

Brewing change in Indian tea

Not many will recall a BBC News and Radio 4 investigation into appalling conditions of workers at some Assam tea gardens, but much work is now being done for their upliftment



Photo: Indranil Bhoumik/Mint

Here's another cupful about globalization of exposure and accountability of businesses, a matter repeatedly highlighted in this column. Take what happened recently with Indian tea.

Not many in India will recall a BBC News and Radio 4 joint investigation into the appalling conditions of workers at some Assam tea gardens, broadcast in September 2015. This found scant mention in Indian media, and even when it did, it was accompanied by artful camouflaging of key players. But it made a huge splash in the UK, India's key export market for tea, and elsewhere in Europe.

The investigation ([at bbc.com](http://bbc.com)) focused on some Assam estates of McLeod Russel India Ltd and Assam Company India Ltd. Images of workers' toilets and accommodation at the McLeod Russel estates made facilities in Indian slums appear salubrious in comparison, accompanied by details of abject poverty, malnutrition and disease. A manager of one of its estates admitted to "a huge backlog of repairs". Sandip Ghosh, who headed Indian Tea Association's branch in

Assam, was quoted as saying: "Cesspools and open defecation are not acceptable to me or the association."

Assam Company came in for criticism for not providing workers in an estate protective gear while spraying agrochemicals, and for employing child labour.

The investigation did not only tag these companies—two among several in Assam with wretched living conditions of labourers, certainly as wretched as with several tea estates in West Bengal that I have personally witnessed—but it also fingered the certification procedure of Rainforest Alliance. That organization lends its distinctive logo (of a frog) to businesses and checks them into marketplaces with a stamp of kosher ethical practices—as it did with Assam Company's produce. Rainforest Alliance claims to work with "more than 850 tea estates across India" that account for 15% of the country's tea production.

Stung, Rainforest Alliance yanked its certification from Assam Company teas. A BBC follow-up of 14 January mentions that Twinings, Taylors of Harrogate, Fortnum & Mason and Harrods, all major tea buyers and retailers, pulled Assam Company teas and haven't transacted business with it for several months. (An Assam Company response had termed BBC's investigation as "baseless and false", but its corporate communications may not exactly be ship-shape. When I visited the company's website on 21 January, it still had former patriarch Krishna Kumar Jajodia, who died in May 2014, listed as "non-executive chairman of group companies".) The company has promised to get its act together by this March.

For its part, McLeod Russel, which bills itself as India's largest tea producer, owns estates in Vietnam, Uganda and Rwanda, and tea businesses in the UK and the UAE, buckled down to get its workers' facilities in better shape—it was no longer an option. The company's estates in Assam supply tea, among others, to Unilever's PG Tips and Lipton, Tata Group company Tetley Tea, and Twinings.

Under pressure from its buyers, Rainforest Alliance and Ethical Tea Partnership—a UK-based watchdog that monitors workers' health and safety, use of agrochemicals, environmental sustainability and human resource practices in supply chains—the offending McLeod Russel estates have literally started cleaning up their act.

Among other things, new toilets and bathing facilities are being built for workers.

Rainforest Alliance too is under pressure. This past December, it undertook to make the criteria for certification more stringent; its earlier criteria did not consider appalling worker housing and sanitation, for instance. The BBC's follow-up article mentions that henceforth, according to Rainforest Alliance, "any estates failing to provide adequate housing, water supply and sanitation will lose their green frog seal

of approval”.

This pressure will likely remain. Behemoths like Unilever and Tata have promised to intensify monitoring and review in supply chains. Twinings, working with Ethical Tea Partnership, plans to review the Assam estates from which it buys tea.

This can only be to the general good; scrutiny isn't limited to the estates in Assam and companies featured in BBC's September 2015 sting for shaping up. A January 2014 study by the Human Rights Institute at Columbia Law School looked into the condition of tea estates in India in which Tata has a stake. Besides citing issues at several estates, the report (at web.law.columbia.edu) slams India's tea industry in general for abysmal—the words it used were “inhumane” and “abusive”—human resource and human rights practices.

The first flush of success for Indian tea is now long maximized. It's time to minimize the flush of shame.

Sudeep Chakravarti's latest book is Clear.Hold.Build: Hard Lessons of Business and Human Rights in India. His previous books include Red Sun: Travels in Naxalite Country and Highway 39: Journeys through a Fractured Land. This column, which focuses on conflict situations in South Asia that directly affect business, runs on Fridays.

Respond to this column at rootcause@livemint.com