

Small-scale Tea Growers, Organic Cultivation, and Sustainability: An Evaluation in Eastern India

The small-scale tea production sector forms a significant part of the global tea industry and supports the rural economy in several tea-producing countries in Africa and Asia including India. However, the small-scale tea growers are often confronted with challenges like limited technical knowledge and commercial skills, lack of capital, limited marketing options, and meagre income from tea cultivation that threaten their existence and livelihoods. Their dependency on the Bought Leaf Factories to sell raw tea leaves has reduced them to mere cultivators. Many growers extensively rely on chemical inputs to achieve higher yield, which makes tea cultivation environmentally and economically unsustainable. Nevertheless, some small-scale growers in the traditional tea-growing regions in India have adopted organic cultivation in anticipation of economic and environmental benefits. Given the sustainability (social, economic, and environmental) implications of organic cultivation, the present study analysed the adoption of organic cultivation and its consequences in the small-scale tea production sector. The study is based on the analyses of primary data collected from the small-scale tea growers and other stakeholders of the tea sub-sector in two globally well-known tea-producing regions of India viz., Assam and Darjeeling. It used a mixed methods research, i.e., a combination of qualitative and quantitative analyses. The study found that organic cultivation of tea can be a profitable alternative for small-scale growers when compared to conventional cultivation and that it is also an economically viable option in the long term. The study analysed organic tea cultivation within the framework of sustainability and identified the factors that significantly influenced the conventional growers to adopt organic cultivation. The study revealed that organic cultivation of tea has provided an avenue for the growers to get involved in value addition activities like processing and marketing of tea, which is leading to the development of a sustainable tea value chain controlled by the small-scale growers. The study also established Alternative Food Network as a possible pathway for organic tea growers to achieve sustainability. Overall, the findings of the study have significant implications for policy-making and practice to promote sustainable tea production and consumption patterns.

Keywords: Small-scale tea growers, organic cultivation, adoption, value chain, sustainability.