

Assam tea estates get first 'bada madam'

Naresh.Mitra@timesgroup.com

Guwahati: It's always been the 'bada sahebs' who have headed Assam's tea estates, but now there's a 'bada madam' managing an estate here, nearly two centuries since the British set up tea estates in the region in the 1830s.

Manju Baruah is the manager of Apeejay Tea's Hilika Tea Estate in upper Assam's Dibrugarh district. Baruah, 43, who started as a welfare officer, says, "I am often addressed as 'bada madam'. It is the alternative to 'bada saheb', the way the boss in a tea garden is traditionally addressed. Sometimes, the workers call me 'sir'. I rather enjoy it."

Baruah rides a motorbike across the 633-hectare tea estate to carry out her duties every day. "A woman manager is certainly a disruption of the traditional management structure in a tea garden, but it's a disruption of a good kind," she said.

Work on a tea estate is mostly outdoors and requires



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physical strength, she said. "There are more women workers than men here. The tea industry is labour intensive, so I think the challenge is the same for both men and women," she said.

An official of Tea Board of India said there have been women senior assistant managers and welfare officers but no woman was appointed manager until Baruah was promoted in August.