



# Tea Farmer In India Leads Charge For Organic, Evades The Charge Of Elephants

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As you clutch a cuppa for a bit of winter warmth, spare a moment to consider the elaborate process that goes into producing that seemingly simple sip of tea.

In the biggest tea-growing region in India, the hazards alone range from red spider mites to herds of wild elephants.

Grower Tenzing Bodosa, a native of Assam, fights the former and unusually invites the latter.

From the large Bodo tribe and widely known by his first name, Tenzing stands beside the vermilion flames of a brick oven that provides the heat for a drying contraption erected in his backyard.

Here, tea leaves plucked from Tenzing's small estate are fermented, dried and sorted. "Next comes packaging and marketing," he says with the same wide smile that adorns his tea label.

Tenzing is a marketer's dream. He exudes a passion for tea, gratitude toward his supporters, and an affability that attracts guidance. Visitors from as far away as Europe have turned up at his door, helping him learn social media and new farming methods.

Tenzing sports a T-shirt bearing the logo of a New York importer of upscale teas called "In Pursuit of Tea." Founder Sebastian Beckwith says he was impressed with samples of Tenzing's tea, and in 2016, visited Assam to see his small operation.

A one-day inspection was all it took: The American tea aficionado ordered 500 kilos on the spot, fetching 500,000 rupees (about \$8,000), a windfall for Tenzing. "It's big money for me. For here, this is big money," Tenzing remarks.

Beckwith also taught him how to taste teas, including one that Tenzing excitedly says "has been grown in China for 2,000 years." Beckwith says Tenzing's tea, "with notes of black currant," is one of their bestsellers.

He puts a premium on the way that Tenzing produces his traditional tea without synthetic pesticides, saying it's clean and tastes good.

"That's ultimately going to make us all healthier ... He is someone who is succeeding on a very small level, and I think it's great," Beckwith says.

Tenzing's small 13-hectare (about 32 acres) tea estate sits in the folds of the Himalayas, and borders the mountain kingdom of Bhutan to the north. By late morning, some 30 workers have been plucking leaves for hours. Their tightly pruned shrubs are the symbol of Assam, the region that produces half of India's tea each year.

Tenzing transitioned to organic farming after an incident with pesticides on his own farm convinced him he needed to change. He would feel nauseous and have headaches after spraying insect-killing chemicals, and wondered why he felt sick.

Then, as the fish died in the water where he'd washed his clothes, and rabbits at his farm died, Tenzing became worried he was selling people "poison" for tea. Now his small tea estate is free of synthetic chemicals.

Under a bright sky, Sumitra Sabar, 60, moves with a small group of women along dark green rows, softly talking and plucking tea leaves placed in wicker baskets carried on their backs. But a danger lurks in this seemingly tranquil scene. Sumitra says the tea pickers have an ever-present dread of wild elephants while working on the estate.

"Fear is always there, because the elephants are always there," she says.

Suresh Munda, 23, recalls one of the scariest encounters, when an elephant approached them as the tire of their vehicle blew out, immobilizing them. Fortunately, the elephant wandered off.

Just beside the tea estate, Tenzing has established a 74-acre wildlife preserve that attracts herds of elephants, which roam between Assam and Bhutan. With twigs crackling beneath our feet, Tenzing carefully leads us in.

The preserve is lush green with a healthy ground cover, and an abundance of flowers, wildlife and birds.

Tenzing explains that his natural park helps stimulate growth in his tea plantation. He says he is "collecting 15 different plants" full of calcium, potassium and iron. He ferments the plants and uses them as fertilizer for his tea bushes.

Tenzing spots an elephant's fresh print inside the preserve, just steps from the tea estate. Pointing at the ground, Tenzing says, "An elephant kicked here."

We hear wild peacocks flap above the treetops. The peacock calls are signal of approaching danger. "They are not happy," says Tenzing, ushering us out of the preserve.

The fear of wild elephants has sometimes led to an unwillingness by tea pickers to work at Tenzing's farm, risking his business. "Earlier, they would run around in a panic at the site of an elephant. But now they've become used to them," he says.

This young tribal farmer puts his passion for conservation down to his grandmother, who never allowed anyone to cut a tree.

Tenzing's commitment to conserving nature — and growing organically — has attracted a following. Farmers such as Bolin Chandra Bodo beat a path to his door for advice on organic methods.

"Chemical fertilizers are used everywhere. Everything is so adulterated," Bodo says. "We all must learn to grow organic and stay healthy." Bodo and the 25 other farmers who have gathered in Tenzing's backyard call themselves "foot soldiers" in a campaign to transform farming here.

Tenzing says that in the past eight years, he's shared his knowledge of organic farming with more than 20,000 farmers.

"I love to teach them. I want to share what I learn. I want to give back to my people," he says, adding that if we "respect nature, nature will respect us."

When they fret over their organic ventures not making a profit, the young farmer and reformer urges them to "keep faith" in themselves, and to keep building a movement for healthy farming.