



# STORIES FROM THE FIELD

*trustea* has been established as a domestic initiative to drive sustainability in the Indian tea industry. Based on industry realities and globally accepted sustainability principles, the programme advocates the implementation of a voluntary sustainability code for the Indian domestic tea market.

The programme supports smallholders and estates in improving the competitiveness of tea gardens by stimulating continuous improvement and improving the livelihood of smallholders and estate workers.

The communities associated with *trustea* are starting to feel these changes, but it is their personal stories that really show the impact made by the programme in their lives.

# A bought leaf factory owner's journey into producing high-quality tea

*Dindoyal Verma is the owner of Surya Tea Factory, a bought leaf processing unit. The factory, set up in Tinsukia, Assam in 1999 processes 1200 kilograms of leaves. Adopting *trustea* has helped Dindoyal to improve productivity and the quality of his production at his unit.*

## The Tea Man of Talap



*Dindoyal Verma, Owner, Surya Tea Estate*

*"Adopting the *trustea* programme has benefited my business by improving hygiene standards and the discipline among my staff, both of which go hand-in-hand."*

*- Dindoyal Verma*

Dindoyal Verma traces his passion for tea to his childhood which he spent in Talap in Tinsukia district. His passion has resulted in the Surya Tea factory, a bought leaf processing unit known in the market for its high-quality teas.

Dindoyal's early career was linked to tea only indirectly; as a construction contractor between 1989- 1992, when he often visited tea estates and factories. He describes how these visits to the estates rekindled his childhood fascination for tea and, in 1992, having saved some money he decided to become an agent - buying the leaves directly from growers and selling them to factories for processing. Trading as an agent was merely a stepping stone and, in 1999, he set up the Surya Tea Factory in Talap.

Dindoyal's early realisation that quality would be the bedrock of his business would seem to mark him as a natural early adopter of the programme but he recalls that he was initially hesitant to implement the programme.

Dindoyal spent close to a year studying the guidelines to understand what changes their implementation entailed. This detailed study convinced him that the *trustea* code aligned with his idea of quality being all-important; it was this alignment with his personal business philosophy that made him see the programme components as beneficial for the long-term growth of his business.

Dindoyal remarks, "Adopting the *trustea* programme has benefited my business by improving hygiene standards and the discipline among my staff, both of which go hand-in-hand," He goes on to say, "It would be impossible to maintain the hygiene standards without the staff's discipline."

He explains that the improvement in hygiene standards has furthered his pursuit of quality and is quick to enumerate the two distinct ways in which this has been implemented. "Our factory floor and equipment is now cleaned thoroughly every few hours to eliminate residues that collect while the leaves are processed. Secondly, better personal hygiene of workers is ensured through washing stations and proper uniforms."

Their improved hygiene results in improved worker attendance and better health for themselves. The use of clean uniforms and protective gear such as gloves means that the produce is also handled in a more hygienic manner resulting in improved quality.

Dindayal's comments are supported by his workers like Geeta Sanga and Amina Tirkey who are involved in the sorting and packing, and those who work on the CTC machines like Basant Badhai and Anand Teli. All four remark on the high cleanliness standards. Those who have been here longer, like Anand, compare it to past saying that the factory is cleaner now. It is clear that this aspect of the *trustea* programme has permeated the workforce. All four workers were conscious of the need for hygiene given that they handle produce meant for human consumption.

The timely plucking of leaves ensures that they get even sized leaves, which in turn reduces that time spent in sorting and processing leaves. The factory can now process 1200 kilograms of leaves, which is a good 200 kgs more than their earlier capacity. This is not just a time saving but as Dindayal enthusiastically calculates it saves him about Rs. 115,000 every month in electricity bills because the machines are more efficient, both because they are cleaned often and because of the even size of the leaves.

**Dindayal's passion for fine tea would have got nowhere without the people who supply the leaves and this story is, therefore, incomplete without hearing from them.**

## SMALL GROWERS CREATING LARGE IMPACT

Dipak Tanti is one of the small tea growers who supply tea leaves to Surya Tea. The garden he oversees belongs to his brother and they started it about 15 years ago because there was a craze to plant tea in the area. He says, "We had learned what we know from our experience over the years, we had limited access to information earlier and depended on word of mouth information." He adds, "It is only in the last two years, following our training in the *trustea* standards, that we have learned about how to plant and maintain tea in a methodical fashion".



*Deepak Tanti, Small Tea Grower*

In spite of the initial hesitation he admits, "Now we know what pesticides we are using, when to spray them, and when to pluck. Leaves are plucked on the sixth day after spraying so that there is no pesticide residue left. We use safety gear, such as masks and protective clothing while spraying and have constructed a washing area where the sprayers can clean the last of the residue."

The health benefits of implementing *trustea* guidelines have turned Dipak into an advocate, he regularly talks about these benefits to neighbouring small tea growers. As far as Dindayal is concerned it is because of the efforts of people like Dipak and other small growers, and workers at Surya Tea, that they command higher than average prices in the market.



*Nakul Shawashi, Small Tea Grower*

Nakul Shawashi, owner of a tea garden in Talap. Nakul has been building up this garden since 1990 when he started acquiring small plots of land which have grown into the farm that he has today. He has found *trustea* to be beneficial for him; he supplies all his tea to Surya tea, where he gets more than the market rates for good quality leaf.

The growth stories of people like Dipak and Dindayal makes it evident that the adoption of *trustea* guidelines has not only improved the tea quality but also provided economic and health benefits for people in the supply chain.

# An Assam tea growers co-op helps small growers in improving profits

*Udayanchal Tea Growers Cooperative Society is a group of smallholder tea growers in Talap area of Tinsukia, Assam. The society was originally set up with 35 members in 2001 and now has 144 members from four villages in the same area. On complying with the guidelines, the society members have a standardized pesticide spraying and plucking schedule and improved hygiene standards within their farms.*



*Tea pluckers at work*

## Together - we grow

"Small growers like us had limited knowledge about tea and especially tea prices, making us easy targets of exploitation by the tea agents. Hence, we decided to come together and help each other get fair prices for our *trustea* produce."

- Dharmen Bora

Assam's tea plantations have had a large influence over the culture and economy of the region for more than a century. These tea plantations were started by the British and, since then, these plantations have existed mostly in the form of large tea estates that lead the production and sale of tea in the area. The small, family-owned gardens, on the other hand, faced several problems such as low market rates for the leaves produced by them and high rejection rates of leaves supplied to the factories. In addition, most of the new or small-scale tea growers had little or no training in the cultivation of tea. The information they had picked up was strongly influenced by practices used in large-scale commercial tea plantations which are not suitable to small tea gardens.

Taking note of their difficulties, the Tea Board helped small growers in forming cooperative societies in order to protect their interests. Udayanchal Tea Growers Cooperative Society is one such co-operative, which brings together the small growers to work collectively towards addressing their common issues in tea growing and trading.

"We formed this group because we recognised that small growers like us had limited knowledge about tea and especially tea prices, making us easy targets of exploitation by the tea agents. Hence, we decided to come together and help each other get fair prices for our produce," shared Dharmen Bora, Cooperative Secretary.

"We used to supply our produce to Surya Tea directly and started getting fair rates for our produce. Surya Tea's owner Dindayal Verma decided to get *trustea* certification about 2 years ago. Now selling our produce to Surya Tea meant that the society members also had to comply with the *trustea* guidelines," said Bora.

“This decision changed the tide for us,” added Utpal Kumar Moran, Cooperative President, “In spite of our earlier achievements, there was a lot of knowledge that was new to us. We were trained on the guidelines, especially about quantity and timing of pesticide spraying, hygiene standards, and plucking tea at pre-defined intervals.”

Bablu Agu, cooperative member agreed, “Earlier, we would often fall sick - usually respiratory problems and skin ailments - which we only recognise now as being the harmful effects of improper pesticide use, both because we were using hazardous chemicals and in excessive quantities, which was harming us as well as our produce. However, this changed after the *trustea* training. Pesticides are now stored separately and used with caution. We have built changing and washing rooms for workers in our plantations, which has resulted in a decline in health problems.”

In order to get *trustea* certification, producers have to adhere to government-approved pesticide quantity and spraying schedule as outlined in the *trustea* code, which also defines the plucking schedule. Compliance with the scheduled spraying and plucking timelines has resulted in consistent, better quality leaves, which fetch a higher price in the market. The society members reveal that they have turned a profit in the previous couple of years, but mention that their new meticulous accounts are also because of the *trustea* training and they have little idea how well, or not, they were doing earlier.

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- Utpal Kumar Moran



Tea workers using protective gear while spraying pesticides across the tea garden

Coming together as a cooperative has meant that the members benefit receive more than financial benefits. Every member of the cooperative has invested some of their profits in combination from grants from the Tea Board to construct an office and employ some staff who now maintain their accounts. In addition to furthering their own business, the society has also been involved in larger community issues such as making a road for their villages; this was not just to aid the transport of tea but also so that children could commute to school more easily. Since there had been no school in their villages, children often missed school before the advent of the road.

Society members can now clearly see the benefits of the *trustea* programme and are thankful for Surya Tea’s guidance in adhering to the *trustea* guidelines. This is not just because of the material gain but also because of improvements in their own and community’s health, improved tea quality and linked to that higher production, and new knowledge.

# A tea estate provides a healthier work environment to its workers

*Balijan Tea Estate is located roughly 30 km away from Tinsukia, Assam. Located in high-quality tea producing belt in Assam, the estate is known for the quality of the tea it produces. Adopting the *trustea* code has resulted in improved cleanliness and safety standards for the estate.*

## Brewing progress



*Bhuvarsen Tanti, Factory Supervisor, Balijan Tea Estate*

“Cleanliness and safety standards essentially improved after our Estate adopted the *trustea* code”.

- Tapan Bordoloi

Follow the orderly rows of tea bushes to reach the Balijan Tea Factory, somewhere in the middle of the estate. On your way, amidst the green sea of tea leaves, you will meet scores of uniformed workers of the Estate. The view is astounding.

Inside the factory, there are large processing units designed to manufacture high-quality tea. The floors and machines are neat and tidy. Workers can be seen washing their hands and feet, every time before entering the factory.

“But this wasn’t always the case. Cleanliness and safety standards essentially improved after our Estate adopted the *trustea* code,” informed Tapan Bordoloi, factory supervisor, as he walked on the tidy floors of the factory, “We now have uniforms and special clothing which we wear before entering the factory floor; this not only protects our tea from extraneous particles which further helps in quality control but also prevents the workers from getting dirty.”

Another Supervisor at the estate, Bhuvarsen Tanti talks about the fact that the leaves are now plucked according to a schedule and can be traced back to specific parts of a garden. “This allows us to check, if necessary, the spraying and plucking schedule so that we can attend to complaints from buyers.” He also mentioned that the complaints have come down drastically ever since the *trustea* guidelines were adopted for the simple reason that the quality of tea leaves is much better both because of the systematic spraying and plucking schedule as well as improved hygiene.

Tanti further informs that the adoption of the guidelines have not only boosted productivity but has also improved relationships in the supply chain. Now they have healthier plantations, workers, and the environment.



*Change and wash room for farm workers near the tea garden.*

"Tea defines our lifestyle and culture. But things were deteriorating till some years back. Low wages, non-availability of safe drinking water and poor quality food were putting us and our families at health risks," says Ajay Srimati, a worker at the Estate, "But things have changed now."

"You see these newly installed dustbins. Our waste is now segregated. We also have a new water filtration machine for drinking water. We always get water on time now," informs Ajay, "Earlier, working long hours in the sun would often leave us severely dehydrated."

Akali Dhuijan, one of the many female workers, agrees and adds, "One of the other significant changes has been the provision of more toilets in the factory, gardens, and the residential lines." Akali has lived here practically all her life, having worked here for over two decades. She is the second generation of tea garden workers in her family and her ties to the estate are more than just her day job. She shares the progress she has witnessed on her job, "We now receive dry staples, protective equipment and clothes for our work. The management has become more responsive to our complaints, which we raise at the monthly meetings."

Yakob Johan, a fitter at the factory adds, "Earlier when I handled the heavy machinery and equipment, I had no safety harness or belt to protect myself a fall from higher up on the machines. With the adoption of *trustea* code, we have been provided protective gear and equipment in accordance with the work that we do."

Kamlesh Gupta, manager at Balijan puts these changes in perspective especially when remarking on the crisis that the tea industry faces in terms of a labour shortage, "The introduction of a *trustea* like program was long overdue and these have gone some way in making workers throughout the estate feel a part of the process because they are able to see benefits not just for the estate but also for themselves. This is an important aspect of these guidelines since they depend entirely on the employees' commitment if they are to be implemented well."

At a time, when many tea estates were shutting down, *trustea* guidelines helped the estate build a sustainable tea programme, leading to the production of 'certified' safe and hygienic teas. The improved social and economic conditions of tea estates like Balijan point to a brighter future for the tea industry in India.



Akali Dhuijan, Tea Garden Worker, Balijan Tea Estate

"Tea defines our lifestyle and culture. But things were deteriorating till some years back. Low wages, non-availability of safe drinking water and poor quality food were putting us and our families at health risks."  
- Ajay Srimati



A worker's colony



*trustea* is a locally developed and owned Indian tea code and verification system which promotes sustainable agricultural practices, improves productivity and reduces costs to ensure future security of tea supply in India. The code enables producers, buyers, and others involved in Indian tea businesses to obtain tea that has been produced according to agreed, credible, transparent and measurable criteria. Through an increased focus on Bought Leaf Factories and Small Tea Growers, it aims to have 50% of Indian tea production (600 kg) *trustea* verified by 2020.