

Angry small tea growers stage protest

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LOW PRICES OF RAW TEA LEAVES

Growers throw raw tea leaves in front of Golaghat DC office, demand price hike and immediate government intervention

BY OUR BUREAU

GUWAHATI/DHEKIAL/GOLAGHAT, Sept 23: The more the merrier is not applicable for the small tea growers in upper Assam, the main tea producing zone of the State. Despite having a good production by these small tea growers in this month, they are facing huge losses due to very low market prices they are currently getting by selling raw tea leaves. The situation has so much deteriorated that several small tea growers in Golaghat district were compelled to throw huge amount of raw tea leaves in front of the office of the Golaghat deputy commissioner last night in protest against their plight.

In the last few days, some big tea companies and bought leaf factories in upper Assam, most of which are run by gas, have cut their production due to falling gas supply. Some of these big tea companies also allege that tea leaves produced by these small growers are not of good quality. As a result, these factories have refused to buy raw tea leaves from small tea growers, which has depressed the market for raw tea leaves.

It needs be mentioned that while big tea companies do not show keen interest in buying raw tea leaves from small growers, the brought leaf factories are generally their reliable customers.

To protest against the discrimination, several angry small tea growers in Golaghat district threw raw tea leaves in front of the office of the Golaghat deputy commissioner. Not only in Golaghat district, small tea growers are also facing similar problems in Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sonitpur and Biswanath districts. Sources said raw tea leaves grown by small tea growers in Dibrugarh are currently fetching Rs 8/9 per kg and in Golaghat district Rs 13 per kg, whereas its actual price should be around Rs 20 per kg. The cost of production per kg of raw tea leaves is around Rs 14.60, added the sources.

The present BJP government at Dispur, before it came to power, had promised to look into different problems faced by small tea growers in the State, but nothing has been changed on the ground for these small tea growers who continue to face discrimination when it comes to getting right price for their produce. In Assam, more than 15 lakh people are directly or indirectly associated with tea cultivation in small scale, and they have a major share in the overall tea production in the State. But these small tea growers are now facing huge losses due to low price of raw tea leaves.

On this issue, secretary of Small Tea Grower's Association of Golaghat district Achyut Boruah said, "The small tea growers are always deprived by the government. The tea growers are facing various problems in selling raw tea leaves. Several times we have taken up the issue with the government, but it has never paid any heed to the same seriously," adding, "in Golaghat district, there are 22 thousand small tea growers and 54 bought leaf factories and 40 other factories."

Boruah alleged that small tea growers in Golaghat district are affected by conspiracy of a big tea company of Lettakoojan in the district. The Tea Board of India has fixed rate of per kg of raw tea leaves by Rs 18.64, but these small tea growers are being paid Rs 13 per kg for their produce in Golaghat district. The cost of production of per kg of raw tea leaves is around Rs 14.60.

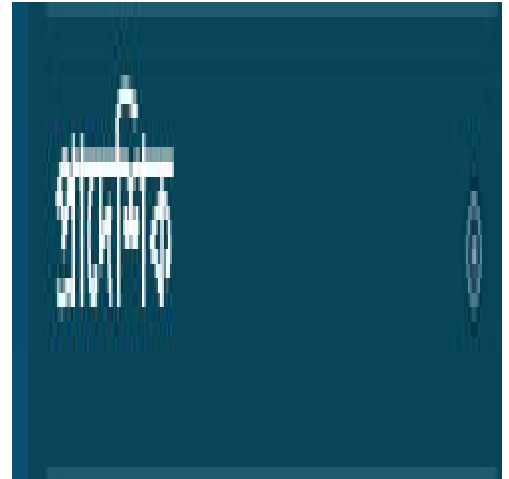
In this connection, the members of the Association of Tea Growers approached the Golaghat deputy commissioner several times, but the deputy commissioner did not pay any attention to the matter. There is a monitoring committee in Golaghat district, in which the deputy commissioner is acting as a chairman. There are also members from the Tea Board of India, two members from the Small Tea Growers Association, two members each from NETA, ABITA and Tea Association of India in the monitoring committee, but the committee has failed to address the plight of small tea growers so far.

Gopal Krishna Khaund, president of the All Assam Small Tea Growers Association, said it was very sad that small tea growers came out on the streets, demanding their legal dues. The small tea growers are always deprived of their legal dues, despite their hard work.

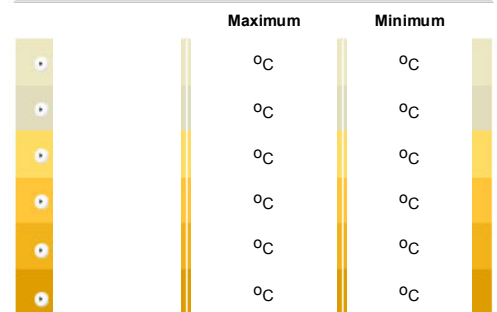
In Golaghat district, more than lakhs of unemployed youths are engaged in production of tea leaves in small scale.

The Golaghat District Small Tea Growers' Association demanded that if the authorities concerned don't take any initiatives immediately, they will launch massive agitation against government and tea factories. The Association said they would block transportation of raw tea leaves produced by any type of growers to factories in Golaghat district.

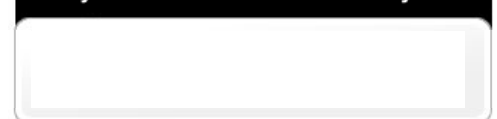
Monoj Singh, a small tea grower of Rajgarh area in Dibrugarh district who is also an office bearer of the Tingkhag regional committee of Assam Small Tea Growers Association, said: "Many unemployed youths in upper Assam have taken up tea cultivation as their profession. More than 15 lakh people mainly in upper Assam are directly or indirectly associated with tea cultivation in small scale, and they have a major share in the overall tea production in the



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State. But these small tea growers are now facing huge losses due to low price of raw tea leaves," adding, "raw tea leaves grown by small tea growers in upper Assam are currently fetching prices of Rs 8/9 per kg. Before Durga Puja, we are facing huge problems due to low prices of raw tea leaves."

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