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**GROWTH OF SMALL TEA GARDENS IN ASSAM: A TOOL FOR RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Rural economic development had remained a priority sector since the First Fifth year plan period of independent India. Despite of various planning strategies, the economy of rural India remained feeble due to poor effectiveness of the Government plans and programs towards the rural population. Of late, certain innovative ideas of the farmers appear to be highly successful in transforming the economy of the rural areas. Small Tea Gardens is emerging as one of the innovative tools of the farmers that succeeded in revolutionised rural economy, particularly in the State of Assam. Over the last five decades since 1970 the small tea gardens in Assam started growing out of the search of the marginal and medium farmers for economically beneficial agricultural activities. Assam has, at present, 1, 38,213 small tea gardens, which have generated high proportion of employment a part from raising the income level of the rural workforce. The present paper deals with the overall economic impact of the small tea gardens in the rural economy of Assam. A part from the growth pattern and the problematic areas confronted by the small tea growers for their viable and sustainable growth. The paper also underlines the repulsive forces behind the growth of small tea gardens.*

**KEYWORDS**

Assam, rural economic development, small tea gardens.

**JEL CODE**

O13, R51, R52.

**INTRODUCTION**

The diversification of agricultural activities in Assam in recent origin. After the national independence of India the medium and marginal farmers' deteriorating economic status due to shortage of agricultural land uneconomic land holding size and over involvement of the rural workforce in agricultural sector compelled them to innovate high profit making commercial agricultural activities such as small tea garden, herbal gardening, medicinal plant gardening dairy farming, poultry farming, duck farming, pisci culture, etc. all such commercial agricultural activities landscape of India. More particularly towards the late Seventies of the past century. In Assam, small tea gardens started growing at a faster pace since 1970's; which by now play a major role in the economic. Transformation of rural Assam. Even it, other Commercial activities are found to co-exist, the small tea gardens have been playing a dominating role in the rural economic landscape of the State. Such a forceful economic warrants sincere efforts of the researchers and economists to peep into the growth and operational modellies of the small tea gardens along with their impact in transforming rural economy.

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

In deriving the conceptual base, the under mention works are consulted:

The work of B. Sing and S. Ghosal<sup>1</sup> – "small Tea Growers spurt of Assam" provides a detail explanation on the revolution of small tea gardening in Assam and the circumstantial causes behind the growth of small tea gardens in Assam. The work also elaborates adequately the plight of the medium and marginal farmers prior to the growth of small tea gardens.

Saikia B and Hazarika P<sup>2</sup>. (ed).- "Asomor khudra chah khati," (in Assamese) depicts the historical background behind the growth socio-political constants before the small tea growers by the State.

P. Gayari and B. Basumatary<sup>3</sup> in their work "Assam Tea" elaborated the history, quality, reputation of Assam tea. This work is detail analysis on emergence tea plantation in Assam along with involvement of British entrepreneurship capital in the growth of Tea industry in this eastern state of India.

All the above works inspired to take up the present work on small tea garden of Assam.

**IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY**

In a developing country like India where nearly 69% of the total population live in rural areas (2011), the goal of up gradating national economy economic up gradation of rural masses. As the economy in rural India is exclusively agro-based, and as more and more warning population is forced to engaged themselves in agricultural activities, their economic condition has perennially become uncomfortable and uneconomic. Thus, the economy alternative more and more working population is forced to engage themselves in agricultural activities, their economic condition has perennially become uncomfortable and uneconomic. Thus, the only alternative.

Alternative to transform the economic fortune was to involve themselves in large numbers in commercial agricultural activities which could secure better internal and international markets. Interestingly, the medium and marginal farmers evolved a number of commercial agricultural activities for themselves under socio-economic compulsions. Such innovative commercial activities proved to be more powerful tools of socio-economic up gradation of rural population as compared to government strategic plans and programs. The growth of small tea gardens in a number of Indian States including Assam is one of such innovative agricultural activities that appears to have significant role in transformation of rural economy. It is in this context, the small tea gardens of Assam need intensive study as regards their growth trend, economic impact and on strategies for removal of constraints before their viable growth.

**STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The present paper highlights the growth trend, spatial growth pattern and economic impact of small tea garden on the rural economy of Assam. The study area – Assam is situated in the North Eastern part of India. The State has 33 administrative districts including 31 plain and 2 hill districts. Out of 31 plain districts 28 are situated in the Brahmaputra Valley, while 3 plain districts are situated in the Barak Valley. The geographic location of the State of Assam is 24<sup>0</sup> -28<sup>0</sup> N latitude and 90<sup>0</sup>– 96<sup>0</sup> E longitude. The State has a total geographical area of 78,523 Sq.km. and a total population of 3, 11, 69,272 persons (2011). The State has 765 large tea gardens of sizes above 50 acres and 1, 38,213 small tea gardens of sizes ranging from 0.5 – 25 acres. All the small tea gardens are located in the rural areas of the State, whereby they bear significant importance to the rural economy in the context of employment and income generation. Further, with 86% rural population (2011), the small tea gardens serve as the driving force behind the transformation of rural economy of the State; even if, their spatial distribution is not uniform all throughout the districts. The present work intends to examine the role of small tea gardens as economic facilitators in up grading rural economy of Assam.

**OBJECTIVES**

The objectives of the present study are:

1. Whether the growth of small tea gardens in Assam presents a uniform growth trend or there is any asymmetry in such growth, and
2. Whether the areal variation in the growth of small tea gardens creates certain rural economic growth and development pockets.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The present work is based mainly on data and information collected from All Assam Small Tea Growers' Association (AASTGA), Tea Board of India Assam Branch, and ABITA. Apart from these organisations, data and information from District Industries Centers (DICs), Community Development Blocks and Agriculture Department Govt. of Assam are used. Data relating to production, production cost, quality management, price, market, etc. are collected from the regional offices of AASTGA of the concerned districts.

**ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

In Assam small tea gardens started emerging in the rural economic landscape of the State since 1970, following the economic hardships of the medium and marginal farmers and an appeal from the then Govt. of Assam to the farmers to start small tea gardening even in nearby available barren government lands. Since then, the growth of small tea gardens picked up a momentum among the farmers of the State. The following table represents the growth trend of small tea gardens in Assam since 1970

TABLE - I

Decade	No of Small Tea Gardens	Percentage of Growth
1970-1980	5228	3.78
1981-1990	26,745	19.26
1991=2000	38,202	27.64
2001-2010	57,556	41.64
2011-2017	10,482	7.38
Total	1,38,213	100.00

Table I indicates that the small Tea gardens started growing steadily since 1970, reaching the peak growth period during 2001-2010. Since 2010, there is a steady decline in growth of small tea gardens in the State. The small tea gardens not only present a wide variation in their location over territorial space; but also present a spectacular variation in their sizes ranging from 0.5 acres to 25 acres. 51.5 % of the small tea gardens have their sizes "between" 0.5 acre to 4 acres, which indicate that the same proportion of marginal farmers are involved in this activity. It may also be noted that at the initial stage small tea gardens were set up in vacant government lands and in traditional horticultural lands attached to the dwelling houses of the individual farmers. On exhaustion of such lands the small tea gardens started growing on upland paddy grounds after necessary land improvement. Table II presents concentration of small tea gardens, employment generation and production of green tea leaf per acre of plantation area in 25 small tea gardens containing districts of Assam in 2017.

On the basis of table II, the 25 districts of Assam wherein all the small tea gardens are found to be concentrated are delineated into four distinct growth and economic developments.

Belt I (Highly developed small tea garden belt) : comprised of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Jorhat and Golaghat districts covering upper south bank plain of the BRAHMAPUTRA ;

Belt II (Moderately developed small tea garden belt) : Which includes six districts of, upper and central Brahmaputra valley along with an adjacent hill district, viz – Lakhimpur, Dhamaji, Sonitpur, Darrang Nagoan and Karbi-Anglong ;

Belt III (Poorly developed small tea garden belt) : comprised of five lower Brahmaputra valley districts, namely – Udalguri, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Baksa and Chirang ; and

Belt IV (Very poorly developed small tea garden belt) : Which includes six lower Brahmaputra Valley districts, three Barak Valley districts and one hill district, viz – Goalpara, Dhuburi, Kamrup(Rural), Barpeta, Morigaon, Darrang, Cachar, Karimganj, Hailakandi and Dima-Hasao.

TABLE - II

Sl. No.	District	% of STGs	% of plantation area	% of workers employed	% of production of green tea leaf
1	Tinsukia	25.8	24.35	23.53	26.72
2	Dibrugarh	20.19	17.62	17.93	18.20
3	Sibsagar	11.79	12.99	13.21	12.97
4	Jorhat	9.53	7.95	7.22	7.81
5	Golaghat	13.18	14.72	14.41	14.06
6	Sonitpur	8.57	8.18	7.50	7.90
7	Lakhimpur	1.66	2.22	3.43	2.05
8	Dhemaji	0.38	0.49	0.53	0.47
9	Nagaon	0.86	1.91	1.94	1.78
10	Karbi-Anglong	2.61	2.88	2.80	2.50
11	Udalguri	1.62	1.81	1.69	1.64
12	Kokrajhar	1.31	1.94	2.06	1.70
13	Bongaigaon	0.71	0.92	1.30	0.83
14	Goalpara	0.46	0.44	0.47	0.40
15	Dhuburi	0.28	0.26	0.26	0.21
16	Cachar	0.49	0.56	0.43	0.40
17	Karimganj	0.09	0.11	0.10	0.07
18	Hailakandi	0.07	0.08	0.09	0.05
19	Dima-Hasao	0.04	0.08	0.10	0.05
20	Darrang	0.06	0.09	0.10	0.10
21	Baksa	0.23	0.21	0.56	0.16
22	Chirang	0.04	0.06	0.08	0.04
23	Kamrup(Rural)	0.01	0.02	0.07	0.02
24	Morigaon	0.04	0.06	0.10	0.05
25	Barpeta	0.009	0.05	0.05	0.04
	Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

The naming of the belts signify their status as regards the economic impact imparted by them to the rural economy of the concerned belts. Further, these small tea gardens of Assam have a total plantation area of 1204 hectares and employ 2,96,704 persons (2017) which constitute 11% of the total agricultural workforce; while these small tea gardens produce 1220 million kgs of green tea leaf that constitute 41% of the total made tea of Assam. Such an achievement of the small tea gardens indicates that this newly emerged commercial farming could succeed in transforming the economic fortune of the farmers to significant extent. Such an achievement of the small tea growers also indicates that attention of the planners and executive machineries of the government towards their management, marketing and infrastructure is like to establish them as a major tool for rural economic up gradation.

**FINDINGS**

The major findings of the study are:

1. The small tea gardens of Assam had started emerging since 1970's under the impact of economic strain confronted by the marginal and medium farmers due to shortage of arable land and gradually declining income from their traditional agricultural activities;
2. The highest proportion of growth of small tea gardens took place during 2001 -2010 and since then there is a declining trend. The declining trend is accorded by gradual exhaustion of suitable land for tea plantation;
3. The growth of small tea gardens imparted significant change in the rural economy of Assam with a boost in income of the farmers and in employment generation for the rural workforce;
4. The highest growth and development of small tea gardens took place in the upper south bank plain of the Brahmaputra valley, while the central and upper north bank plain of the valley register moderate growth and development. Thus, small tea gardens imparted vibrant socio-economic changes in upper and central plains of the Brahmaputra valley; and
5. With a generation of 11% employment to the rural workforce and through creating a commercial mindset among the economically frustrated farmers the small tea gardens serve as facilitators of rural economic thrust.

**CONCLUSION**

The growth of small tea gardens not only plays a vital role in regenerating rural economy of Assam; but it also generates visible impact on employment generation, expansion of trade and commerce and growth of support line entrepreneurial services. The analysis pertaining to this work also indicate some other revolutionary commercial activities are needed to be evolved for up gradation of rural economy in lower Brahmaputra Valley and Barak valley of the state of Assam. Further, small tea gardens concentration belts of the State also need proper policy instruments for their sustainability and ramification through generation allied support services such as setting up of public sector tea factories, packaging units, high quality tea sapling nursery, etc.

**RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTION**

On the basis of analysis and observation the under mentioned recommendations and suggestions are underlined:

1. The small tea gardens established on government land needs land occupancy rights either permanently or on lease;
2. A separate Directorate for small tea gardens' development is needed to be created by the Govt. of Assam providing special status as rural economic elevator;
3. Special emphasis is required to be given to upgrade the transport network of small tea garden concentration belts;
4. Policy and financial incentives need to provide to the support line entrepreneurs of the small tea gardens both for their viability and generation of indirect rural employment; and
5. There is a need for higher involvement of the Tea Board in quality management, plant nutrition and pesticide application.

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