

Organic Farming And Sustainable Development: A Case Study Of Tenzing Bodosa

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Abstract

Since the second half of the 20th century environment has become a paramount issue of discourse. Rapid urbanization and technological advancements have led to widespread environmental degradation, ultimately contributing to climate change. Once disregarded, the issue of climate change has now become humanity's foremost concern today. The global community is actively seeking ways to address this threat, with countries increasingly adopting environmentally friendly practices such as renewable energy, organic farming, and other sustainable approaches.

Northeast India, home to numerous indigenous tribes, possesses a treasure of traditional knowledge systems that have the potential for sustainable development. Preserving and fostering these indigenous knowledge systems is crucial. Northeast India offers plentiful examples of sustainable practices, among which is the case of Tenzing Bodosa from Assam is one. Bodosa is dedicated to organic tea farming and endeavours to foster peaceful coexistence between elephants and humans in his tea garden areas.

Keywords: *Organic Farming, organic tea, sustainable development, co-existence*

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I. Introduction

The northeastern region of India, encompassing Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, Nagaland, and Sikkim, has been ignored by mainstream India for long due to unknown reasons. Northeast India is rich in natural resources and serves as a hub for numerous sustainable practices aimed at harnessing these resources. The indigenous peoples of Northeast India possess their own knowledge systems that protect nature.

The concept of sustainable development gained prominence following the Brundtland Commission's report in 1987. This report defined sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Subsequent conferences such as the UN Conference on Environment and Development (Rio de Janeiro) and the Kyoto Protocol (Kyoto) further emphasized the importance of sustainable development.

In 2012, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, also known as Rio+20 took place. This conference culminated in a document titled 'The Future We Want,' which underscores the quest for an economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable future for our planet.

In the 21st century, countries worldwide are increasingly embracing renewable energies, environmentally friendly mechanisms, organic farming, and other sustainable practices. Northeast India stands out as a region abundant with such sustainable practices. The indigenous communities of Northeast India have long depended on nature, considering it their home for centuries. They maintain a profound connection with their natural surroundings and possess indigenous knowledge systems that support the sustaining of the environment. Examples of sustainable farming practices in Northeast India include wetland rice cultivation by the Apatani tribe, Zabo farming, Alder agriculture in Nagaland, and cardamom plantation in Sikkim. While these practices were previously overlooked, growing interest from other parts of the world is noticed now in adopting the sustainable methods of indigenous communities. Addressing climate change and global warming requires a collective shift towards sustainable practices across all sectors. While development remains crucial, environmental preservation is equally important.

Today, the global community is taking numerous initiatives to protect the environment and encourage environmentally friendly practices. Northeast India offers plentiful examples of sustainable practices. One such

practice is organic farming. A notable figure in this realm is Tenzing Bodosa, a renowned organic tea farmer from Assam, whose efforts exemplify the commitment to sustainable agriculture (Priyadarshini, 2019).

II. Methodology

This case study which explores the journey, struggles and vision of Tenzing Bodosa, a resident of Odalguri, Assam regarding organic farming is based on a personal interview. A personal interview with an unstructured questionnaire was conducted on 27 November 2023 at Bodosa's residence. The researcher also visited his tea garden on the same day for a better understanding. Secondary sources are also used for this study. The study is divided into two parts. The first part deals with the basic concept of organic farming and sustainable development while the other deals with Tenzing Bodosa's journey as an organic tea farmer.

III. Organic Farming And Sustainable Development

Mark Smallwood once observed, "If you are looking to feed the world for next 50 years, conventional can do it. But if we're looking at feeding the world for next 1500 years, we must switch to organic" (Sumit, Asif: 2022). Transition to organic farming is a pivotal step towards sustainable agriculture. As the demand for food rises, conventional farming methods often rely on pesticides and chemicals to boost crop yields from limited land which has negative impacts on the environment. Awareness of the detrimental effects of these practices on both nature and human health has prompted human beings a shift towards organic farming. Organic farming not only yields healthy and nutritious food but also offers ecological benefits. Excessive pesticide use can lead to soil erosion, water pollution, and other environmental damage, which organic farming helps mitigate. The Organic Trade Association 2019 report estimates that if all farmers in the US adopt organic practices, it would prevent 500 million pounds of harmful pesticides from entering the environment (Leslie Carvitto, Wonderlust).

Moreover, organic farming promotes soil health by preserving its natural fertility. Unlike pesticides, which deplete soil nutrients, organic methods maintain soil integrity, fostering healthier and more productive soil. Research indicates that just a teaspoon of organic soil can host up to 1 billion beneficial bacteria from 15,000 species, demonstrating the richness and diversity of organic soil (Kumawat, 2022). Organic agriculture plays a crucial role in combating climate change. Studies by The Rodale Institute Farming Systems suggest that organic farming can reduce greenhouse gas emissions, thus contributing to climate change mitigation efforts (Rodale Institute, 2014).

Furthermore, organic farming safeguards water supplies by preventing pollutants from runoff. Runoff from conventional farms, including pesticides and chemical fertilizers, is one of the major contributors to water pollution. Use of Nitrogen (N) fertilizers, troubles soil and pollutes water bodies (Craswell, 2021). Switching to organic farming therefore contributes to addressing these environmental challenges. The fact is that the environmental benefits of organic farming are manifold and underscore its importance in promoting sustainability and safeguarding our ecosystems.

As residents of Assam, researchers have observed how people practice organic farming without pesticides. People cultivate vegetables in their fields, embodying a self-sustaining mindset and a deep regard for nature. It preserves the environment, soil, and aquatic ecosystem and thereby promotes sustainability. Realizing the importance and marketability, there is a growing trend in organic farming. Farmers in the region are taking up organic farming as a method of their production. This practice, however, is not without any challenges. It presents unique challenges due to the substantial requirements of organic fertilizer and pesticides. Fighting all these challenges, a person named Tenzing Bodosa appeared as a trailblazer in this field to become among the first organic tea farmers in the region. His farms not only adhere to organic principles but also hold the distinction of being certified as the world's first elephant-friendly farm by the World Wildlife Fund (Chait, 2019).

IV. Findings And Discussion

Tenzing Bodosa, a farmer hailing from Assam, is renowned for his remarkable dedication to cultivating tea organically while fostering a harmonious relationship with the environment, and wildlife. Regarded as a warrior in his own right, Tenzing Bodosa has triumphed over adversities to shine brightly like a star. His two farms located in the Bodoland Territorial Area of Kachibari, Udalguri district, stand as certified organic tea farms and the world's first elephant-friendly establishments.

Born when the insurgency and separatist movement was at its height in the region, Tenzing experienced the tumultuous situation of Bodoland's struggle for autonomy from a tender age. At just 6 or 7 years old, amidst the peak of the separatist movement, Tenzing lost his father, brother, and sister-in-law in a military attack, compelling him to run away from home and undertake various odd jobs to sustain. Despite these challenges, Tenzing acquired a diverse skill set, mastering driving, mechanical work, machinery control, and small-scale factory setup. He also worked under a Malaysian Construction Company and lived in Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore, and so on. However, with the signing of the Bodo Accord (2003) and the subsequent return to peace, he decided to return to his motherland. In 2007, he made the pivotal decision to return, but only to encounter the

stark reality of underdevelopment in his native region. With limited earning opportunities, Tenzing decided to do farming in his ancestral place (A Talk with Tenzing Bodosa, a World-Famous Organic Farmer, 2020).

Recognizing the lucrative export potential and high market demand for tea, he decided to venture into tea cultivation. After visiting numerous tea gardens, he became aware of the prevalent use of chemical fertilizers in tea farming. Despite receiving advice from tea experts advocating for the use of chemical fertilizers and genetically modified seeds, he found himself experiencing headaches and nausea whenever he worked on his farms. He noticed that the chemicals used were also causing the death of fish in his pond. Determined to eschew these harmful practices, he opted for a traditional and organic approach to farming. Undertaking a comprehensive study on tea plantation techniques, soil and grass management, and natural fertilizers, he embarked on the challenging journey of transitioning to organic tea farming. However, with no training centres for organic farming available in Assam, he sought knowledge elsewhere. His quest led him to Dr. L. Narayan Reddy, a successful organic farmer from Doddaballapur in Bangalore. Under Dr. Reddy's mentorship, he learned the fundamentals of organic farming. Yet, recognizing the need for further education, he connected with a Canadian NGO, Fertile Ground, who provided additional training at their farm. Armed with newfound knowledge and skills in organic farming, he established his farm in 2007. Despite encountering initial challenges, his perseverance and dedication enabled him to overcome obstacles and achieve success (Mohan, 2019; T. Bodosa, personal communication, 27 Nov, 2023).

Although he was working on organic farming, realized that Assam lacked a profitable market for organic tea. Hence, he began exploring international markets. He travelled to Hong Kong and Australia in search of potential buyers and eventually started selling tea in Canada, Germany, the US, the UK, and other countries (T. Bodosa, personal communication, 27 Nov, 2023). Gradually, he expanded his business from his parents' one-hectare land, investing his earnings to acquire approximately 25 hectares of land. With an annual revenue nearing 70 lakhs, he cultivates various types of tea, along with cardamom, coffee, ginger, and various spices. He exports green tea as well as orthodox black tea. Tenzing also has taken the responsibility of training local farmers, having guided approximately 30,000 farmers over the past decade. Contrary to the claims of some tea companies that intercropping is incompatible with tea cultivation, Tenzing asserts that the Indian climate is conducive to growing multiple crops simultaneously. He emphasizes that chemical-based farming methods deplete soil fertility over time, making intercropping challenging, whereas organic farming allows for such practices (Mehra, 2021).

An intriguing aspect of his farm is the buffer zone that separates it from the adjacent jungle, marking the boundary where his land ends and the wilderness begins, stretching up to the Bhutan border. Spanning 74 acres, this buffer area comprises a natural forest meticulously maintained by him, serving as a sanctuary that draws herds of elephants. Alongside, he has cultivated bamboo, jackfruit, pumpkin, watermelon, and other vegetation (T. Bodosa, personal communication, 27 Nov, 2023). With ample space to roam and abundant food sources, the elephants peacefully coexist with the tea garden and its workers, exemplifying harmonious living. This symbiotic relationship extends beyond elephants, as various other wild animals, including deer, bears, wild pigs, rabbits, hornbills, and sparrows, also frequent the area. Despite prevalent incidents of wild elephants wreaking havoc in tea gardens elsewhere, Tenzing Bodosa has found a solution for peaceful coexistence, fostering a wildlife sanctuary that also benefits his tea farm. He fermented plants rich in essential nutrients like calcium, potassium, and iron as fertilizer for his tea garden, leveraging the natural ecosystem to enhance soil fertility (T. Bodosa, personal communication, 27 Nov, 2023).

With a deep-seated affection for wildlife, Tenzing was deeply troubled when an elephant died in his farm. Motivated to seek guidance in wildlife conservation, he reached out to the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), urging their intervention. After two years, WWF finally visited his farm, commending his efforts to create a sanctuary for wild animals. Impressed by the sight of freely roaming wildlife, WWF certified Tenzing's two farms as the world's first elephant-friendly farms. This recognition catapulted his farm to global fame among environmentalists and nature enthusiasts, attracting visitors from diverse corners of the world and helping to popularise his tea. To accommodate the coming of tourists, Tenzing ventures into eco-tourism, constructing treehouses amidst the natural surroundings to offer visitors a comfortable retreat immersed in nature's beauty (Mohan, 2019). He is working in association with several global tea companies such as Lake Missoula Tea Company, Metolius Tea, Elephant Origins, Inspired Leaf Teas, etc. His tea, as he said, can be found in approximately 400 outlets in Europe (T. Bodosa, personal communication, 27 Nov, 2023).

Tenzing also harbours ambitious plans to expand his business in the future and visualize a society where every people will venture into organic and eco-friendly agricultural practices. While asked about his plans for the future, he spoke about the shortage of quality and pesticide-free food which requires attention. In this connection, he connected with two American scientists named John Stephon and Marshal, with whom he devised a strategy to implement advanced farming techniques, such as oxy farming. Recognizing the emerging challenge of food scarcity, they aim to introduce innovative farming methods that can maximize output from limited land using cutting-edge technology (T. Bodosa, personal communication, 27 Nov, 2023). In his garden, along with tea, there are black pepper, areca nut, coffee, and guava. He is working on multi-farming which includes fishery, piggery,

poultry, and others. Tenzing Bodosa epitomizes a warrior spirit, tirelessly advocating for the protection of the environment, forests, wildlife, and indigenous tribes. He always says he wants to give back to nature. Hence, in his lectures, he urges the young generations to adopt eco-friendly agricultural practices which, according to him, will ensure sustainable development. He visualizes a world where humanity coexists harmoniously with nature (A Talk with Tenzing Bodosa, a World-Famous Organic Farmer, 2020). Recognizing his outstanding contribution to the field of environment and forest, the Government of Assam conferred with the 'Assam Gaurav Award' on 13 February 2024. Today, he is an inspiration for thousands of youths who aspire to venture into organic farming specially organic tea. He has set an example of how humans and wildlife can coexist in harmony.

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