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| Tuesday, February 14, 2017 |

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## Small tea production goes up

OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT



BREW BOOST

**Siliguri, Feb. 13:** Production has increased in the small tea sector in north Bengal in the immediate past year, prompting the sector to demand incentives from the state and central governments.

Around 154 million kg of brew was manufactured in 2016 in the small tea sector, that is over 40 per cent of the total production in the region. The figure was 130.13 million kg in the preceding year.

The contribution from the small tea sector, comprising small tea growers and bought-leaf factories (BLFs), in the national tea production has remained same - around 34 per cent - in the past two years (2015 and 2016).

The data have been released by the Tea Board of India.

"Due to emergence of the small tea sector, there has been huge employment in rural areas of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, North Dinajpur and Cooch Behar districts in the past 10-15 years. In tea estates, there hasn't been much recruitment during this period. But in a different way, people have found employment in the tea industry," Bijoygopal Chakraborty, the president of the Confederation of Indian Small Tea Growers' Associations, said today.

In 2016, there has been a considerable growth in production in the small tea sector, both in the Terai and Dooars, where, altogether, the increase has been around 24 million kg of tea vis-à-vis the production of 2015.

"This is probably the first year when the small tea sector has produced over 40 per cent of the total tea produced in north Bengal. It is a matter of pride for us and a clear

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indication that the small tea sector is moving ahead. The figures are most striking in the Terai, where almost 60 per cent of the total tea has come from this sector. It is also encouraging that in the Dooars, around 33 per cent of tea has been produced in the BLFs with tealeaves supplied by small growers like us," the association's president said.

The rise in production, stakeholders said, is an indication that in the coming years, the tea industry will have two prominent sectors or branches - the tea estates and the small tea sector.

"At this point, they feel, it is imperative that the governments and the tea board takes up initiatives, ranging from skill development of growers and workers to provisions for more financial assistance, along with the existing subsidies," Chakraborty said.

"The total production of tealeaves is actually more. However, it will not be reflected as many growers sell tealeaves to tea estates and not the BLFs. The data reflect only the tea produced in the BLFs. If the quantity of those tealeaves (sent to estates) is added together, we won't be surprised to see that over half of the total production of north Bengal is from tealeaves supplied by us," a grower at Phansidewa block of Siliguri, said.

BLF owners have also expressed satisfaction over the increase in production.

"It is good to see that the sector is contributing more every year. But we are simultaneously bothered about the lower price realisation in auctions, as compared to the prices fetched by tea estates," Satish Mitruka, the president of North Bengal Tea Producers' Welfare Association, said.

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