

PRODUCER SPEAK

When an Assam tea garden decided, it will not just wear green, but 'go green' – it scripted a radical transformation opening doors in Fairtrade markets

Speak Assam and one is transported to the green undulating slopes of North East India known for its bold, brisk black tea used globally in every blend because of its distinct colour and full bodied flavour.

West Jalinga is a Fairtrade certified estate located in Cachar District, South Assam. Though climatic conditions favour growth of tea, the poor infrastructure, frequent power outages and underdevelopment makes achieving export quality grades an almost Sisyphean challenge – arduous yet futile. What sets apart this 656 Ha plantation is its transformation from an obscure, low output garden to become one of the largest organic tea producers in the region with an annual production of 900 MT that accounts for about “10% of the entire organic tea manufactured in India”.

Since the 1960s, Jalinga Tea cultivated their gardens using conventional methods. Riddled with concerns that included dismal yields, pest menace grown resilient to chemical coercion and the perspective that tea's attribute of being a health beverage was being diminished by chemical farming; the Group in 2004 overhauled production systems and introduced a comprehensive organic programme under the Inhana Rational Farming Technology (IRF).

As part of the IRF, the Estate pioneered a newly evolved composting technology called Novcom. The process using plant material and cow manure (80:20 ratio) generates heat at temps of 65 – 75 degrees centigrade. This destroys harmful pathogens and is conducive to the growth of actinomycetes (known to decompose organic substances) and other soil friendly bacteria enabling the breakup of organic matter and cellulose to simpler forms. The composting cycle is complete in 21 days unlike 60 – 90 days as seen in other methods. It has economic advantages as well with almost no investment needed in infrastructure or raw materials and makes minimal use of labour and technology.

The changes have been both palpable and profitable with far-reaching benefits

- yield sustainability was achieved at lower costs than chemical farming
- annually 3000MT of on-farm compost is generated
- growth in population densities of micro-organisms including fungi, actinomycetes and bacteria
- increased immunity of tea bushes lowering incidence of pest and crop disease
- speedy removal of accrued toxicity from previous farming practices resulting in pesticide residue free pure made tea with higher antioxidant content

- comparatively higher level of nitrogen was found which rejuvenated deactivated soil system
- improved health of garden work force and incidence of dysentery, fever and stomach related illness reduced significantly
- marked increase in biodiversity of insect, plant and animal population

The cumulative effect of these green interventions was greater carbon sequestration and a lowering of greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) earning them recognition for attaining carbon neutrality.

In 2014, West Jalinga saw a match in their pursuit for greater ecological balance with Fairtrade's emphasis on environmental and social sustainability. Jalinga's agricultural innovation gave them the necessary fillip to sales and to forge inroads in Fairtrade markets of UK, US, Italy and Australia. Fairtrade sales climbed from 200 MT in the first year of certification to 300 MT by the third year, aggregating a premium of \$250,000 which was utilized in solar powered lighting for 1500 worker's homes, hand water pumps and recreational facilities among other projects.

"If organic sustainability was not existent, then creating a new export business with Fairtrade would not have been possible. Our organic Assam prices are competitive because of no crop loss in our organic conversion" concedes Ketan Patel, Director, Jalinga Tea Co (India) Pvt Ltd.

Mr Patel is also appreciative of the Fairtrade systemic support received, more specifically participation in crucial trade forums as well as a Fairtrade climate change workshop that happened to be a turning point. It was here that he was introduced to an Indian supplier of fuel-efficient cook-stoves which led to West Jalinga initiating a cook stove project for its workers which lowered their firewood consumption by 60%. The project enabled them register with Atmosfair Germany for the Gold Standard Carbon Credits.

West Jalinga is bullish about the Fairtrade market because of the tremendous social and environmental impact it effects. These early wins have motivated them bolster their marketing strategies and they are optimistic about the potential to up their current average of 30% sales in Fairtrade.

Jalinga is not letting complacency set in. By 2018, they intend to move from using coal to bio-mass generated energy for processing tea. And by 2020, they target complete conversion of electricity from grid lines to solar power for running factory operations.

In 2018 Jalinga is starting a small grower Organic & Fair-trade tea project, 60MT annual 1st year production.

Also starting Organic & Fair-trade herb production of various products like Ginger, Turmeric, Peppermint, Chamomile & Rooibos. This is a year 1 trial & will scale upto 200hectares from 2nd year.

In 2018 November it will host its 1st Annual Charity run inside Jalinga plantation, 3k / 5k / 10k & 21k & 1k for children & all proceeds will 100% go to Charity for Assam tea workers & their children.

Also Jalinga will start producing Matcha green teas 1st time in 2018 due to buyers demand for Organic & Fairtrade Matcha green teas.

The West Jalinga experience establishes that commitment to the environment and product quality goes a long way in economic and social sustainability. They hope their story inspires other Fairtrade certified gardens to “go green” as well.

References:

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PHOTOS:

Novcom Composting









Carbon neutral line of teas

