

The World's First Elephant-Friendly Farm

by Manabi Katoch

Tenzing's two farms in Bodoland territorial area of Kachibari village in the Udalguri district of Assam have recently been certified as the world's first elephant-friendly farms.

But there was a time when Tenzing did not want to become a farmer like his father and grandfather.

Tenzing Bodosa

He dropped school after class 6. He left his home when he was 10 to work and help his mother, who was looking after their 2-hectare ancestral farm after his father's death. Tenzing was just 6 years old at the time. He did odd jobs for the first few years and then joined a Malaysian construction company, where he learnt to drive, repair machinery, work on the internet and even speak English fluently.

"In those 13 years, I learnt everything - driving, mechanic work, how to control the machinery and how to set up a small factory. This made me gain a lot of confidence to do almost all jobs," says Tenzing, while speaking to TBI from his farm.

However, as his mother was getting older, she wanted Tenzing to come back home and take care of their farm. And finally on December 12, 2006, Tenzing returned to his hometown in Assam.

Tenzing in his tea-farm

His family used to always grow paddy and vegetables, but by the time he came back, everyone was growing tea in Assam. When Tenzing visited several farms, he came to know that tea could be easily exported and many tea companies were buying tea, making marketing easier for the farmers. Tenzing too decided to grow tea in his farm. But as his family had never grown tea, he had no idea how to do it. Hence, he went to his friends who were growing tea to learn from them.

Most of the tea experts that he met suggested him to use chemical fertilisers and pesticides and advised to buy genetically modified seeds. According to them, this was the best way to get the fastest and highest yield. Being a layman in this field, Tenzing followed their instructions.

But whenever he would spray pesticide on his farm, he would get a headache and feel nauseous.

His mother, too, did not like the idea of using chemicals as they had never done this before.

“My father, grandfather and my mother had never used chemicals in our farm. They always used organic fertilisers made of cow dung and urine. We could not stand the smell of the chemicals. And then I saw that the fishes were dying in my pond. The pesticides were nothing but poison. Everyone starts their day with tea, I couldn’t have fed them poison,” says Tenzing.

He started looking for alternatives. However, everyone told him tea couldn’t be grown organically. Tenzing did his research online and came to know about Dr. L Narayan Reddy from Doddaballapur in Bangalore, who was doing it organically. He then went there and learnt organic farming. He also took up many classes, but still was not very satisfied with the training. Finally in 2007, he connected with a Canadian NGO Fertile Ground, and invited them to his farm. That’s where they trained him.

Thus, Tenzing started growing tea organically in 2007. Though initially he had to face some challenges, slowly he started getting better yield and quality of the tea leaves. Tenzing was the only farmer among 12,000 others who was growing tea organically.

Tea from Tenzing’s farm

But now the marketing of organic tea was a big challenge for him. He then decided to have his own processing unit, through which he processed the tea and packaged it all by himself.

“I set up a small processing unit and started selling my tea in Canada, Germany, US and UK through a tea company which helps me export. It was very difficult for me to find a global market. I visited Hong Kong and Australia for the royal expo to find a market. Everything was a big challenge,” he says.

Today he has 25 acres of land, in which 7.5 acres is used for tea plantation, and he grows almost all types of fruits and vegetables. He also grows paddy in the rest of the land. His yearly turnover from the tea plantation is around ₹160-₹170 lakh per annum.

The most interesting part of his farm is the buffer zone, which is the area at the end of his farm from where the jungle begins at the Bhutan border. He has left that part of the farm as is. He does not cut down the trees or start a fire there, instead he has planted bamboo trees on which the wild elephants feed. He has also not put any barriers in and around his plantation, so that the wild animals from the jungle can freely move in his farm.

At times, you can see at least 70-80 wild elephants in his farm. Hornbills, wild pigs, deers, peacocks and a variety of birds is a common sight there.

"If you grow organically, you can grow every seasonal crop in a tea farm, and you can maintain the ecological balance. When you maintain the ecological balance, you can see more birds and animals too," he says.

According to Tenzing, tea companies mislead farmers to grow only tea on their farms. Indian climate is suitable for growing anything from apples to strawberries and from tea to rice, but the farmers don't intercrop. This is because when you use chemicals, it is difficult to grow consumable fruits in the same farm and the soil slowly becomes infertile, as microorganisms also die due to pesticides. But if farmers grow organically, then all the seasonal fruits, vegetables and even paddy can be grown in the same tea farm. This makes the farmers self sufficient. Moreover, growing one's own food will ensure that there is enough food for everyone and farmers can get a chance to export their produce for bigger benefits. He also urges the urban population to learn the basics of farming and grow as much they can on their rooftops or balconies. This will increase the food security of the nation and thus, the government will help the farmers to export too. Also, it's only if one grows organically will the entire ecosystem get back into place.

"When I started growing organically, it brought back the ecological balance and even elephants loved to stay here. Yes, they are also damaging some tea plants and sometimes my house too, but it's fine by me. Even they need to survive so I am growing for them too. Why should I be selfish to grow just for myself?," he adds.

Tenzing's success inspired many, and farmers from Nagaland, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh also started coming to his farm to learn organic farming. He has trained about 30,000 farmers so far.

For farmers who want to grow organically, Tenzing suggests that they should not buy anything from the market for their farm. He recommends the '1 family, 1 hectare and 1 cow' formula, which means that the fertiliser made from cow urine and dung is sufficient to grow in one hectare of land which is sufficient for one family.

Though Tenzing's farms were very popular in and around Assam, he came into the

limelight two years back when an elephant died in his farm due to elephant conflicts. Tenzing was so upset with this that he kept writing to the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) to visit his village and help. After persuading them for two years, they finally visited his farm and were very happy to see the wild animals roaming freely. It was then that both his farms were certified as the world's first elephant-friendly farms.

Every year almost 100 tourists visit Tenzing's farm from various parts of the world like Japan, China, UK, Australia and Germany.

Some are tea buyers, some come to learn, some to know about organic farming, and some come to see the wild elephants in his farm. There are many people who also come to volunteer. There are guests who stay for more than two months and Tenzing loves hosting them.

"I love the jungle because I grew up in a village. I love every tree. I respect every microorganism, every creature, every animal of the jungle. I love to grow. I am happy with my life," he concludes.

You can contact Tenzing at tenzingb86@yahoo.in