

Small growers enjoy a place in the sun via organic tea

Farmer-producer firm sets flavour for profitable cultivation

E.M. MANOJ
KALPETTA

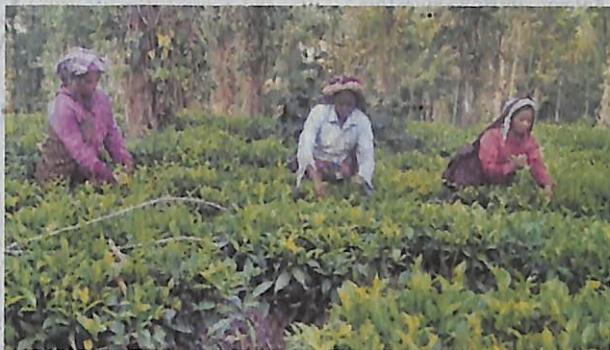
The Wayanad Green Tea Producer Company has become a kind of role model for small tea growers in the country by ensuring sustainable income through organic tea cultivation.

'According to the data with the Tea Board, as many as 3,500 registered small-scale farmers in the district depend on the tea sector for their livelihood. But most of them are left to the mercy of bought leaf agents and bought leaf factories in the absence of any processing facilities in the small-scale tea sector of the district,' said Jose Sebastian, CEO of the company.

As the farmers had no access to tea factories, they were forced to sell their produce to the bought leaf agents or the middlemen as per the price fixed by them.

Five years ago, members of the Small Tea Growers Society at Karadippara and the Karshaka Jyothi Small Tea Growers Society at Vattachola in the district constituted Wayanad Green Tea Producer Company, a farmer-producer organisation, with the support of NABARD to overcome exploitation by the middlemen.

Finally, they set up a factory exclusively for green tea processing at Karadippara to tap the vast potential of organic green tea.



Brimming cuppa: Tea leaves now fetch ₹40 a kg. Two years ago, farmers had to sell them at ₹5-₹9 a kg to agents.

The company, which started with 15 shareholders and ₹10 lakh in authorised capital, now has 167 shareholders and an authorised capital of ₹50 lakh, Mr. Jose said.

GREEN SHOOTS

The factory had been set up at a cost of ₹83 lakh, including ₹45.80 lakh in assistance from NABARD and ₹37 lakh as start-up grant from the State Industries Department, he said.

With a capacity to process 3,600 kg of green tea leaf in three shifts a day, the factory started functioning from May 7, 2018. They had sold 1,136 kg green tea and 322 kg orthodox tea till December at a farm gate price of ₹500 a kg of green tea and ₹200 a kg of orthodox tea.

'We could not utilise the full potential of the factory owing to the dearth of green

leaves during summer,' Mr. Jose said, adding that the company was planning to operate two shifts from the next season.

Better prices

'We are getting ₹40 a kg for our tea leaves now but, two years ago, we were forced to sell it at ₹5 to ₹9 a kg to bought leaf agents, says K.K. Padmanabhan Nambiar, a farmer and a director of the company. Moreover, production cost is also very low compared with traditional tea cultivation as we are following an organic way of cultivation here, he said.

'The company has become a model in organic tea cultivation for small-scale farmers in the country and the Tea Board is providing incentives and subsidies to promote organic tea cultivation, K. Karthikeyan, development officer, Tea Board, Wayanad said.