

# 'Bada Madam' breaks a 200-year-old tradition

## Assam Gets First Woman Tea Garden Manager

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**Guwahati:** In the nearly two-centuries'-old history of Assam's tea industry, it is the 'bada sahebs' who have been at the helm of gardens. As estate managers, they are used to enjoying absolute authority and a host of perks. But for the first time, a woman in Assam has managed to break the glass ceiling by being appointed to the post at Apeejay Tea's Hilika Tea Estate in upper Assam's Dibrugarh district last August.

Lovingly called 'bada madam', Manju Baruah (43), who started off as a welfare officer, says, "I am often add-



Manju Baruah (in blue T-shirt) with estate managers

ressed as 'bada madam'. It is the alternative to 'bada saheb' — the legendary terminology to address the boss in a tea garden. Sometimes, workers also address me as 'Sir'. But I don't mind. I rather enjoy it."

Manju, who prefers ri-

ding on her motorbike for supervision of her 633.75-hectare tea estate, adds: "Women at the top certainly is a disruption of the traditional management structure in tea gardens. But it's a disruption of a good kind." She says she took it as a challenge to

prepare herself mentally and physically to head a tea estate where the nature of work is mostly outdoor, moving from other corner of the sprawling garden to another.

"The tea industry is a labour-intensive sector. In fact, there are more women workers than men here. So, I think the challenge is the same for both men and women at the top. Men do have certain advantages but I have never given any excuse as a woman at any point," she adds. Manju, who feels that talent is 'gender neutral', further says, "If the motive and ethics are right and you are doing full justice to your job, it doesn't matter whether a man or a woman at the top of the garden management structure."

A senior Tea Board of India official said there have

been women at senior assistant manager and welfare officer levels but no woman was appointed as a manager until Manju's elevation to that position.

The native species of tea was discovered by Scottish explorer Robert Bruce in 1823 in upper Assam, where the members of the Singpho tribe used to traditionally brew them. In 1835, the East India Company established the first tea garden in the state. Assamese planter Maniram Dewan was the first Indian to start commercial production of tea after at Cinamora in Jorhat after he quit the Assam Tea Company in 1840.

Assam's annual tea production is 670 million kg, which is little over 50% of India's total production. Tea is Assam's state drink.