

Assam woman breaks tea glass ceiling

ROOPAK GOSWAMI

Guwahati: The *bada saheb* (boss) has given way to *bada madam* in Assam's tea industry.

Apeejay Tea has for the first time appointed Manju Baruah, 43, as the first lady manager in a tea garden, a post which has been held by men till date. She has been posted as a manager at Hilika tea estate in Tinsukia district. Baruah took charge in August.

Baruah drives a Maruti to visit different sections in the garden, considers talent to be gender-neutral, does self-analysis for a better tomorrow and thinks that the industry needs people who love tea.

"Earlier, they used to call me *memsahab* but now it's *bada madam*. Sometimes everyone calls me Sir and I don't mind," Baruah told **The Telegraph**. *Bada Saheb* is the boss in the tea industry.

Baruah is married to a telecom professional and they have an 11-year-old daughter. Baruah joined the company as a trainee welfare officer in 2000 when it had taken a unique decision to hire women to the post. Her work starts at 6am and ends at 3.30pm. She then plans for the next day.

"Since it is a labour-inten-

sive industry, it is equally challenging for both male and female workers," Baruah said, adding that women heading tea gardens was an aberration in the traditional management structure.

"I am an outgoing girl. I was very engaged with workers and my talent, sincerity and hard work helped me get this far," Baruah said. She thanked the company for



Manju Baruah

adopting a forward-looking approach with no discrimination. The garden has around 2,500 workers.

Baruah admitted that she had faced difficult situations in different gardens tackling the male workers.

"If I am fair, right and just to my workers, I need not be afraid," she said.

She said as a manager, one had to be "a good observer,