

Contribution of Tea Industry on Employment Generation in Assam

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Abstract – *The tea industry is an important source of employment and income generation in the state of Assam. Though the state is rich in mineral and non-mineral resources, tea cultivation has been an important economic activity for the Assamese people for nearly two hundred years. This paper examines the contribution of tea industry to employment generation in Assam while highlighting the avenues of self-employment in the sector with advent of small tea growers in the state.*

Keywords – Assam, Employment, Entrepreneur, Tea Industry, Worker

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INTRODUCTION

Assam is one of the larger states in North East India and is the gateway to the whole of Northeastern region of India. Assam is blessed with many mineral and natural resources which have provided a foundation for setting up of industries in the state but the fact remains that agriculture continues to be the mainstay of the Assamese people. A majority of the population is engaged in production of food and non-food crops ranging from the staple rice/ paddy, wheat, pulses and minor millets, fruits and vegetables to jute, bamboo and tea. Tea is, in fact, an important crop of the region and is a regional specialty of the state. The scientific name of the tea plant is *Camellia sinensis* and the Assam variety is known as *Assamica*. Apart from large tea gardens owned by reputed Indian or multinational companies, many unemployed youths have also undertaken tea growing as business venture.

This paper attempts to trace the ability of tea industry in generating viable employment opportunities in the state of Assam. The article is based on secondary sources of data such as published research works from reputed journals, Economic survey of Assam and Tea Board statistics.

Tea cultivation in Assam

Tea is grown in both the Brahmaputra basin and the Barak plains of the state and Assam produces more than 50% of tea in India. While tea is grown in more than 35 countries across the world, Assam alone accounts for almost 1/6 of the total world production. Tea produced in Assam is exported to many of the European and Middle-East countries as well as Pakistan, Egypt, Japan and Israel. The important districts involved in tea production are Tinsukia,

Dibrugarh, Shibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Nagaon and Somitpur.

The agriculture sector provides employment to more than 50% of rural population in Assam and contributes nearly 25% to the state GDP. Since tea is an important agricultural produce of the state apart from rice, wheat, potato et cetera, many more people depend directly or indirectly on tea cultivation for their livelihood.

The history of cultivation of tea in the Assam Valley goes back to centuries. The indigenous inhabitants have been known to use wild tea as food and drink even before 1815. Robert Bruce is usually credited identification of the tea plant in 1823 and its eventual popularization as a viable economic activity. Soon many British settlers moved into the Assam region to set up tea plantations. By 1841, Indians led by Moniram Datta Barma also known as Moniram Dewan, entered the scene and set up in plantation in the region.¹ The 19th and early 20th Century witnessed phenomenal growth of tea plantations in the region. However, while great progress was made in this period, after the 1950s stagnation set in due to various political and economic happenings in the country and entry of new competitors in world market. This was inimical to development of tea industry in Assam which suffered low incomes and low returns.

Self-employment in tea cultivation

The British rule was generally biased against providing opportunities to Indian businessmen to reduce competition for British businessmen. Also, the British government formulated its policies in a way to discourage local entrepreneurial activity. The Assamese found it difficult to set up tea gardens

which was also a very costly endeavor. However, entrepreneurs like Maniram Dewan, Roseshwar Barua, Hemdhar Barua Dinanath Bezbaruah were some Indian pioneers during colonial period. After independence many rich Indians and companies bought large tea gardens providing employment to many people. The government of India initiated number of schemes and missions to promote tea plantations from the 1970s and encouraged small tea growers with holding ranging from 0.13 to 3.0 hectares leading to massive increase in the number of tea gardens and overall production of tea. During the 1970s, the idea of small-scale tea cultivation was mooted to increase production. By 1985, many young educated people started growing tea on small scale as they were sitting unemployed. According to the All Assam Small Growers Association there are more than 1.4 lakh small tea growers cultivating around 80,948 ha of land contributing more than 40% of Assam's total tea production.²

Employment generation by the tea industry

The tea industry is a highly labour intensive one. Approximately 17% of workers in Assam are engaged in tea plantations³ providing average daily employment to more than six lakh persons in the state. This is nearly half the employment provided in the tea industry all over the country.

Assam's tea industry is a vital source of employment providing job opportunities to all sections of people including skilled and unskilled workers, industrial and non-industrial personnel. People from different communities and gender are able to find work in this industry. The Assamese tea industry provides direct employment to more than 50 thousand workers of which half are women workers. The tea industry of Assam alone accounts for 66.6% of total labour employed in North India and around 54% in All India.⁴ Since the picking and sorting of tea leaves are generally done by women workers, tea industry plays an important role in their economic emancipation. According to Economic Survey of Assam 2017, the tea industry provides average daily employment to 6.86 lakh persons with an average of 11.1 lakh labour employed per day.⁵

Historically the British plantation owners found that there was deficiency of local labour to work on their plantations, so they initially tried to bring trained workers from China. However, this was not very cost-effective so they resorted to bringing migrant labour from various parts of India, specially Bihar. These workers came to work on the plantations and eventually settled in and around the plantations. Even today, a large proportion of Bihari migrant workers work in the tea industry of Assam.

The Small tea growers have emerged as strong providers of employment in the state. In 2017, about 3 lakh persons were engaged in tea cultivation.⁶

Problems

The main concerns plaguing the tea industry stem from ignorant and nonchalant attitude of the people. Many owners are only interested in maximizing their incomes for sake of lavish lifestyle. So they have tended to overlook the needs of the land and the workers working on their plantations. As a result, the tea plants have deteriorated age and lack of pruning and rejuvenation. Remuneration paid to the workers continues to be a concern as they are paid very low wages. With decreasing returns from plantations, owners resort to paying lesser and lesser. This has led to exodus of skilled labour. Employment of untrained workers affects production negatively.

The workers employed by the small tea growers are in a worse situation as they do not get any help from labour unions. Hence, they are not paid gratuity, pension, Provident fund etc. Most plantations fail to provide the various civic amenities such as medical facility, schools etc to their workers leading to weaker socioeconomic condition of the workers. This has led to rampant underdevelopment and discontent in the region.

Since majority of tea production in the state is carried out by the small tea growers nowadays, the workers are able to get gainful employment for only a limited time period. Rest of the time they are forced to work as agricultural labour in other fields or find employment elsewhere.

The issues of lack of market, connectivity, quality monitoring and standardization affect the tea industry just like any other industry.

CONCLUSION

Employment generation remains a major concern for India. Evidently, the state alone cannot provide adequate livelihood to all people. In such case it is imperative that educated and unemployed youth enter the self-employment sphere. As many people continue to have a base in rural areas and agriculture, it makes sense to enter this field armed with new knowledge. Assam is showing the way to the country as regards employment generation and entrepreneurial activity over the last few decades. The tea industry of Assam has been able to provide not only work but has also provided a decent standard of living to the people of Assam.

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