Self Help Group - a ray of hope in despair for small tea growers in West Bengal

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Introduction:

Tea is the most consumed drink in the world after water. It is a refreshing and thirst-quenching natural product. Tea is indigenous to India. This is mainly because of its pre-eminence as a foreign exchange earner and its contribution to the country's GNP. India is one of the largest producers and exporters of tea in the world.

The Indian tea industry provides livelihood for more than a million workers and several lakhs of small growers. Being the largest producer and exporter of tea, the industry receives significance at both micro and macro levels. But the ongoing crisis in the agricultural sector in general and the tea growing sector in particular lends more significance to the industry. It seems a paradox that when small Indian growers and workers are struggling for their existence, big multinational tea brands accumulate huge profit by exerting pressure on the tea supply chain, and through better networking and lobbying. At the same time, the government and the tea boards at national and regional levels launch a large number of programmes to upgrade the livelihoods of people who are involved in tea cultivation and processing.

The Indian plantation sector as a whole and the tea industry in particular is in a disarray due to frequent price declines and increase in cost of production owing to hike in fertiliser and pesticide prices and unscientific agricultural practices. Moreover, this problem is aggravated by steep falls in green leaf prices, determined by auction centres, bought-leaf factories (BLF) and other market forces. The condition of small growers in major tea growing areas of India is pathetic, owing to small landholdings and poor quality of the produce. A large number of small growers are workers by themselves and work in other tea gardens for their livelihood. Being scattered among the major tea growing areas of Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, the small growers are less organised, while other agents in the tea industry like big tea growers, bought-leaf factory owners and leaf agents have better bargaining power. A large chunk of small growers are not registered with Tea Board or any other government body. In addition, the improper landholding documents also impair them from registration, and thereby from government schemes meant for small tea growers. The unorganised nature of small growers pushes them to depend on bought-leaf factories and agents for selling green leaf.

The primary data will be collected with the use of interview schedules in the form of questionnaires from tea growers of West Bengal. Primary data is collected from seven hundred labour and Eleven (11) SHG, NGO's through questionnaire, personal interviews and observation through personal visits.

Secondary data will be collected from various references which already exist and would be published in future like books, articles in newspapers like Economic times, Business Standards, and Times of India, publications of consumer association, Council For Fair Business Practice etc. from time to time. The articles in Business magazines as well as Web and Internet support will also be considered for the purpose of secondary data.

The general understanding about self-help groups in Indian states is that they are women's SHGs involved in credit, saving, monitoring and revolving of fund. There is a need to spread more awareness among the growers about the purpose of an SHG beyond the concepts of credit and saving. The concept of self-help groups prevalent among small tea growers is different from the general concept of SHGs.

SHG Activities for small tea growers-

Followings are the details of the activities, arrangement of meetings, and assistance given by SHGs to the small tea growers.

- To disseminate knowledge on the latest technology in cultivation of tea,
To assist in procurement and supply of inputs.

To act as an agent of the concerned state government and the Tea Board.

To ensure maximum productivity and returns to the small farmers by serving as a connecting link between the farmers and the tea-manufacturing unit.

To arrange for soil analysis and other tests aimed at maximisation of the utility value of inputs.

To organise other welfare and educational programmes for the benefit of the members.

To liaise with the Tea Board, tea research institutes and agricultural universities.

To liaise with processing factories for processing and marketing of tea.

To raise necessary funds.

In this context this research attempts to identify roles of existing associations of small tea growers’ self-help groups (SHG), NGOs and other forms of associations that intervene in the tea trade. The study emphasizes the empowering of small tea growers through the formation and strengthening of small tea growers associations and self-help groups to intervene in price fixation and to get fairer terms of trade. The present study would also help the policy maker and government agencies to undertake excellent measures in promoting tea cultivating by helping tea growers and SHGs.