticulture crops (Field Survey: 2006-07). Until, 2006, in Assam there were 206 BLFs of which 172 are located in five districts of Tinsukia (68), Dibrugarh (51), Golaghat (24), Jorhat

(15) and Sibsagar (14) (TBI, 2007).

The land under occupation of STGs belong to diverse categories of land classification<sup>1</sup>. Unfortunately, most of the STGs occupy *Tauzi land*, hence Tauzi Patta or rent receipt is the required for individual registration with Tea Board of India (Field Survey: 2006-07). Land cultivated by STGs in district Biswanath in Assam falls under three categories: agricultural land (low and high), forest land and grazing land and small gardens exist on high lands (Sharma and Barua: 2017). In Lakhimpur land available for small tea plantation can be divided into three categories: *myadi* land (permanently settled), *eksona* (yearly settled), and *tauzi* land (Pachoni: 2016). People use all categories of land for tea plantation in the district. The small tea growers who have *myadi* land or land ownership document receive the benefit of registration under Tea Board of India and avail loan and subsidy from Tea Board of India and other financial institutions.

In 2001<sup>2</sup>, there were 28585 small tea growers with a total of 27878 hectares of cultivated area. Out of the total tea production 453.5 million kg, 257.6 million kg was contributed by STGs in the State. However as mentioned earlier, STGs are concentrated in five districts of Assam, viz. Dibrugarh (30.26 per cent), Tinsukia (21.97 per cent), Jorhat (13.42 per cent), Golaghat (12.44 per cent), and Shivasagar (11.08 per cent), (Baruah and Taparia:2004-05). An estimated 2.40 lakh people are directly employed in STGs sector in Assam which includes family labour, labour from neighbouring tea estates and sub-staffs. In 2013, Assam had 220 BLFs in the state with average employment ranging between 20-25 workers and the numbers of STGs is 68465 with plantation area of 118058.30 hectares (Borah: 2013).

The number of STG registered with Tea Board has increased over the years (Table: 2). From a total 42390 growers recorded under All Assam Small Tea Growers Association in 2002-03, the total number of registered STGs in the State increased to 84591 growers with tea plantation area of 82250.47 hectares. The average farm size however shrunk from 2.76 hectares to 0.97 hectares. There is a marked difference in farm size between two sets of data sources i.e. Tea Board of India and All Assam Small Tea Growers Association (AASTGA). Field interaction revealed that only well-informed STGs were registered with Tea Board. The STGs which have problems with land holding records have registered with district level units of AASTGA as registration with TBI requires unambiguous land holding records. Though the proportion of such growers is small, yet there is need for state intervention to regularize the land records and extend support to organize them

<sup>1</sup> *Tauzi land* (locally known as *Tauzu Bahi*) is government land but can be under individual possession in lieu of nominal rent to the government. For *Tauzi*, the occupant can pay land tax/revenues for the use. On the other hand, on *Myadi land* the owner has every right to claim as per legal provisions. Thus only Myadi Patta holders are the actual owners of a land. There is another type called *eksonia*, it is an intermediate phase in obtaining *myadi* ownership.

<sup>2</sup> Directory of Small Tea Growers (2001), Government of Assam.

**Table-1: Share of Production of Made Tea in India (2017-18)**

States /Region	No of Districts	Production (M. Kg) of Made Tea in India			% Share in Tea Production within State/Region		% Share in Tea Production in India	
		Estate Sector	STGs Sector	Total	Estate Sec.	STGs Sec.	Estate Sec.	STGs Sec.
Assam	22	391.07	285.24	676.31	57.82	42.18	55.59	45.89
West Bengal	5	179.74	208.12	387.86	46.34	53.66	25.55	33.48
Sub-Total	27	570.81	493.36	1064.17	53.64	46.36	81.15	79.37
North-East India*	44	401.45	296.57	698.02	57.51	42.49	57.07	47.71
North India**	8	180.94	212.44	393.38	46.00	54.00	25.72	34.18
South India	14	121.05	112.60	233.65	51.81	48.19	17.21	18.11
All India	66	703.44	621.61	1325.05	53.09	46.91	100.00	100.00

*[Note: North-East India\* includes Assam and North India\*\* includes West Bengal]*

*Source: Computed from Tea Board of India*

into clusters or co-operatives or SHGs like the Industrial Co-operatives existing in Nilgiris of Tamil Nadu. However, majority of the STGs in Assam are small and marginal and 85 per cent of STGs possess less than four hectares of land holding (Table-3). The small growers with such marginal land holdings are covered under *Price Stabilisation Fund Scheme*. However, growers not registered with Tea Board of India cannot avail this benefit. Higher the proportion of registered tea grower firms with Tea Board higher would be the transparency at farm gate prices.

The classification of STGs in Assam can be further sub-grouped into (a) non-cultivating landowners (above 25 acres), (b) semi-middle peasants (10-25 acres), (c) middle peasants (5-10 acres), (d) small peasants (2-5 acres), (e) marginal peasants (below 2 acres) and (f) landless wage labour (Sharma and Barua: 2017). The first three categories of growers have sound economic support while fourth and fifth group do not possess enough land for production of rice to support their family and therefore have taken up tea cultivation in the available land for family sustenance and additional income. Unlike the estate gardens which have hierarchical employee structure, the STGs gardens have only one category of employees i.e. labourers. However, gardens with size of above eight acres engage two categories of workers: supervisors locally known as *Mahari*<sup>3</sup> and the labourers. Most of the STGs gardens below five acres are managed by individual families. A distinctive feature of the STGs is the wide variation in the wage rates e.g in 2016 the wage rate in STGs gardens varied from Rs. 120-140 across locality and also seasonally (peak season and lean season). This uncertainty in wage rate is largely because of the absence of labour market institutions to look into the causes of labourers in STG.II.2 North Bengal

In North Bengal, the STGs are mostly pineapple growers of yesteryears in highlands and they switched over to tea cultivation during 1980s. Their emergence and geographical spread is limited in four districts of North Bengal i.e. *Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar* and *Uttar Dinajpur*. This is basically a farmer-based tea cultivation occupying small tracts of land. Owing to the paucity of available market for the pineapple, the farmers shifted to tea cultivation. Since pineapple is perishable, absence of downstream processing market and storage facilities led farmers switching over to tea cultivation. Most of the produces from pineapple were sent outside the region particularly to cities like *Delhi, Kanpur, Agra, Nagpur, and Kolkata* etc. involving an army of middlemen and the prices realized by farmers were non-remunerative. There was no readily available local market for pineapple besides household-level consumption in the region. Consequently, the vast pineapple growing area gradually was replaced with tea bushes. In 2016, the STGs in West Bengal produced 154 million kg made tea accounting to 52 percent share of total tea produced in West Bengal (Table-4).

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<sup>3</sup>A *Mahari* discharges the role of multitasking as manager, field supervisor, accountant and driver at times.

However, the STGs of West Bengal are besieged with same set of problems that at one point led farmers switch over to tea cultivation from pineapple. There are institutional bottlenecks in respect of market and credit availability. To meet the working capital requirements informal sources are accessed which carry high interest burden often leaving farmers in perpetual debt. In respect of labour wages, the STGs are treated at par with the large tea estates. There is periodic revision of wage agreements between STGs and representing trade unions of the respective districts like that in case of organized tea industry in North Bengal. The STGs, continue to perform remarkably, in terms of employment generation and currently an estimated 1.63 lakh people directly derive their livelihoods from the sector in the state (Hannan: 2006, 2017). Till, 2016 (the latest data available) 176 BLFs were in operation in North Bengal depending on the supply of green leaf from STGs. The STGs have changed industrial map of rural pockets in North Bengal. The rising number of BLFs indicates that this sub-sector within tea industry has potential to grow if STGs receive fair deal in the supply chain and receive proper institutional support which ensures distributive justice.

As per the available sources (2017), there are 35140 growers situated in four districts of West Bengal. In 2009, it was 20,352 with a total area of 25708.06 hectare. Most of the growers are not registered with Tea Board due to non issuance of No-objection Certificate (NOC) from the Land and Land Reforms Department, Government of West Bengal. Till 30.06.01, only 6041 growers submitted their application to the Land Reforms Department out of which only 1783 growers received NOC as per the records available on 31.12.2005. The highest number of growers is concentrated in the district *Uttar Dinajpur*<sup>4</sup> with tea cultivation area of 10993.32 hectares. The average farm size in the State is 1.27 hectares (Table-5). It is to be mentioned that the current data on STGs include only members affiliated to associations. There are many marginal STGs in the state who are not even affiliated to any organization and cultivate tea like any agricultural crop and survive at the mercy of leaf agents. The state government (West Bengal) is yet to provide NOC and regularize the STGs in the state unlike in Assam which has somehow negotiated procedural problems and allowed STGs to register with Tea Board of India.

The NOC guidelines by the Government of West Bengal were notified in 1994 and the Land Reforms Department of the State was instructed to complete the entire exercise within a period of three months (Hannan, 2013). It is unfortunate that the said task has not been accomplished by the respective agency of Government of West Bengal.

Although Uttar Dinajpur has the highest concentration of STGs, approximately

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<sup>4</sup>The highest number of STGs is concentrated in the district of Uttar Dinajpur in North Bengal and the *Chopra* block is considered as birthplace of STGs in North Bengal.

**Table-2: District-wise Number, Area and Average Farm Size of STGs in Assam**

Districts	2002-03 (AASGA)			As on 31.03.2006 (Tea Board of India)			As on 18.06.2012 (Tea Board of India)			2014-15 (Tea Board of India)		
	No	Area (Ha)	Farm Size	No	Area (Ha)	Farm Size	No	Area (Ha)	Farm Size	No	Area (Ha)	Farm Size
Kokrajhar	24	89.6	3.73	9	46.65	5.18	115	417.33	3.63	335	998.81	2.98
Dhubri	86	90.4	1.05	1	1.04	1.04	3	13.07	4.36	13	28.7	2.21
Goalpara	96	96.13	1.00	1	6.25	6.25	13	31.54	2.43	154	154.22	1.00
Barpeta				1	1.51	1.51	1	1.51	1.51			
Morigaon	20	44.27	2.21	7	7.35	1.05	7	12.7	1.81	7	12.7	1.81
Nagaon	321	219.07	0.68	119	300.17	2.52	145	345.13	2.38	1032	1659.19	1.61
Sonitpur	1412	837.33	0.59	493	1047.06	2.12	1073	1896.96	1.77	8750	8677.09	0.99
Lakhimpur	448	262.27	0.59	133	349.15	2.63	266	511.89	1.92	1815	1649.22	0.91
Dhemaji				54	111.42	2.06	80	168.06	2.10	536	447.74	0.84
Tinsukia	11714	13789.47	1.18	218	496.52	2.28	265	605.29	2.28	18595	16674.24	0.90
Dibrugarh	10876	5723.07	0.53	190	490.05	2.58	208	528.98	2.54	19160	15433.77	0.81
Sivasagar	7047	5389.2	0.76	121	332.01	2.74	290	676.21	2.33	10868	11149.42	1.03
Jorhat	3320	1325.47	0.40	183	247.87	1.35	194	365.51	1.88	6366	6158.83	0.97
Golaghat	6526	5566.93	0.85	868	1905	2.19	1387	2715.62	1.96	9503	9160.06	0.96
K. Anglong	380	574.67	1.51	286	1961.68	6.86	489	2627.29	5.37	1520	3345.43	2.20
Dima Hasao				1	4.68	4.68	1	4.68	4.68	2	10.22	5.11
Cachar				31	127.7	4.12	172	604.97	3.52	172	604.97	3.52
Karimganj				7	36.28	5.18	9	44.17	4.91	10	57.5	5.75
Hailakandi				4	23.84	5.96	4	23.84	5.96	4	23.84	5.96
Bongaigaon	45	113.33	2.52	23	60.3	2.62	52	121.76	2.34	696	595.9	0.86

Chirang										8	4.78	0.60
Kamrup	25	45.6	1.82	7	26.95	3.85	8	30.55	3.82	8	29.42	3.68
Kamrup Metro										3	2.4	0.80
Nalbari	16	9.6	0.60	8	29.42	3.68	8	29.42	3.68			
Baksa							21	75.6	3.60	257	339.56	1.32
Darrang	34	49.47	1.46	162	476.07	2.94	165	502.05	3.04	4	2.83	0.71
Udalguri							77	121.27	1.57	4773	5029.63	1.05
Assam	42390	34225.88	0.81	2927	8088.97	2.76	5053	12475.4	2.49	84591	82250.47	0.97

*Source: Computed from Unpublished data collected from AASTGA, Dibrugarh for the year 2002-03, TBI-North-East Zonal Office, Guwahati for the year 2006, Statistical Handbook of Assam 2012 and 2016*



**Table-3: Holding-Size Distribution of STGs in Assam**

Holding Size (Hectares)	% of Growers	
<0.67	10.28	84.76
84.76		
0.67-1.21	25.63	
1.35-2.56	34.68	
2.70-3.91	14.17	
4.05-5.26	6.37	15.24
15.24		
5.40-6.61	4.32	
6.74-7.96	2.32	
8.10-9.31	1.49	
9.45>	0.74	
All Groups	100.00	

Source: Baruah and Taparia (2004)

**Table-4: Growth of Small Tea Growers (STGs) in North Bengal**

Years	No. of STGs	No. of BLFs	Production(M. Kg.)	% Share in State	Avg. Green Leaf Price (Rs)
1996	2000	10	05	03	16
2004	15000	77	46	28	15
2016	40000	176	154	52	15

Source: Computed from Uttar Banga Sambad, August 23, 2017, p. 11.

**Table-5: Status of Small Tea Growers in North Bengal and their Legal Recognition**

Districts	Small Tea Growers (As on 31.12.2009)			Status of NOC Issued to STGs (30.11.2004)		
	No of STGs	Area (Ha)	Average Farm Size (Ha)	No of Applications Received	No of NOC given to STGs	% of STGs received NOC
Uttar Dinajpur	10397	10993.32	1.06	1860	561	5.40
Jalpaiguri	5777	8986.36	1.56	1947	845	14.62
Darjeeling	3637	4062.59	1.12	2005	249	6.85
Cooch Behar	541	1665.80	3.08	129	44	8.13
Total	20352	25708.06	1.27	5941	1699	8.35

Source: Computed from Unpublished data collected from the local level STGs Associations and the Land and Land Reforms Department, Government of West Bengal cf. [http://www.telegraphindia.com/1100115/jsp/siliguri/story\\_11985634.jsp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1100115/jsp/siliguri/story_11985634.jsp) accessed on 25th April 2010.

83.55 per cent of STGs have small and marginal land holding size below 2.43 hectares<sup>5</sup>. Around 93 percent growers possess tea holding-size of less than four hectares which justifies that STGs are entitled to register under *Price Stabilisation Fund Scheme* of Government of India, 2003<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, more than 18 thousand growers would have been benefitted under Price Stabilisation Fund Scheme but only 132 numbers of STGs are enrolled since the inception of the scheme (54<sup>th</sup> Annual Report, Tea Board of India). The case of North Bengal seems to be in the same direction as in Assam and the Price Stabilisation Fund Scheme. The Policy has not found much enthusiasm among the STGs because of the long drawn administrative process associated with it and benefits remained behind the long drawn administrative processes. The CAG Report of 2012 on records that even after five decades of existence of STGs, the Tea Board of India has failed to discharge its basic regulatory role effectively and more than 80 percent of them continue to exist outside the ambit of regulations of Tea Board (Das, 2014).

**Table-6: Holding-Size Distribution of STGs in West Bengal**

Holding-Size (Ha)	% of Smallholders	
<0.80	46.84	83.55
0.80-1.62	27.85	
1.62-2.43	8.86	

Source: Unpublished data, Department of Commerce and Economics, NBU collected from United Forum of Small Tea Growers Associations, Jalpaiguri

Three types of farms exist under STGs in North Bengal according to holding size. The *Family Farms* (0-5 acres) are defined as those farms which are managed collectively by all the family members of the farm including children and women and have the presence of family labour as well as hired labour; the *Owner-Supervisory Farms* (5-15 acres) managed by the farm owner individually including technical advice and work schedule and have the presence of hired

<sup>5</sup>The number of blocks, STG (area) and farm size each block wise as taken from: <http://uttardinajpur.nic.in/dlro.html> accessed on 02.02.2019 is:

Blocks	No of STGs	Area (Ha)	Farm Size
Chopra	7654	18328.50	2.39
Islampur	2069	4297.57	2.08
Goalpokhar-I	82	511.28	6.24
Goalpokhar-II	9	15.00	1.67
Uttar Dinajpur	9814	23152.35	2.36

<sup>6</sup>The *Price Stabilisation Fund Scheme* was introduced by Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India in 2003. The small and marginal growers /farmers of tea, coffee, rubber and tobacco with an operational holding of four hectares or less are eligible to enroll as member of the scheme. The objective of the scheme is to provide financial relief to the STGs when prices of these commodities fall below the specified level. The period of operation of the scheme is 01.04.2003 to 31.03.2012.

labour; the *Staff-Supervisory Farms* (15-25 acres) fully managed by staffs called *Munsi* (multi-tasking) either technical advice or work schedule or even payments and have the presence of hired labour (Hannan, 2006). Majority of the STGs are owner supervisory farms in North Bengal as most of them have switched over from pineapple cultivation on their small farm land.

### **Section-III: Locating Trade Relations of Small Tea Growers (STGs)**

#### **III.1 Price Stabilisation Fund Scheme and Role of Ministry of Commerce, Government of India**

The Price Stabilisation Fund (PSF) Scheme was introduced by Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India w.e.f. April, 2003. The small and marginal growers or the Plantation Crops viz. tea, coffee, rubber and tobacco with an operational holding of four hectares or less are eligible to enrol as beneficiary member of the scheme. The objective of the scheme was to provide financial relief to the STGs when prices of their commodities fall below the specified level. The period of operation of the scheme was w.e.f. April, 2003 to March, 2012. The financial support was provided through the members PSF savings bank account, by the Price Stabilization Fund Trust in a given year and was based the categorization of the year as Boom/Normal/Distress Year. Such categorization was done on the basis of a Price Spectrum Band which was fixed and announced every year.

In *Distress year* Price Stabilisation Fund Trust contributed upto Rs.1000/- to the members PSF Savings Bank Account; in *Boom Year* the member had to contribute Rs.1000/- to his PSF Account and in *Normal Year* both the Price Stabilisation fund Trust and the member each contributed Rs.500/- to the members PSF Account. A uniform band of 40 percent for all the four crops was adopted with the Price Spectrum Band of +/-20 percent from the seven years' moving average of international prices of the crops. In accordance with the Price Stabilisation Fund Scheme, the Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India, has, on the basis of data relating to seven years' international prices of each commodity obtained from the Commodity Boards, fixed the Price Spectrum Bands for Tea.

The progress of Price Stabilization Fund Scheme however was not satisfactory. Out of 42619 numbers of STGs are proposed initially, 14883 are enrolled i.e. only 34.92 percent of STGs were enrolled under the scheme since its inception (51<sup>st</sup> & 52<sup>nd</sup> Annual Report: TBI). There were several factors responsible for the slow pace of progress of the scheme. *First*, the premium amount paid by the government was barely able to meet the farm management costs. *Second*, the formalities for getting enrolled under the scheme had too many administrative procedures and most of STGs in India are not even registered with Tea Board of India and this was a major

issue. *Third*, the categorization years as *Boom/Normal/Distress* were not linked at the actual farm gate price of green leaf of STGs across the country. *Fourth*, Price Spectrum Band did not consider and undertake regional dimension of tea price particularly in north and south India. Lastly, PSF scheme was not connected with Price-Sharing Formula implemented by Tea Board of India. Ultimately, the ambitious programme failed to deliver the result to the smallholders.

### III.2 Price-Sharing Formula and Role of Government of West Bengal

Initially the STGs operating in North Bengal sold their green leaf to the estate garden factories, but later number of BLFs evolved to cater the needs of the STGs. Besides, some estate garden factories also purchase green leaf from STGs. In North Bengal, the purchase of green leaf is controlled by *Farias* (leaf agents). During the period of 2001 to 2003, the STGs were adversely affected by the poor price realization despite considerable improvement in the plucking standard i.e. two leaves and a bud (Chakraborty, 2003). The *Report of the Committee on the Tea Industry in West Bengal* (2004), submitted to the Tea Board of India suggested in Para 5.1 (b):

- i. “The Tea Board should lay down a Price-Sharing-Formula in terms of which the sale proceeds of made tea produced by the BLFs is shared in fixed proportions between the STGs and BLFs. The TMCO 2003 has a provision to this effect, and this practice is already being implemented in Sri Lanka. This will ensure that STGs get a reasonable price for the green leaf, which they sell to the BLFs. At present, this market is a buyers market in which the BLFs are able to fix the price at which they will buy green leaf from the STGs and other new non-estate plantations”.
- ii. “In order to ensure further transparency and fairness in the trade in green leaf, there should be a one-to-one linkage between each BLFs and STGs. The Tea Board can chalk out the tagging of selected STGs with each BLF, keeping in view the capacity of each BLF and the geographical location of the BLFs and the Small Tea Plantations. This one-to-one tagging means that a particular BLF can buy green leaf only from the Small Tea Plantations tagged to it, and it cannot buy green leaf from any other source. Similarly, the STGs can sell green leaf only to the BLFs to which they are tagged, and they cannot sell to any other agency. This will ensure further stability in the price of green leaf, and can be introduced along with 100 per cent auction. There is such a system prevailing in Tamil Nadu, though there it has developed on its own over time”.

Eventually considering the interests of the STGs, Tea Board of India introduced the Price-Sharing-Formula between the green leaf suppliers and manufacturers through the Tea Board circular; *vide circular No. 12 (23)/2003/XII/3317 dated*

19/20.01.2004 and 12 (23)/LC/2003/XII/ dated 26.03.2004 and issued an order to implement Price-Sharing-Formula w.e.f. April, 2004.

### III.3 Price-Sharing Formula and Role of Tea Board of India

The formula<sup>7</sup> came into effect from 01.04.04 through a notification by Tea Board with prior approval from the Government for ensuring reasonable returns to the STGs for the green leaf supplied by them to the BLFs/Estate Factories for processing. Under this formula, the manufacturer has to share the sale proceeds with the STGs in the ratio of 40:60 based on the sale price of the manufacturer vis-à-vis average auction price for the corresponding month. While calculating the actual price for the green leaf, the outturn percentage is also taken into consideration. The out turn percentages applicable for Tamil Nadu is 23%, Himachal Pradesh and Uttaranchal is 26.40% and for rest of India it is 21.50%. These changes induced significant repercussions on the functioning of the STGs gardens especially in respect of production, pricing and seasonal price variations of green leaves, involvement of middleman in selling green leaves, price-sharing rise in wage rate.

**Table-7: Region-Specific Percentage Share of Gross Sale of Made Tea**

States/Regions	Percentage Share of STGs and Factory	Outturn Percentage
Assam	60:40	21.50
West Bengal	60:40	21.50
Nilgiris	60:40	23.00
Kerala	60:40	21.50
Himachal Pradesh and Uttaranchal*	52:48	26.40
Tripura	60:40	21.50
Bihar and Rest of India	60:40	21.50

Source: Computed from the Circular No.12(23)LC/2003/XII/3317 on 19/20<sup>th</sup> January 2004, Tea Board of India, Kolkata.

The implementation of Price-Sharing Formula differed regionally and also across states in India. The Tea Board could barely handle this variation efficiently. The monthly average price for CTC tea (from auction and non-auction route) was calculated by Controller of Licensing, Tea Board of India, Kolkata. It is done in first week of every month for the previous month and copy of the same is circulated

<sup>7</sup>The Price-Sharing-Formula envisages sharing of sale proceeds between green leaf supplier and manufacturer in the ratio of 60:40 in all tea growing states except Himachal Pradesh and Uttaranchal, where the sharing is in the ratio of 52:48, so long as the prices realized by the manufacturers remain either at par with or lower than the state average. When the price realization exceeds the state average price, the differential is required to be shared in the ratio of 50:50. While calculating the actual price for the green leaf, the out turn percentage is also taken into consideration. The out turn percentage applicable to Tamil Nadu is 23 per cent, Himachal Pradesh and Uttaranchal it is 26.40 per cent and for rest of India it is 21.50 per cent.

to Tea Board regional offices located in different parts of North India, i.e. Assam, West Bengal, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh<sup>8</sup>. Similarly, for South India, the monthly average price for CTC teas (from auction and non-auction routes) was calculated by Joint Controller of Licensing, Tea Board of India, Cochin. It was done in first week of every month for the previous month and copy of the same was circulated to Tea Board's regional offices located in different parts of South India, i.e. Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka. The variations in prices of tea also left the STGs vulnerable.

In order to protect the interests of the STGs, Government of India amended the Tea Marketing Control Order (TMCO) and made special provisions for green leaf price monitoring through a well articulated functional norm for District Green Leaf Pricing Monitoring Committee (DLPMC). It is to be highlighted here that there are twenty-seven (27) districts in Assam and five (05) districts in West Bengal that grow tea. Interactions with the office of the Collector/Deputy Commissioners of districts revealed that small tea growers are not aware of such green leaf price monitoring committees of the Tea Board of India. Field survey revealed that very few meetings of DLPMC<sup>9</sup> were organized keeping up with the norms in the circular issued despite the fact that Tea Board had constituted and notified Small Tea Grower Development Directorate (SGDD) in 2013 and recruited officers

<sup>8</sup>Additionally, the Tea Board regional office located at Siliguri prepared BLFs-wise monthly green leaf price paid to STGs and average price of CTC received for made teas for North Bengal tea growers as per price-sharing formula and circulated it to the Board's notice board (see Example in Annexure-I). This practice was not in existence in Assam and other North Indian states.

<sup>9</sup>The Tea Board of India notified vide ref. no. SO 1012 (E) dated 15.04.2015 and circulated to all stakeholders vide ref. –Law/08/2013 dated 21.05.2015 for its effective implementation. The Clause as included is 30A.

District Green Leaf Pricing Monitoring Committee – (1) There shall be a green leaf price monitoring committee in each tea growing district comprising of two representatives each from Bought leaf factories, small tea growers and estate factories and one officer of the Board not below the rank of Assistant Director and the Collector or Deputy Commissioner of such tea growing district shall be the ex-officio Chairman. The officer of the Board shall be the member secretary of the committee.

(2) The Registering Authority shall notify the constitution of the committee and the tenure of the committee shall be for three years from the date of such notification and the committee shall be reconstituted after the expiry of every three years.

(3) Upon the death or resignation of any member of the committee, other than the Chairman and officer of the Board, the Registering Authority can re-nominate new member from such category that the deceased or, as the case may be, resigned member represented and the tenure of such re-nominated member shall be for the remaining period, as if such death or resignation of the committee members has not happened.

(4) No member of the committee representing Bought leaf factories, small growers or estate factories shall be a member of two consecutive terms.

(5) The committee shall undertake the following functions, namely:-

(a) to monitor the average green leaf price payable to the small tea growers for each succeeding month based on the last month average auction price of Bought leaf factories of such district by applying price sharing formula as notified by the Registering Authority under the provision of paragraph 30;

(b) to oversee the compliance of payment of such average price to the small tea growers and bring to the notice of the Registering Authority about the errant Bought leaf manufacturer.

(6) The member secretary of the committee shall ensure to conduct at least one meeting of the committee in a month

in all small tea growing districts in the country. There is a complete absence of monitoring mechanism by SGDD of Tea Board though there exists of 67 sub-regional offices (SROs) in India including Assam (39) and West Bengal (15). The SROs of SGDD have failed to provide the basic extension services and farm gate price monitoring as mandated in TMCO. In Assam, Price-Sharing Formula is not properly implemented (Pachona: 2016). The DLPMC constituted by government has failed to stabilize the prices of green leaves. During peak plucking time, BLFs or tea estate refuses or bargain to buy tea leaves. It has serious consequences in laboring conditions and wages. In North Bengal, situation the wage rate in STGs gardens was Rs. 132.50 plus ration of Rs. 1.80 in 2016-17 which increased to Rs. 150.00 plus ration of 1.80. At the same time, the green leaf price realized by STGs during peak season (July-September) in 2017 was Rs. 4-5 / per kg (Uttar Banga Sambad, October 12, 2017) and Rs. 9-10 / per kg in 2018 (Uttar Banga Sambad, May 09, 2018).

### **III.4 Development from Below and Initiatives of Small Tea Growers**

#### **Assam**

The processing of own leaf would represent a big step towards self-sufficiency for the STGs. In comparison to the large tea factories, the small-scale tea processing units present different picture. The case studies from Assam reveal that STGs have moved ahead with individual initiative. There is no collective move towards organizing the STGs. Individual initiatives have pushed the sector. The case studies from fields of Assam reveal how individual initiatives by the STGs have helped them overcome various challenges and establish profitable ventures and secure a livelihood through small tea garden.

*Lachit Neog and Hemanga Gohain* bought 9.5 hectares tea garden at *Amlongchang* in central Assam in 2002 and converted it to organic production. It was certified by SKAL, Holland in 2006. Neog and Gohain have set up a small tea processing unit in the garden itself: the machinery cost is Rs. 6 lakh, two generator sets cost is Rs. 2.9 lakh, the building and sheds cost is Rs. 80,000 and the furnace fired by paddy husk costs Rs. 30 thousand with total project cost of Rs. 10 lakh. The unit is processing about 120 kg of green leaf per day and fine quality orthodox tea with future plans for producing green tea. As revealed during interaction, there are about 30 such small processing units in Assam and the Tea Board of India yet to recognize these units. The efforts of the two young men have helped them to create their own production units and have also saved the uncertainty of uneven bargain in selling green leaf to factory gardens at nominal rates. The investments have helped in ensuring livelihood and security and economic well being.

*Ranjit Chetia*, a B.E. in Chemical Technology, a STG, and a resident of Golaghat district, have also developed a small-scale CTC processing unit and experimented



in his house yard. He is on the process of patent right with two of the scientists at Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, Jorhat. Presently, there are two production units: one is at Arunachal Pradesh, which has been approved by the Tea Board of India, and the other has been set up at Golaghat town. Both the processing units have started production. The small-scale processing unit has a threshing capacity of 1000-1500 green leaf/per day and cost is Rs. 13-15 lakh. His family has been STG for long and his experiences has helped him to understand the challenges that lie in this trade as well. He was fairly well acquainted with the market monopoly of BLFs which is exploitative in nature. It was to break free of this exploitation that he developed his processing unit with a small-scale technology. The young entrepreneur also believed that fellow STGs can also use this small technology which could help them break away from non-remunerative production process. The young man also supported fellow STGs with his technical and other expertise with respect to production and marketing.

Pabitra Lingda, a member of Sighpho Tribe<sup>10</sup> of Ketetong Gram Panchayat of Tinsukia district has also set up a small-scale processing unit of orthodox tea at his residence. In the same village, there are two other such units under operation. He has 10 acres of tea cultivation adjacent to his house, which he started in the year 1992. In, 2002, he initiated his plan to convert it into organic tea cultivation and currently he produces organic tea production without any use of chemicals and fertilizers. Compost, cow-dung and urine are used in resisting pest attack in his plantation. It was revealed by him that after switching over to organic cultivation, birds are regular visitors to his fields and also help in keeping away pests and insects by feeding on them. Currently he plucks 30 rounds in a year from March to November. He sells his orthodox tea locally at Rs. 300-400 per kg. Generally, army officers and government employees purchase from the retail outlet that he runs from his house. The efforts to switch over to organic cultivation have also brought better results in terms of quality and price of his orthodox tea manufactured at home.

The STGs in Assam have been driven by individual family run enterprise. Family members are actively engaged in the garden and seasonal labourers are employed only. The STGs have been developed using areas which had hitherto been unutilized or under utilized and an estimated 20 million hectares of land were brought under tea cultivation during the last decade by the small growers (DES Report: 2013). At least five workers are employed in each small garden and an estimated 2.40 lakh people are directly employed in the sector of which 1.45 lakhs are ex-tea garden or excess number of workers from the nearby big tea estates, especially women labourers (DES: 2013). The STGs in Assam is still in its

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<sup>10</sup>The *Sighpho Tribe* is distributed over 19 villages in upper Assam and almost all the villages are located adjacent to each other. Some of the households have developed organic tea production and marketing it locally and abroad in Cannada.



nascent stage and is unorganized sector. As majority of the STGs do not have their own processing units and leaves are sold to BLF which is a form of dependent subcontract. Unregulated growth of STGs has also added to the uncertainty of leaf price and wide fluctuations. Notwithstanding the challenges the private initiatives has also helped the sector to sustain.

### North Bengal

The STGs in North Bengal mostly sell their leaves through leaf agents who play a major role in leaf trading. They provide advance to the growers and exploit in terms of quantity and quality of leaf. The indebtedness of the growers to the agents leave them virtually trapped in the clutches leaf agents. The reason for selling green leaf through *Farias* is many and is complex combination of situational issues, assemblage and other economic factors (Hannan: 2006). An often repeated quote by the STGs is “*we follow the movement and direction of the wind*”.

In most STG farms prior indebtedness is the primary reason for selling green leaf at low prices to the *Farias*. The farm size is a natural constraint for regular production which also restricts access to avail the factory vehicle. Higher the size of the farm, regular is the production in the farm by rotating plucking in different fields on daily basis and better the incentive for factories to collect green leaf. The *Farias* play a mediating role by providing the vehicle and collecting the green leaves from the STGs. Therefore, this new intervening community is an outcome in response to the gap between the STGs and their nearby factory tea production units which procure their green tea leaves. In addition to being the link, the *Farias* also provide advance money, cash payment and other support services to these STGs to sustain their plantation and livelihood.

To overcome such an exploitative situation, the STGs have joined hands together and formed SHGs in Duars of North Bengal. There are three such societies: *The Panbari STGs Society*, *The Jai Jalpesh STGs Society*, and the *Naba Jagaran STGs Society*. Though the governance and conditions for establishment of *Tea Producing Societies* (SHGs) by Tea Board of India seems to be same, yet the other three states i.e. Assam, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala, such models are yet to establish and transform their farms into processing and visible in marketing. The *Panbari* is the first STGs Society in India and *Jalpaiguri STGs Association* has played an active role in establishing such units. The agro-extension services and leadership qualities of the association propelled the STGs of the region to take the initiative of forming SHGs. Registering its product as *Mahalaxmi Tea* brand the group has been selling its tea in the auction market. The *Jai Jalpesh* society has its own registered brand named *Shib Bari Jai Jalpesh Bari Tea* since 2013. The factory has a retail outlet within its garden premises and promotes direct marketing. The entire production of the gardens is sold through auction. The Society has procured

export license in 2016 from Tea Board of India and have demonstrated their product in Russia and Kazakhstan.

## **Conclusion**

There is an underlying process of change in the nature of implementation of policies of Government of India by the Tea Board with wide regional variations. A major limiting factor for the STGs have been the ownership rights over the land used for STGs which has also hampered the process of being registered with the Tea Board of India. The TBI is yet to engage in addressing this issue with state governments. The result has been that STGs which is an unorganized sector faces the uncertainty and challenges that are faced by any other production unit in the unorganized sector. Coupled with the market monopoly of BLFs, the STGs have been left with weak bargaining power. Lack of market information, absence of proper storage facilities, transportation problems ultimately bring down the price of green leaf.

It is worth mentioning that two countries i.e. Sri Lanka and Kenya where more than 60 per cent production of tea comes from smallholders, the respective governments and the regulatory agencies have put in relevant measures. There are elaborate mechanisms to secure better price to farmers and transparency in auction and non-auction markets which ultimately percolate down to the STGs in the supply chain. The TMCO has made provision for equitable sharing of the tea price between the STGs and BLFs by taking into account the cost of production of green tea leaves in the smallholdings and the cost of manufacturing and marketing by the BLFs. It is seen that the Association of BLFs are well connected to dictate their terms and conditions, while STGs have weak base to negotiate their terms of trade and it is reflected in implementing the Price-Sharing-Formula. The SGDD and SROs of Tea Board are yet to play an effective key role in implementing the objectives of District Level Price Monitoring Committee (DLPMC) of the respective district of their jurisdiction.

Most of the small tea gardens in Assam are on Government ceiling land without formal ownership. The Land Act of Assam restricts the transfer of ownership right to the growers. This restricts the growers to qualify for registration with Tea Board and avail the benefits under various schemes. Similarly, in Bengal the policy of providing NOC is required to register the farms. But the Govt. of West Bengal has withheld the process of issuing NOC to growers since 2001 and therefore the STGs cannot register with Tea Board and avail financial benefits from the formal sources. On the contrary, BLFs have been encouraged in both the states unlike the initiatives in Tamil Nadu where co-operative model was taken up and an INDCO factory model was started since 1960s.

Approximately fifty per cent of the production of the STGs farms (green leaf) come during the months between *July to September* (third quarter), while it is in this period STGs receive minimum price for their product. The introduction of proper irrigational measures and implementing catchment planning in the small tea-growing areas can enhance the farm production during February to June. This requires institutional support and incentives from Tea Board of India and respective State Governments. Per unit production in the small farms as compared to large ones is higher. Higher productivity in the small farm is on account of the relatively young plantations as the tea bushes are young ranging between 20 to 30 years as compared to old bushes in estate gardens. Small tea growers are merely price takers and sell their green leaf at whatever prices offered by the estate factories or BLFs. BLFs mostly procure through leaf agents who have become the major link between the growers and the factory/estate. The major share of green leaf prices are siphoned off by the *intermediaries* as the STGs are not directly linked with BLFs. In order to ensure a remunerative price to the STGs who are the dominant suppliers of green leaf to factories, there need to be some regulation on quality control, price of green tea and direct payment transfer system to the STGs from BLFs/estates. This would help in incentivizing the STGs and ensure due returns on their product.

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## Annexure-I

### Declaration of Green Leaf price under Price-Sharing Formula

Sl No.	Name of Factory	TMCO NO.	As Per E-Return (July 2006)	
			Made Tea (Rs/Kg)	Green Leaf (Rs/Kg)
1	Aryaman Tea Factory	(RC. 1545)	N.P.S.	N.P.S.
2	Balasan Tea Factory	(RC. 1672)	58.89	7.60
3	Bansibhariji Tea Factory	(RC. 1672)	58.00	7.48
4	Dalmiya Tea Plants & Ind. Ltd	(RC. 1759)	62.64	8.08
5	Darshanand Holdings Factory	(RC. 1720)	61.06	7.88
6	Duke Tea Private Ltd.	(RC. 1767)	56.77	7.32
7	Durga Tea Industries	(RC. 1776)	60.25	7.77
8	Essels Tea Factory	(RC. 1665)	61.52	7.94
9	Fatapukur Tea Factory	(RC. 1415)	56.00	7.22
10	Gobra Agro Tea Factory	(RC. 1483)	50.00	6.45
11	Gupta Tea Factory	(RC. 1732)	63.99	8.26
12	Himalayan Tea Factory	(RC. 1555)	60.58	7.82
13	Hindustan Tea Processing	(RC. 1412)	70.01	9.03
14	Hanuman Tea Factory	(RC. 1641)	N.P.S.	N.P.S.
15	Joghara Tea Factory	(RC. 1782)	65.00	8.39
16	Kanchan Agro Products	(RC. 1501)	55.98	7.22
17	Kanchanjanga Tea Factory	(RC. 1740)	59.00	7.61
18	Kayan Agro Tea Factory	(RC. 1549)	62.55	8.07
19	Limtex Steels Tea Factory	(RC. 1758)	59.49	7.67
20	Limtex Tea Factory	(RC. 1461)	59.65	7.69
21	M. Rudra Tea Factory	(RC. 1766)	N.P.S.	N.P.S.
22	Manakamna Tea Factory	(RC. 1638)	57.64	7.44
23	Mars Tea (India) Pvt. Ltd.	(RC. 1714)	49.89	6.44
24	Mount View Tea Factory	(RC. 1661)	55.87	7.20
25	Mohitnagar Tea Factory	(RC. 1681)	53.01	6.81
26	P.C.M. Tea Factory	(RC. 1619)	59.64	7.69

27	P.P.S. Progressive Tea Factory	(RC. 1531)	Closed	Closed
28	Parag Tea Factory	(RC. 1450)	59.17	7.63
29	Parsuram Tea Factory	(RC. 1697)	60.61	7.82
30	Pioneer Tea Factory	(RC. 1420)	60.71	7.83
31	Seal Tea Factory	(RC. 1463)	58.12	7.50
32	Sevok Tea Factory	(RC. 1593)	20.00	2.58
33	Shree Ganapati Tea Factory	(RC. 1464)	61.10	7.88
34	Shree Rama Tea Factory	(RC. 1528)	56.35	7.27
35	Sujali Tea Factory	(RC. 1693)	58.60	7.56
36	Sondeep Tea Factory	(RC. 1735)	58.22	7.51
37	Sundaram Agro Tea Factory	(RC. 1537)	62.39	8.04
38	Super Klass Tea Factory	(RC. 1541)	63.54	8.20
39	Shakti Tea Factory	(RC. 1467)	59.94	7.73
40	Shanti Tea Factory	(RC. 1647)	60.39	7.79
41	Tea Tops India Tea Factory	(RC. 1462)	65.86	8.50
42	Teesta Tea Co. Pvt. Ltd.	(RC. 1749)	63.21	8.15
43	Terai Dooars Tea Factory	(RC. 1746)	55.15	7.11
44	Terai (Karjeepara) Tea Factory	(RC. 1721)	58.92	7.60
45	Terai Tea Factory	(RC. 1644)	47.18	6.09
46	Terai Tea Factory (Exp)	(RC. 1628)	57.30	7.39
47	Topline Tea Factory	(RC. 2914)	57.38	7.40
48	Unique Tea Born Factory	(RC. 1630)	N.P.S.	N.P.S.
49	Ushasree Tea Factory	(RC. 1536)	61.41	7.92
50	Vrindaban Tea Factory	(RC. 1770)	54.88	7.08

*N.P.S.-Not Properly Submitted*

*Source: Tea Board Regional Office, Siliguri, West Bengal*