



Small-Scale Tea Economy and *Arsla* Organic Tea Cooperative: A Grassroots Initiative of Khasi Tribes of Meghalaya, North-East India

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KEYWORDS

Tea Economy,
Cooperatives, Farm Size,
Tribes, Organic Tea

ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to explore the Small-Scale Tea Economies in North-East India. Of late, it is seen that most of the tribes in the North-East have engaged into tea cultivation. As per the Tea Board of India (2019), there are 110,422 Small Tea Growers (STGs) spread over 47 districts in the region. The 'Arsla Organic Tea Growers and Producers Cooperative' model was innovated by Khasi Tribes of Meghalaya way back in 2013 with an objective to improve their scale of operation into processing and marketing. In 2020, a global pandemic affected their production and marketing channel due to their inexperience in the tea industry and particularly marketing. The Sub-Regional Office (SRO) of Tea Board of India has also found unsatisfactory to strengthen their extension services to the Cooperative.

Introduction

The tea economy today consists of *Estate* and *Small-Scale* sub-sectors and deviated from its classic definitions and characteristics of the Estate model of farming, which was once initiated by the colonial rulers in India. This Small-Scale Tea Economy (SSTE) contributes roughly 653.55 M.kgs (48.41 percent) out of a total of 1350.04 M.kgs (Tea Board, 2018-19; Hannan, 2020a). The 1990s has witnessed structural changes in tea economy in India's North-East and many small-scale farmers popularly known as *Small Tea Growers* (STGs) entered into tea cultivation (Hannan, 2017; Saha, 2020). Earlier tea cultivation was confined in Assam, West Bengal, Tripura, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala, known as the traditional tea growing areas in India (Hannan, 2017). The geographies of plantations has been innovated over the last three decades and one finds them in the hilly and mountainous terrains of North-East India, where farmers are engaged in small-scale tea cultivation (Hannan, 2019; Bos *et al.*, 2020). Besides, states like Bihar, Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh also grow tea in the farming sector. In the SSTE sector there are 210,225 STGs cultivating 215,886.40 hectares of land in India. The average farm size is 1.03 hectares in India as a whole and 1.24 hectares in North-East India. The highest-size farms are found in Nagaland with 6.79 hectares and the highest numbers of STGs in Assam, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal in descending order. More than fifty percent STGs are situated in North-East India (Tea Board, 2019). There are 571 Bought-Leaf Factories (BLFs) situated all over the country, which purchase green leaf from the STGs (Confederation of Indian Small Tea Growers Associations, 2019). The estate sector has 1569 tea estates with tea area of 420,670.60 hectares and average size of estates is 268.11 hectares in India. The average size of tea estates in hill states in India is relatively small, particularly in Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Sikkim (Table 1).

Generally, a plantation is considered as a specialized type farming, and there are different opinions on the minimum size of a plantation. Plantations are divided into: a) *Smallholdings*; typically less than 10 hectares, on which a plantation crop may be either the main activity, or one of several activities. b) *Small plantations*, frequently family-owned or belonging to small companies operating only in the country concerned; typically ranging 10-500 hectares. c) *Large plantations* (or estates): starting from 100 hectares to several thousand hectares, typically owned by Transnational Companies (TNC), large national companies, a state organization or an exceptionally large landowner (Goldthorpe, 1983; Tiffen and Mortimore, 1990; Mishra *et al.*, 2012). The minimum economic size required to support a processing plant has been quoted as 15,000 hectares for sugar, 7,500 hectares for oil palm, 6,000 hectares for bananas, 3,000 hectares for rubber and 600 hectares for tea (Goldthorpe, 1983; Tiffen and Mortimore, 1990), this has been disproven and SSTEs also own processing factories today and there has been a shift in the traditional characters of plantations as oppose to established norms.

Kirk (1987) argues correctly that looking at either the plantation itself, or at some of the new organizational forms of plantations in which there are contractual arrangements with smallholders, one should ask the following questions: a) To what extent do smallholders receive a fair price for their production, or labourers for their work, after taking into account fluctuating world prices for primary commodities? b) To what extent do smallholders participate in decision-making, with respect, most importantly, to choice of crops and cultivation methods? Production cooperatives appear to offer an alternative mode to the large-scale production of crops, but they have been tried, and failed, in several countries. In Jamaica, three Government-owned sugar estates were turned into workers' co-operatives in 1970 and early 1980's (Coote, 1988; Phillips, 2010). They lasted six years, and failed because of underinvestment in the years preceding state acquisition, capital shortage afterwards, and technical and management problems. On the other hand, in Maharashtra village sugar producers own and operate cooperative sugar factories efficiently and innovatively with notable success (Attwood and Baviskar, 1987; Baviskar and Attwood, 1995). The key to success was the resolution of the competition between the factory and the artisan '*gur*' (jaggery) sugar manufacturers for the supply, and the successful balancing of the interests of the larger and smaller producers in the operation of the factories.

Hayami reported that small family farms and large plantations are the two contrasting modes of agricultural production in tropical Asia. The term '*plantation*' refers to a large farm estate producing a crop (or crops) for commercial purposes, using a large number of hired wage labourers organized under a centralized management hierarchy (Hayami, 2002). It is a new system brought by the west to extract tropical agricultural products for export to home countries. The plantations became especially common after the 1870s with innovations in transportation such as the use of steamships including the opening of the Suez Canal and railways. Alternatively, a 'Family Farm' is considered to be an old institution, which has existed for time immemorial where the communities of indigenous smallholders had already been established. Family farms proved to be equally or more efficient producers of tropical export crops with their family labour characterized by low supervision costs, relative to plantations based on hired labour. This advantage of family farms rose as population density increased and rural infrastructure improved. Neilson and Pritchard (2009) while studying the small tea growers emphasize on the institutional dimension and social embeddedness, which emphasized on patterns of relation in economic activities. They argued that governance and institutions were necessarily co-produced in an interactive nexus with the global value chain. This interactive nexus was defined by the struggle for new forms of value chain governance. The way these struggles are played out and resolved, indicates how producers are inserted in the global value chains, the economic returns and the level of control (Pallavi and Johnson, 2012).

Banerjee reported that the smallholder tea sub-sector is an important segment worldwide. In Sri Lanka more than 400,000 smallholders constitute 64 percent of total tea area and 76 percent of tea production. In Kenya, 560,000 smallholders contribute roughly 62 percent of tea production. In China, Vietnam and Indonesia too, smallholders dominate in Tea production (Banerjee, 2012). He further highlights that the smallholders face high levels of transaction costs and lack of bargaining power in green leaf and input markets. In India and Indonesia, their growth is hampered by lack of institutional support which, on the contrary, is present in Kenya and Sri Lanka. Therefore, it is pertinent to ask where the SSTEs are located in the supply chain and how much a counter pressure they have been able to build against the global capital or whether there is evidence of a surrender of the local institutions to the global capital.

Bhowmik (1997) highlighted that the existence of the cooperatives had imposed checks on the exploitative tendencies of the Bought-Leaf Factories (BLFs) in Nilgiris. In fact, the first cooperative tea factories in the tea sector were established in Tamil Nadu based on the recommendations of the Plantation Enquiry Commission in 1956 (Hannan, 2020b). There are two kinds of tea cooperatives available in the tea industry -- firstly, the cooperatives formed by the STGs, and secondly, plantation workers in the closed tea estates formed cooperatives such as in Tripura (Hannan, 2020b). The STGs were able to get remunerative prices and increase their income through their collectives either enhancing their economies of scale or survival by innovating the alternative livelihoods due to closure of existing tea estates. Therefore, the present study is about the SSTEs and the *Arsla Tea Cooperative* with a focus on the tribal areas in the North-East, and is relevant for exploring the utilization of land resources by adapting environment friendly organic cultivation practices, entrepreneurship development and livelihood sustainability.

Objectives of the Study

The present paper explores and investigates the following objectives:

1. To examine the growth and spatial pattern of the SSTEs in North-East India.
2. To report the success stories of community-based organization of the *Arsla Organic Tea Growers and Producers Cooperatives Society Limited* of the Khasi Tribes of Meghalaya, North-East India.
3. To analyze the trade relations that exist in the supply chain of green leaf production, processing of made tea and access to the market of the tribal community engaged in the SSTEs.

Methodology

A mixed-approach of both qualitative and quantitative techniques was used to collect data of the present study. *Tea Statistics* of Tea Board of India is used extensively to estimate the size and regional pattern of emerging SSTEs in India as well as North-East India. The primary data from the field were collected through both structured and in-depth interviews, and repeated telephonic interviews were also conducted in order to collect and also validate the informations during the period 2018-2021. The first round of fieldwork was carried out during February to April, 2018, and the second round in March to May, 2019. The subjects were included and interviewed in the present study using a purposive sampling method. An informed consent was obtained and objectives of the present study were explained before the collection of data. Three key informants were identified using purposive sampling methods, and considered for the in-depth interviews, viz., the President of the '*Confederation of Indian Small Tea Growers Associations (CISTA)*', the Managing Director and the Secretary of the '*Arsla Organic Tea Growers and Producers Co-operative Society Limited*'. Lastly, the experiences and association with the subjects and informants of the authors during the fieldwork also enriched the explanations and analysis of the present research study.

Results

Spatial Aspects of Small-Scale Tea Economies in North-East India

In India, the SSTEs are found in 66 districts spread over 16 states out of which 47 districts are situated in North-East India (Tea Board, 2018-19; Hannan, 2019). During the corresponding period, the SSTEs produced 323.791 million kg of made tea out of total production of 723.96 million kg in the North-East. This substantial growth of this sub-sector is a noticeable change during the last two-three decades in the region, but the situations are different for varied reasons. Firstly, the entire North-East India may be divided into two categories: *Traditional* and *Non-Traditional* tea growing areas. Assam and Tripura are known as traditionally tea growing states since the beginning of tea plantations in India and have shared the colonial history of their emergence. The other six states are known to be non-traditional tea growing areas. Secondly, there is a presence of land under tea cultivation which was used previously under '*Jhuming*' and government officials including the Tea Board, believed that tea cultivation would be a better option than any other crops for the SSTEs involved. Thirdly, the growing tea area in the North-East is diverse in ethnic and linguistic plurality and has unique socio-cultural history. This has also resulted in varieties of tea technology and processing and presence of traditional knowledge in farming and processing tea which is yet to be explored. Fourthly, the land rights and tenure system differ across states as many of these areas are being governed and administered by traditional institutions in the 6th schedule areas except some areas of Assam and Tripura. Therefore, schemes and provisions of the Tea Board have less penetration in these areas unless a proper research, documentation, capacity building and a road map is prepared and community participation is extended. Hence, the present research attempts to have an in-depth understanding in restoring the tribal communities' livelihoods and document their traditional sustainable approaches in the SSTEs.

Table 1: *Geographies of Small-Scale Tea Economies in North-East India*

States/Regions	STGs (No)	Tea Area (Hector)	Farm Size (Hector)	Tea Districts (No)
Arunachal Pradesh	1690	4630.5	2.74	10
Assam	101085	105291	1.04	22
Meghalaya	644	910.35	1.41	3
Mizoram	364	182.80	0.50	2
Manipur	489	1382.61	2.83	1
Nagaland	3354	22772.27	6.79	2
Sikkim	30	8.75	0.29	1
Tripura	2766	1407.28	0.51	6
North-East	110422	136585.60	1.24	47
North India	45541	40448.57	0.89	13
South India	54262	38852.31	0.72	06
All India	210225	215886.40	1.03	66

Source: Computed from Tea Statistics, 2019

Organizational Innovations and the Arsla Organic Tea Cooperative

The *Arsla Organic Tea Growers and Producers Cooperative Society Limited* was established in 2013. It is situated at *Nongjri* village in Meghalaya which is 33 kms away from Shillong and 6-7 kms from the *Tea Development Centre*, the Government of Meghalaya located at the Umsning block (Figure 1). Administratively it falls under the Ri-Bhoi district and the village has 153 houses. The total population

is 897 persons of which 452 are males and 445 are females, 863 persons belong to scheduled tribes (Census, 2011). The village has a sex ratio of 985 persons which is just below the state average of 989 persons. The literacy rate of the village is higher with 82.77 percent as compared to 74.43 percent of the state of Meghalaya. Female literacy is 85.92 percent and male literacy is 79.59 percent. The name *Arsla* is derived from two Khasi words 'Ar' means two and 'sla' means leaves. The total workers in the village are 290 persons of which 198 are males and 92 are females and the distribution of main and marginal workers are 237 persons and 53 persons respectively. At the beginning, only 30 farmers approximately with 70 hectares of land planted tea bushes way back in the 1990s. Some of the farmers planted tea bushes with the support of the *Tea Development Centre* (TDC) established in 1978 at Umshning under the Department of Horticulture, Government of Meghalaya. Plant saplings were supplied to the farmers by TDC free of cost with a cash incentive of 15000 rupees per hectare was given to grow tea. This is how the farmers began their journey to tea cultivation. Now, green leaves are harvested from the tea fields starting from the first week of April to the first week of November. The rest of the months are lean periods and no harvesting activity takes place during the lean season. Farmers practice fine plucking standards of two leaves and a bud and the quality of tea produced by the *Arsla Cooperative* is appreciated by all corners in the market. It is often said by tea experts that the quality of tea is made on a farm with good cultivation practices and fine plucking standards. The *Arsla Organic Tea* is known for its strict farm management practices (Hannan, 2020c). Tea is purely grown using organic cultivation methods in the field. Before the establishment of the *Arsla Organic Tea Cooperative* they used to sell green leaf to the 'Nalari' tea factory which produced conventional CTC tea (crush, tear and curl method) located at Nongpoh near the Assam-Meghalaya border. Over the years, the *Anderson* tea factory has come up to fulfill the needs of farmers at Umshning which produces both the *CTC* and *Orthodox* varieties of teas. To overcome the crisis, the farmers joined together and the *Arsla Tea Factory* was established in 2018 under the *Mini Tea Factory* scheme of Tea Board of India. It started producing *Orthodox* variety of tea in the year 2019. A 'Mini Tea Factory means a tea factory owned by a small grower, an association of small tea growers or a Producers Company and which sources all the required tea leaf from its own plantation for the purpose of manufacture of tea and having capacity to produce not more than five hundred kilograms of made tea per day' (Government of India, 2017).

Figure 1: Growth History and Timeline of Arsla Organic Tea Cooperative

- *Tea Development Centre* in Meghalaya was established in 1978
- *Ri-Bhoi Small Tea Growers Association* was established in 2008
- *Arsla Organic Tea Growers and Producers Cooperative Society Limited* was established in 2013
- Control Union Inspection India Pvt. Ltd. Certified the *Arsla Organic Garden* in 2013
- In 2014, the *Arsla Tea Cooperative* received one time financial grant of 68 lakhs from Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India under the *Mission Organic Value Chain Development for North-Eastern Region* (MOVCDNER)
- *Arsla Tea Factory* was established in 2018
- *Arsla Tea Factory* was registered under Tea Marketing Control Order (TMCO) in May 2019
- *Arsla Organic Tea* started selling made tea at Guwahati Tea Auction Centre (GTAC) in 2020

The *Arsla Tea Cooperative Factory* has 61 members and started with a shared capital of 25 lakhs. As per the bye-laws of the Society, a single share can be a maximum of five percent of authorized capital of 50 lakhs. Therefore, the upper limit of a share is fixed at 2.5 lakhs. Out of 61 members, only 4-5 members have an upper limit. The lowest share of individual members normally varies from 2-3 thousand rupees only. Initially, the farmers were moving from pillar to post to set up their *Mini-Tea Factory* due to financial shortcomings. The project value of the *Arsla Tea Factory* was estimated at 1.36 crores. The *Meghalaya Rural Cooperative Bank* came forward and extended financial support of 1.08 crores with

an interest rate ranging from 12.5-13.5 percent per annum. In 2014, they received a one-time financial grant of 68 lakhs rupees from the Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India under the *Mission Organic Value Chain Development for North-Eastern Region* (MOVCDNER). They have not received any financial support from the Tea Board of India though there were promises of providing them for setting up Office Building, Reception Room and other Infrastructures. In 2019, they were told to be given pruning machines for bush management in their gardens which they have not received so far. They might be provided in future by the Tea Board of India.

Organic Certification and the *Arsla Organic Tea*

The *Arsla Organic Tea Garden* was certified in the year 2013 by the *Control Union Inspection India Pvt. Ltd.* The certification process was facilitated by the Department of Horticulture, Government of Meghalaya. The farmers of the *Arsla Cooperative* were passing through all odds in their journey starting from planting tea bushes to the formation of the cooperative. The establishment of the *Arsla Organic Tea Factory* was an anticipated expectation of good harvest, access to market, remunerative returns and sustainable livelihoods. They faced and travelled through crop reduction during the process of conversion of their farms from conventional to organic tea production and the challenges of pest and disease management in tea fields. After switching over to organic in 2013, farmers were running at loss. Crop production (Green Leaf) is reduced to 10-15 thousand kg from 30-33 thousand kg earlier from a patch of land of 3-4 hectares. On the other side, the made tea (Processed Tea) which is organic certified is sold to the market at a throwaway price in auction currently.

Marketing of *Arsla Organic Tea*

There are two types of tea produced and marketed by the *Arsla Organic Tea* i.e., *Green Tea* and *Black Tea* and have three Grades of *First*, *Second* and *Third* (Table 2). They are sold locally in packets of 100 gms. The *Arsla Cooperative Society* reduced the unit price of all varieties of teas in the year 2020 as they did not receive good market response in 2019. The Society lowered the plucking standard from two leaf and bud to three leaves and a bud and the green leaf price paid to farmers was reduced from thirty-four rupees to twenty per kg to survive in the market. Normally, labourers pluck 8-10 kg of green leaf in a day and are paid wages of Rs.250-300 per day. They had a stock of seven tons of made teas of last year's production i.e. 2019 which they could sell at the beginning of the year 2020 at Guwahati Tea Auction Centre (GTAC). It was sold at Rs.250-260 per kg. They were receiving Rs.350-380 per kg during Aug-Sep, 2020. In the year 2020 the CTC variety of tea prices were increased in auction but the Orthodox variety remained the same as compared to 2019 (Table 2). At times, they are at margins of profit and sometimes no profit at all. Moreover, a global pandemic has pushed the entire economy in bad shape and the tea industry is also experiencing a crisis.

Table 2: Prices of *Arsla Organic Tea* through Private Sale of Packet Teas (2019-20)

Tea Grades	Green Tea Rate (Rs./Per Kg)		Tea Grades	Black Tea Rate (Rs./Per Kg)	
	2019	2020		2019	2020
First Grade	2000	1000	First Grade	1000	800
Second Grade	1200	800	Second Grade	800	600
Third Grade	800	600	Third Grade	600	400

Source: Based on Field Survey, 2020

The *Arsla Cooperative* is trying to establish their credentials in tea marketing and started online

marketing too. In the year 2020, they received online orders from Kolkata and Gujarat for 10 kgs and 40 kgs respectively for the first time and it was sold at Rs.800 per kg. The *Arsla Organic Tea* is also sold in the local market as packet teas of 100 gms having two varieties of tea i.e. Green and Black as stated earlier. The blank packets are procured and purchased from M/s Swiss Pack of Gujarat at a price of 8-10 rupees per piece. The local sale of the first grade of Green variety was sold at 1000 rupees per kg. in 2020. The *Arsla Cooperative* gives a service charge and commission to the local shop owners at the rate of 10-15 percent for the promotion and marketing of their brand in the open market. The support of the Sub-Regional Offices (SROs) of the Tea Board was inadequate to guide the farmers in the field activities and to promote tea business. But they have received continuous support from the Department of Horticulture, Government of Meghalaya. In September 2019, the *Arsla Organic Tea* was marketed at the Food Show at Pragati Maidan organized in collaboration by SIAL, Paris and Government of India together. In December 2019, they again campaigned the *Arsla Organic Tea* at North-East Expo at Guwahati.

Discussion

Small-Scale Tea Economies in India

The *Arsla Tea Cooperative* is not an exception, but the collective approach to enhance the economies of scale of the SSTE began by introducing the Self-Help Groups (SHGs) model in the tea industry (Hannan, 2018, 2019; Saha, 2020). The Tea Board of India during the 10th Plan Period (2002-07) formally implemented this scheme to improve the bargaining power and scientific cultivation and production practices among the Small Tea Growers (STGs). The STGs movement began in the 1960s in Tamil Nadu with the inception of Industrial Cooperatives (INDCO) tea factories and the first one was set up in Kunda village, Nilgiris (Bhowmik, 1997). But the STGs expanded and grew in the late 1990s in North and North-East India. Of late, it was realized that the Estate model in the Plantation Sector is gradually diminishing and there is an upcoming sub-sector popularly known as the small-scale sector that has gained importance in India (Saha, 2020). During the 12th Plan Period (2012-17), the Tea Board of India established 346 SHGs in various states of India and invested an amount of Rs. 899.89 lakhs (63rd Annual Report, Tea Board of India, 2017a). To develop the capacities of the STGs and their SHGs, various study tours, workshops and training were organized with an actual expenditure of Rs. 488.98 lakhs during the corresponding period. The SHGs model was successful and tangible results were seen in the *Dooars* region of West Bengal. Three such SHGs were upgraded to tea manufacturing factories with the financial support of the Tea Board of India. These are the *Panbari STGs Society* (2004), *Jai Jalpesh STGs Society* (2005-06) and *Naba Jagaran STGs Society* (2008). The *Panbari STGs Society* currently has 290 STGs with a tea area of 279 hectares and it is the first SHG-led tea factory in India. The *Jai Jalpesh STGs Society* has the highest number of STGs in the country with a tea area of 335 hectares. The *Naba Jagaran STGs Society* has 313 STGs spreading tea area of 400 hectares (Hannan, 2019). There are around 2.51 million people directly or indirectly engaged in the SSTE in India (Hannan, 2017). They play an important role in providing rural employment and encouraging first generation entrepreneurs in cultivation, processing as well as marketing of tea (Hannan, 2017; Saha, 2020). It is found that three types of tea factories are associated with SSTE in India. The stand-alone factories popularly known as *Bought-Leaf Factories*, *Cooperative Factories* and *SHGs led factories* are engaged in tea processing from the intermediary product i.e. *green leaf* for human consumption. However, the Estate gardens and their factories do leaf trade with the STGs in their catchments and extend support to the small-scale producers.

Organic Mission of Meghalaya, North-East India

The Government of Meghalaya has announced the *Mission Organic* approach of all cultivation and production systems in the state as planned development in 2015-16. The Department of Horticulture

and Agriculture was entrusted to implement it and one thousand crore rupees were allocated for the mission. All the horticulture crops like Zinger, Cashew, Turmeric, Vegetables etc. were covered under the programme. Before the declaration of *Mission Organic*, the chemicals and fertilizers were available to farmers in open markets in the state, now they are absent. Since the state is in transition from conventional agro-practices to organic cultivation, people buy and procure chemicals and fertilizers from Guwahati with high prices and the cost of production is increased again. The problem of mono-crops like tea was different and the tea farmers switched over to organic farming earlier of the *Mission Organic* of the state. In fact, tea farmers may be considered as pioneers of organic farming in Meghalaya.

Access to Market and Role of Tea Board of India

The *Arsla Cooperative Tea Factory* started its tea production on trial basis in July 2018 and the formal permission of the Tea Board of India under Tea Marketing Control Order (TMCO) was granted in May 2019. It produces approximately 150-160 kg tea/per day and the production activity remains operational five days in a week during April to September and two-three days in a week during October to November in a year. Factory employs labourers from the *Nongjri* village itself. The labourers are hired on hourly basis and paid thirty rupees per hour depending on green leaf availability from the gardens. There are two salaried staff in the factory who supervise the entire management and production and packaging of tea. Both of them are paid 10-12 thousand rupees a month. The entire tea production during 2019 estimated at seven tons of the *Arsla Cooperative* was unsold and it was in stock due to their inexperience in marketing. Here the role of SROs of the Tea Board, which they were unable to deliver, is important. It should have played a critical role in providing extension services of the regulatory agency like Tea Board of India which is mandatory as per the Tea Act and its guidelines. Ultimately, it is only in February 2020 that the factory began selling their old stock of made tea at the Guwahati Tea Auction Centre (GTAC). Unfortunately, the global pandemic and lockdown since March 2020 affected the *Arsla Cooperative* and all its members suffered financially. During the pandemic, all the tea of the cooperative was sold at the GTAC under distress sale. Finding no way, they represented their vulnerable conditions to the Department of Horticulture, Government of Meghalaya and sought financial support. They also requested for a minimum support price during the pandemic time to overcome the crisis and the exigencies. It is also a discouraging fact to report that the Tea Board of India has an SRO situated at Umshning, Meghalaya headed by a Development Officer. But the *Arsla Cooperative Society* has failed to receive any kind of technical and advisory support up to date. In January 2019, the Society applied for funding to purchase pruning machines through the SRO, Meghalaya. It was communicated in March 2019 that no funds were available. But it was assured that next financial year they would receive monetary support. The SRO has yet to confirm their promise so far. It should be reported that the *Arsla Cooperative Society* applied for Office set up, Reception Office and other infrastructures with an estimated budget of 12 lakhs rupees in 2019. The proposal was sent through the SRO, Umshning to the Regional Office at Guwahati which remained undelivered. During the pandemic the *Arsla Cooperative Factory* was facing a crisis to survive and to sell their teas but SRO and the Tea Board of Guwahati did not visit and inspect the financial health of the Society. Unfortunately, the extension services of the SROs of Tea Board of India remain in paper, but in practice the tea farmers found themselves unsupported. The same experiences were noticeable in other states too and the Tea Board Head Office situated at Kolkata should take note of the facts and be vigilant of periodic monitoring of SROs. In light of this, Xaxa (2019) argued for the restructuring of the tea plantations system in India and reported that many of the provisions and welfare schemes of Tea Board were not reaching the labouring community in case of estate gardens. The Tea Board (2017b) has issued the guidelines for the *Mini Tea Factory* under the provisions of the Tea Marketing Control Order (TMCO), 2003, but it is not reaching the beneficiaries appropriately and the *Arsla Organic Tea Factory* is one such case.

Tea Associations and Federations in Meghalaya, North-East India

The tea farmers in the state have formed an apex body way back in 2014-15 named the *All Meghalaya Small Tea Growers (STGs) Federation*. It consists of three regional units and these are the *Ri-Bhoi Small Tea Growers (STGs) Association*, *West Garo Hills Tea Farmers Federation* and *Mawlyngot Integrated Village Co-operative Federation*, Upper Shillong. The state-level apex body of the *All Meghalaya Small Tea Growers (STGs) Federation* is also a member of the 'Confederation of Indian Small Tea Growers Associations' (CISTA) which was established in 2007 with the intervention of Centre for Education and Communication, New Delhi (Hannan, 2017). All three regional units joined together and produced organic teas and have their brands namely the *Arsla Organic Tea*, *Durama Tea* and *Urlong Tea* (means what was thought) respectively. There is one more brand named *Meg Tea* produced and marketed by the Tea Development Centre. It has a garden area of 9.27 hectares which is promoted by the Department of Horticulture, Government of Meghalaya (Kalita *et al.*, 2018). It was also reported that there were around 400 farmers who planted tea bushes in the Ri-Bhoi area but now most of them abandoned their gardens. Only 100 farmers remain today and continue tea farming. If there is a concerted effort by the SROs of the Tea Board, farmers may again pick up their farming and feel optimistic to gain the confidence of the regulatory agencies of state. In nutshell, it could be outlined that extension services of the SROs of Tea Board are not sufficient enough on the ground and farmers are demotivated by their hard earned investments on tea farming and marketing over the years. Effective coordination of regulatory bodies and farmers Associations and Federations are expected to play a critical role to restore the livelihoods of tea farmers in the tea value chain and promote inclusive measures to augment the current crisis of market access particularly when we are passing through a rough patch of the economy during global pandemic.

Conclusion

It is evident that in post 1990's most of the tribal populations are engaging themselves in tea cultivation to sustain their livelihoods in North-East India. Since, this cash crop has an organized marketing of tea through auction centres, and requires collectivization of farmers at local level. The grass root initiatives and organizations can only save these tribal communities from vulnerabilities and market impurities at the macro-level. The Khasi tribal farmers have come together to improve their SSTEs and joined hands to make themselves visible in the tea industry. The *Arsla Organic Tea Growers and Producers Cooperative Limited* is a success story, which may be popularized and replicated in different tribal areas and tea growing states of India. The Tea Board of India, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, and Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India and the respective State Governments of North-East, India should play a catalyst role in promoting such success stories in all the states and the sixth schedule areas to enhance the livelihood sustainability. This would balance in restoring the delicate relationship of human beings with their surrounding environment in the form of organic farming through which they derive livelihoods by effective utilization of land resources and eco-friendly agro-practices.

Acknowledgement

The authors are grateful to the members of Arsla Organic Tea Growers and Producers Cooperative Society Limited, Meghalaya and the President, Confederation of Indian Small Tea Growers Associations (CISTA) for their valuable help, cooperation and support during fieldwork.

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