

Tata Global Beverage Limited (TGBL) And Its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Activities In Assam: An Analytical Study

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ABSTRACT

In today's business environment, corporate social responsibility (CSR) plays a crucial role in shaping the operational strategies of companies. This study investigates the CSR initiatives of Tata Global Beverages Limited (formerly Tata Tea) in Assam, a key region where the company manages numerous tea gardens. The tea industry is critical to Assam's economy, providing livelihoods to millions of workers. Recognising this, Tata Global Beverages has implemented a range of CSR activities aimed at enhancing the socio-economic and environmental conditions of its workforce and their communities. With the enforcement of the Companies Act 2013, which mandates CSR activities for corporate sectors, Tata Global Beverages has intensified its efforts in Assam. The study explores various initiatives undertaken by the company, including those focused on education, healthcare, women's empowerment, and environmental sustainability. These initiatives are designed not only to comply with legal requirements but also to foster long-term community development and well-being. The study highlights the impact of Tata Global Beverages' CSR activities on improving the quality of life for tea garden workers and their families. The findings demonstrate that these initiatives have led to significant advancements in education, health standards, economic opportunities, and environmental conservation among their tea garden workers.

Keywords: tea, tea industry, corporate social responsibility

Introduction:

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has evolved significantly over the past few decades, becoming a fundamental aspect of business operations worldwide. The concept of CSR involves companies integrating social and environmental concerns into their business practices and interactions with stakeholders. The goal is to operate in a manner that is ethical, sustainable, and beneficial to society at large. The emergence and evolution of CSR are influenced by various factors, including globalisation, increased awareness of social and environmental issues, and legislative requirements.

Historically, CSR was seen as a voluntary practice, often motivated by a company's desire to enhance its public image or respond to stakeholder pressures. However, with growing recognition of the interdependence between business and society, CSR has shifted from being an optional activity to a strategic imperative. This transition is driven by the understanding that businesses can no longer operate in isolation from the societies and environments in which they function. Instead, they must contribute positively to these spheres to ensure long-term sustainability and success.

In India, the formalisation of CSR took a significant leap with the enactment of the Companies Act 2013. This law aims to promote a more structured and accountable approach to CSR, ensuring that companies actively contribute to social and environmental development. The mandated areas for CSR activities include education, poverty eradication, healthcare, gender equality, and environmental sustainability, among others. India's tea industry is a cornerstone of its agricultural and economic landscape, positioning the country as the largest grower and producer of tea globally. For over 150 years, India has maintained a leadership role in the cultivation, production, and export of tea, significantly contributing to its economic growth. The

industry's labour-intensive nature necessitates a heavy reliance on human labour throughout the production process, from planting to plucking and processing. Consequently, the welfare of tea industry workers is paramount, with a strong emphasis on fair wages, reasonable working hours, safe working conditions, healthcare, childcare, and protection against unfair dismissals.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in the tea industry addresses these critical areas. However, despite its economic importance, the tea industry has often been criticised for insufficient attention to CSR obligations. Research indicates that many tea companies have historically neglected their social responsibilities, focusing more on profit margins than on the well-being of their workers. This gap in social responsibility has prompted increased scrutiny and calls for more rigorous and committed CSR practices within the industry.

The Government of India addressed these concerns by enacting the Companies Act 2013, which mandates CSR activities for specific categories of companies. This legislation has increased the pressure on tea companies to become more socially responsible and accountable. Despite this, the extent to which these companies have embraced and effectively implemented CSR remains a topic of concern and investigation.

Tata Global Beverages Limited (TGBL), formerly known as Tata Tea, stands out as a significant entity within the tea industry and is known for its proactive stance on CSR. TGBL has made substantial efforts to align its operations with high ethical standards and robust CSR policies. According to TGBL's annual reports and CSR policies, the company is deeply committed to ethical business practices, sustainability, and community development. TGBL's transition from Tata Tea to Tata Global Beverages Limited reflects its broader vision to become the most admired natural beverage company globally, emphasising sustainability and CSR.

In Assam, where TGBL operates numerous tea gardens, the company has implemented various CSR initiatives aimed at improving the socio-economic and environmental conditions of its workforce and their communities. These initiatives include educational programs, healthcare services, women's empowerment projects, and environmental sustainability efforts etc. TGBL's CSR activities are designed to promote long-term growth and development, aligning with the Tata Code of Conduct and demonstrating the company's commitment to ethical conduct and community welfare. This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of TGBL's CSR activities in Assam. It will explore the scope and impact of these initiatives, assessing how they contribute to the well-being of tea garden workers and their families, as well as the broader community. By examining these efforts, the study seeks to highlight the role of CSR in fostering sustainable development and enhancing the quality of life in labour-intensive industries like tea. The findings will offer valuable insights for policymakers, business leaders, and academics interested in the implementation and outcomes of CSR practices in the tea industry.

CSR in Changing Dynamics:

There is no unanimity regarding the concept of CSR, as the term has been defined by different scholars and organisations differently. In general, CSR is a term widely used to define the responsibilities of the corporate world towards society and the environment. (Goyal and Aggarwal) World Business Council on Sustainable Development (WBCSD) defines CSR as the continuing commitment by businesses to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of the workforce and their families, as well as of the local community and society at large. (World Business Council on Sustainable Development)

With the onset of globalisation, the whole world is witnessing that the Westphalia nation-state is losing some of its regulatory power (Kobrin, 2009). As a result, there has been an increasing awareness of the limits of government legislative and regulatory initiatives to effectively deal with the issues of governance. The gradual withdrawal of the state from welfare activities has led to a crisis as far as societal governance is concerned. The declining steering power of the state has created a vacuum to cope with social challenges such as unemployment, poverty, underdevelopment, etc. (Albareda, Lozano, Tencati, 2008), and this has led to a growing realisation that new strategies and public policies are required to effectively deal with the situation. In that, CSR has assumed significance.

Moreover, industrialisation, the rapid growth of multinational corporations (MNCs) etc., are causing unethical exploitation of natural resources (Cherunilam, 2009) and it has made people think that globalisation may inflict severe damage on local cultures, political autonomy and the environment (Eden & Lenway, 2001) From labourers to the social activists all have started to protest against the unprecedented pre-dominance of multi-national corporations and keeping all these into account many writers have argued that there is an urgent need from the part of the government to play a role by making it mandatory for corporate sectors to play a constructive role in the sustainable development of society, particularly in areas such as climate change, health epidemics, immigration, regional conflict and also some other socio-economic and political challenges that have potential impacts across national borders. (Nelson, 2008) As a result, though empowering the people is the responsibility of the government, the corporate sector has also started to take the responsibility to empower people both socially and economically through CSR (Albuquerque, 2010) as a response to the growing recognition that the private sector must engage proactively in the public-policy agenda and explore a new possibility of interaction between governments and corporate sectors through the concept Corporate Social Responsibility. (Steiner, 1971)

Furthermore, the integration of CSR into corporate strategies reflects a broader shift towards sustainable business practices. Companies are increasingly recognising that CSR can enhance their competitive advantage by building brand loyalty, attracting and retaining talent, and mitigating risks. This shift is evident

in the increased focus on environmental, social, and governance (ESG) criteria by investors and stakeholders, who demand greater transparency and accountability from businesses. Effective CSR practices involve engaging with various stakeholders, including employees, customers, suppliers, local communities, and civil society organisations. Companies that actively involve stakeholders in CSR decision-making processes are better positioned to understand and address societal needs and expectations.

Corporate Responsibility in Action: Analysing TGBL's CSR Activities in Assam:

Before discussing the CSR activities of TGBL, it needs to be mentioned that the tea industry of Assam and West Bengal together constitute the most productive region of the world. The state of Assam is the world's largest tea-growing region. The tea industry supports approximately six million people in Assam through employment. (UNICEF, 2014) But the notable thing is that many studies have brought to light that Assam's tea garden workers are the lowest paid in India's organised sectors of industries. It has been stated that though workers are considered as the heart and soul of tea plantations but, as far as the life situation of tea labourers is concerned, things are not as ideal as they should be in India, especially in Assam. (Sharma, 2013) However, as the Companies Act 2013 has made CSR a compulsory activity for corporations, in that situation, one needs to study the CSR activities of tea industries.

Before discussing the CSR activities of TGBL in Assam, it needs a special mention that TGBL, former Tata Tea, at present does not look after the plantation activities of its tea gardens. Now, it is engaged in activities like packaging, distribution of tea, etc. Two new entities of TGBL, i.e. Kanan Devan Hill Plantation Company (KDHPC) and Amalgamated Plantation Private Limited (APPL), are now running all the tea plantation activities of TGBL that exist both in the South and North-Eastern regions of India, respectively. In fact, the changing of name and ownership started in 2005 after Tata Tea successfully transferred 17 tea estates from its South India plantation operation in Munnar, Kerala, to the new company KDHPC under the employee buyout model.

In the same way, a similar route was considered for Tata Tea's Assam and West Bengal Plantation. The actual reason behind the emergence of these two new entities was Tata Tea's decision to move away from the tea plantation business to focus only on the production and sale of beverages and to start packaging and marketing of teas in the market with the brand name TGBL. The APPL was incorporated with TGBL, having multiple stakeholders such as IFC, a part of the World Bank Group, the Tata group, partner investors and employees, including estate workers, etc., on 29th January 2007, and acquired 24 estates from erstwhile Tata Tea Limited on 30th April 2008. Therefore, while talking about the CSR activities of TGBL in Assam, one can discuss them by putting them into two different phases. One is Tata Tea's inception in 2007, and the other is after 2007. In the second phase, there is a need to examine how the new plantation company of Tata Tea, i.e., the APPL, has been bearing the same social responsibility that was being exercised by Tata Tea before. Further, the name TGBL was replaced by "Tata Consumer Products Limited (TCPL)" in 2020.

Before the Amalgamated Plantation, Tata Tea used to run all the tea gardens of Assam, which were owned by it. Along with its plantation activities, Tata Tea was also committed towards society. The Tata Code of Conduct provided Tata Tea with a direction towards commitment towards social responsibility. In this context, one can cite the statement of Brojan Gogoi. In a regional round table conference of Assam on CSR, held at Planters Club, Dibrugarh, on 7th January 2005, Brojan Gogoi, the then Deputy General Manager of the Community Development and Social Welfare Department of Tata Tea, said that the Tata philosophy is that if they earn from society, some part of it should go back to society. (Regional Round Table Consultation of Assam on CSR, 2005) He expressed the view that Tata Tea started its 'Community Development and Social Welfare Department' in 1983. They had initiated this process under the leadership of Dr. Krishna Kumar who was the director of programs for community development.

According to him, Tata Tea took initiatives for the workers and the community where it operates. For workers, a reproductive health and maternal care program was started. The reproductive health system was run in all their tea estates. The main idea behind this was to control pregnancy death, abortion, and other issues that were rampant at that time. Along with that, they had taken up family welfare programs.

One central area that was taken up in that period was the children's care program. They, in fact, wanted to reduce malnutrition among the children. A survey was conducted, and it was found that there were many cases of night blindness among the children. Tata Tea tried to address the problem with vitamin 'D' and 'A'. Immunization programs and mid-day meals, and therefore, clinics were started to monitor the program in the Tata-owned tea gardens.

Again, a system of pre-schooling was also started where the children could enrol to get the basic knowledge to prepare for their future. The management gave them the option of studying either at the estate or outside. The management also provided school buses for the children of the workers.

Assam is the land of agriculture. Keeping this in mind, Tata Tea implemented a program for those with marginal land. It was the "Lab to Land" Program, which started in 1990. It was implemented with the help of Assam Agriculture University and Tata Tea. The farmers have been able to increase their yield greatly after its implementation.

In 1992, a program called TEACUP (Tea Estate Area Community Upliftment Program) was started. The educated youth of the community were encouraged to take up activities like poultry, farming, fishery, weaving, etc. In this regard, Brojan Gogoi expressed the view that though this program is still ongoing in

some of Tata Tea's gardens, those youth who went through this program faced problems regarding market access.

Again, in 1993, an eye hospital was established in Guwahati, which is regarded as Tata Tea's brainchild. Now, it is being run by a trust and has become a big hospital.

In the same way, in 1994, Tata Tea started the Kaziranga Trust and appointed an official there. The main aim behind the formation of the trust was to educate villagers against poaching. It has been quite successful. This trust is being maintained by a group of people, and it is now an independent trust.

In 1995, Tata Tea started another program called "OUTREACH" for areas without medical facilities. Through this program, a full-fledged team of doctors was appointed in the North Bank of Assam. It was also a successful program. The doctors have been able to provide free medical facilities in the tribal areas of the North Bank of Assam.

Tata Tea, as a part of its social responsibilities, established its industrial training centre in the year 1997. The institute, which is known as Amalgamated Plantations Private Industrial Training Institute (APPITI), was set up at Rawta in Bodoland of Assam in the year 1997. The primary focus of the institute was to create an efficient technical workforce, which is a high demand of time. The centre runs two-year residential programs for different courses such as motor vehicle mechanic, computer operator and programming assistant, electrician, etc. It has trained more than 1760 students so far. It is noteworthy that presently, this training institute is affiliated with the National Council for Vocational Training (NCVT), Government of India. (APPL Foundation)

Then another initiative taken by Tata Tea for social transformation is the establishment of the Vocational Trade Centre in Chubwa. The centre was established in the year 1986 with the objective of providing training for the tea garden youth in various skill development programs. The notable thing is that now APPL is also bearing this same responsibility as carried out by Tata Tea before. For the proper implementation of this program, APPL has also collaborated with Mercy Corps India to run vocational courses in basic beauty and hairdressing, lab technology and plumbing. In the words of Bijoya Dangorla, a VTC participant, "The beautician course at the VTC changed my life. The training is a perfect combination of theory and practical learning, the staff is very thorough, and the institute timings are very suitable for me. This has helped me to learn the trade already" (TGBL, annual report, 2013-14)

After 2007:

When we talk of Tata Tea's social responsibilities in Assam after 2007, one needs to mention APPL, as after 2007, all the plantation activities of former Tata Tea have been carried out by this new company. Though the company's name has been changed several times from Tata Finlay to APPL but, the estates of Tata Tea are still proud of their heritage. APPL's tea estates are social institutions that care for their workforce. Apart from employment, the plantation provides free housing, potable water, medical facilities, creches and primary education, food rations, etc. The estate workers are also entitled to a provident fund, annual leave of 20 days and a leave travel allowance. (Shukla, 2023) The notable part here is that in true Tata style, APPL carries forward the legacy of Tata Tea's CSR work and continues to add to it. In this regard, Anup Mehra, Senior Manager of the Kelleyden Tea Estate, opines that they focus on improving the quality of lives in the communities they operate in through different initiatives taken in the fields of education, health and livelihood. (Shukla, 2023) Regarding health, one company official of APPL held the view that the hospitals of APPL tea estates are managed by qualified medical practitioners. By referring to the Referral Hospital and Research Centre at Chubwa Tea Estate, the company official held the view that these hospitals have been providing quality healthcare services at free cost to the employees as well as to the general public at large at an affordable price.

In due course of time, APPL has emerged as the second largest tea producer in India with different varieties such as CTC, orthodox, green and organic tea. This new company is committed to bringing sustainable development. Therefore, through its welfare activities, it wants to create a sustainable livelihood, employment generation and entrepreneurship development for successful micro-enterprises. At APPL, it is always remembered that any success in material terms is worthwhile when it can serve the needs of the country and its people as said by Mr. JRD Tata, the founder of Tata Group of Industries. (APPL, general meeting, 2014)

TGBL co-founded a UNICEF –Ethical Tea Partnership (ETP) program initially for three years to promote child protection in tea gardens in Assam. The program aimed at educating young girls and other community members on child rights, and it has continued. Everyone desires a good environment. APPL, too, shows its concern for protecting the environment. To conserve electrical energy, APPL provides solar-panelled lights in the street and the bungalows of its tea gardens. (APPL) In the tea estates of APPL, chemical wastes and hospital garbage are disposed of according to SA8000 standards. Along with this, soil analysis is done on a yearly basis at the R&D section of Teok Tea Estate.

Again, a Digital Learning Centre (DLC) was set up at Lattakoojan Tea Estate, Golaghat, in collaboration with "The Institute of Research and Documentation of Indigenous Studies," a non-profit organisation and Numaligarh Refinery Limited (NRL) in May 2014 with the sole aim of imparting computer knowledge within the tea garden community. The students within and outside of the Tea Estate have immensely benefitted from this computer centre. (APPL)

The above discussion reflects that TGBL has put its effort into being a socially responsible business entity. However, it is essential to mention that some studies conducted on the tea industry have brought to light that Assam's tea gardens are a hotspot for human trafficking, and it is because of the lack of infrastructure, poor working conditions of the workers, inadequate facilities that all have led to such situation. Such an allegation was also made against APPL. However, as a response to the allegation made against APPL, the TGBL, the largest shareholder in APPL, made its own enquiry regarding the living and working conditions of the workers at the APPL plantations. The enquiry revealed the fact that APPL would be pursuing a phased action plan that will guide APPL to constitute a project to improve the living and working conditions at the plantations of APPL. Initially, it was decided that a total of 25 plantations would be taken under the project in different phases. The areas that have been identified for action under the project include renovation of quarters, construction of new quarters, bathing units and drainage, working conditions, health and other welfare measures, review of sustainability standards in APPL, etc. It has been revealed from the enquiry report that APPL does accept the fact that there are some common problems that all estates are facing, but APPL has started making a considerable number of efforts to meet all those challenges.

However, it is essential to mention here that the name of TGBL has been replaced by the name "Tata Consumer Products Limited (TCPL)," in the year 2020. Following the same heritage as Tata Tea and Tata Code of Conduct, TCPL is also committed to being the world's most admired natural food and beverages company, which will primarily focus on climate change, Water Management, Sustainable Sourcing, Waste Management and Community Development. For community development, the TCPL has undertaken different programs covering the areas of education, skill development, health care, and women's empowerment. The e-health care project taken by TCPL in collaboration with Hewlett Packard is noteworthy as it provides video consultation to the estate hospitals, and the state of Assam has benefitted significantly from this service. Another important initiative of TCPL is the UNICEF-ETP program. This program, taken in partnership with UNICEF, aims to tackle different issues, especially the women and children of tea estates have been facing. This program covers 206 Tea estates in Assam. With the help of this program, TCPL intends to bring some positive developments to the tea estates of Assam by creating awareness of child rights and human trafficking. (Tata Consumer Products Limited)

TGBL's/TCPL's CSR initiatives, though extensive, have faced challenges in ensuring uniform quality and reach across all tea estates in Assam. According to reports, some tea estates benefit from well-equipped health centres and schools, while others experience inadequate facilities and inconsistent service delivery. For instance, a 2022 survey by the NGO Human Rights Watch highlighted that only about 60% of workers in some remote estates had regular access to medical check-ups and educational materials (Tata Consumer, 2023). The effectiveness of TGBL's CSR programs can be hindered by uneven resource allocation. There have been instances where funds intended for CSR activities did not adequately reach the intended beneficiaries. In 2021, it was reported that sanitation projects were underfunded, leading to incomplete or poorly constructed facilities which did not meet the basic hygiene needs of the workers (Tata Consumer, 2023).

Low wages are a significant issue in the tea industry, including TGBL's estates. In 2023, the average daily wage for tea workers in Assam was around Rs. 205, significantly below the living wage benchmark of Rs. 300 recommended by various labour organisations. This wage disparity contributes to persistent poverty among workers and undermines the impact of CSR initiatives aimed at improving living standards. On the other hand, the housing conditions provided to tea workers often remain substandard. Workers have reported inadequate sanitation facilities, lack of clean drinking water, and overcrowded living conditions.

To enhance sustainability, there needs to be a greater focus on empowering local communities to take ownership of these initiatives. This involves training community members in project management, financial literacy, and leadership skills. While TGBL has made efforts in this direction, further efforts are necessary to ensure that communities can maintain and expand these programs independently. At the same time, greater involvement of local communities in the planning and implementation of CSR activities can significantly enhance their effectiveness and sustainability. Currently, community involvement varies across different projects. Successful models, such as participatory rural appraisal (PRA) methods, could be adopted more widely to ensure that the initiatives align with the actual needs and priorities of the communities.

The critical perspective on TGBL's CSR activities in Assam reveals that while the company has made significant contributions, there are substantial areas for improvement. Addressing implementation challenges, ensuring the sustainability of initiatives, and enhancing community involvement are essential steps towards maximising the impact of CSR efforts. Benchmarking against industry peers and adopting best practices can further strengthen TGBL's CSR framework, helping the company to support better the socio-economic development of Assam's tea estate communities.

Concluding Remarks:

The above discussion shows that Tata Tea has invested a particular portion of its earnings in workers, their families as well as the communities where it works. No doubt, there is an allegation about the commitment of Tata Tea towards social responsibilities. The tea industry, however, has the potential to take care of its workers, their families as well as their societies. Owners of the tea industry should keep in mind that it is not only the workers who are dependent on them but also their families. From different studies, it has come to the forefront that though the government of India has made CSR a mandatory practice for the corporate

sectors but, there is more need for awareness among the different sections of society on CSR. Then, only the potentiality that lies behind the concept will reach all sections of society. It is because of the very reason that it has been stated that not only the workers but also the other people are unaware of the welfare programs, facilities that are provided to the workers, and the society where it exists. Therefore, special steps should be taken by the tea companies for the workers so that they can go for the full realisation of the welfare activities taken, especially in their names. (Gowala, 2014) In the context of Assam, the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS) has an important and significant role in realising the full potentiality of CSR in the tea gardens of Assam and also addressing the grievances of the workers in front of the authority or government for being one of the forefront representatives of tea garden workers in Assam.

Moreover, the critical perspective on TGBL's CSR activities in Assam reveals that while the company has made significant contributions, there are substantial areas for improvement. Addressing implementation challenges, ensuring the sustainability of initiatives, and enhancing community involvement are essential steps towards maximising the impact of CSR efforts. Benchmarking against industry peers and adopting best practices can further strengthen TGBL's CSR framework, helping the company to better support the socio-economic development of Assam's tea estate communities. Moreover, it is obvious to have expectations from a company like TGBL that has a glorious history of consistent innovation and development. Though TGBL handed over the plantation part to APPL in all the tea gardens in Assam, still it has a major stake in the tea gardens of Assam. Along with this, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the investment arm of the World Bank, also invested in the APPL to ensure the promotion of the World Bank's goals for the socio-economic development of the labourers as well as the community. In that situation, it is obvious to have expectations from such a company. If a company like TCPL wants, it can bring tremendous changes in the lives of tea garden workers with the help of CSR.

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