

KANGRA TEA— A TEA FROM THE HILLS OF HIMACHAL PRADESH

Pratibha Thakur¹ and Dr. Pardeep Kumar²

¹PhD Scholar CSKHPKV, Palampur

²Principal Scientist, Department of Soil Science, CSK HPKV, Palampur

INTRODUCTION

The majestic Dhauladhar range of the western Himalaya is nestling the popular Kangra valley of Himachal Pradesh. This valley is famous for its glorious beauty since ages but the tea gardens of Kangra valley make this place bonnier. The coolness of the snow concealed mountains, the climate, the characteristic terrain and acidic soils of Kangra region; all play equivalent role in casting a delightful cup of quality tea with unique flavour and aroma. Kangra tea is known for its unique flavours in both green and black tea variants. Black tea from Kangra valley gives sweet lingering after taste and the green tea is famous for its woody aroma.



HISTORY

The history of lush green tea gardens in Kangra dates back to 1849 when Dr. William Jameson (the then Superintendent of the Botanical Gardens) acknowledged the region suitable for tea cultivation which then led to the establishment of first commercial tea garden in 1852 at Holta, Palampur. With the passage of time the Kangra tea continued gaining fame and in 1886, it won gold medal in London for its distinct taste and quality. It was honoured with silver medal in Amsterdam in 1895 for its unique quality. Unfortunately, a terrible earthquake in 1905 twirled this success into a huge failure as it destroyed large number of tea gardens and factories in the valley which led European planters to abandon the valley, handing their estates to the local traders. That earthquake wiped out the tea industry of Himachal Pradesh from tea map. Before this mishap, around 4000 hectare area in Himachal Pradesh was under tea cultivation which has now squeezed to approximately 2300 hectare. The local people who took charge of the abandoned estates failed to maintain the productivity. Before 1905, the tea of this region was being exported to Afghanistan, Russia, central Asia and even USA but negligence by stakeholders made people abandon their plantations and the exports reached to zero.

THE SINKING INDUSTRY

Out of 2300 hectare area, approximately 850 hectares of area under tea is lying neglected or has been abandoned by owners. The owners are helpless due to shrinking productivity and profits. It is a huge failure on the part of farm holders receiving no or little external support as the productivity has declined from 284 kg per hectare to 132 kg per hectare after Europeans left the farms. Apart from low

productivity, there are several other reasons behind neglected and abandoned plantations like fragmented and small land holdings, lack of subsidies on production and processing services, no policies for promotion and marketing of the produce, poor marketing infrastructure, erratic processing and closed processing plants. Moreover, due to small and fragmented land holdings, it is difficult for processing units to procure the uniform quality leaves. Also, the tea is a labour intensive crop which further increases the cost of production. The Himachal Pradesh Ceiling of Land Holdings Act is the only boundary which is restricting tea farm holders not to sell their farms because according to the act the tea estate owners cannot sell inherited farms or use them for any other purpose. However, due to shrinking profits, younger generations are left with no other options except for abandoning them and moving to other viable opportunities and options.

TIME TO TURN THE TABLES

The demand of Kangra tea is still high among the natives. It is a valuable industry. It is a cash crop and can bring profits for government and growers. Concerted efforts are needed both from farm holders and government. Government should come forward with some policies like higher subsidies on hi-tech machinery, fertilizers, herbicides and weedicides. Finance schemes and support system for processing plants should come into action; powerful marketing strategies should be implemented. Small tea start-ups should be promoted by the government. Self-help groups, cooperatives and contract farming can better serve the purpose. Farm holders should be motivated to improve packaging and for value addition of the product (like Rose green tea, lemon grass green tea, tea wines, tea concentrates etc.). Tea growers should also get some of the facilities that are being provided to apple growers in the state. There are some



existing schemes for tea growers but are not that much attractive to the farmers. There is a need to initiate awareness campaigns about the importance and uniqueness of this industry in the region and the demand of products like tea catechins, tea concentrate in the international market and the profitability associated with them should be brought into the notice of the farmers. Farmers should be persuaded and encouraged to establish orchards by planting clones like 'Him Sphurthi' which was developed by IHBT and gives 25 per cent higher production. Trainings should be imparted to the farmers for using modern agro-techniques and machinery.

SUMMARY

To sum up, Geographical Indicator (GI) tagged Kangra tea is no less than Darjeeling or Assam tea in colour, flavour or aroma and has some unique characteristics that make it recognisably distinct. Kangra is the only region in India that comprises China or China hybrid tea bushes. Still, it is not being recognized in the world tea map like Assam and Darjeeling tea. In Himachal, maximum production and marketing facilities being extended to apple growers and tea industry is one of the most neglected industry. The Kangra tea growers are fighting all alone to keep their farms and livelihood alive. Kangra tea industry is facing a number of production, processing and marketing constraints which need the attention of farm holders, scientists and policy makers. The divine cup of Kangra tea with unique aroma and flavour need a quick freeze through the concerted efforts of stakeholders to regain its lost glory.