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GROWTH OF SMALL TEA GARDENS IN SONITPUR DISTRICT, ASSAM: IT'S IMPACT ON RURAL ECONOMY

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ABSTRACT

The present work is associated with investigation on the role of small tea gardens in Sonitpur district, Assam in context of generation of income, employment and entrepreneurial activities among the rural workforce. This newly emerged commercial farm activity is found to transform the rural economy to a significant extent and to motivate the rural population to opt for various allied agricultural activities. Mostly the medium and marginal farmers of the rural areas are involved and are benefitted from small tea gardening. This section of rural farmers is also motivated to start up commercial farm activities in other agricultural practices, too apart from involving themselves in some other allied agricultural activities. The small tea gardens could succeed in generating a significantly high income and employment not only for themselves, but also for the unemployed workforce through their involvement in support services. This growing dimensions of rural economy needs policy and financial incentives from the government and exposure to international market for an economically healthy rural India.

KEYWORDS

small tea gardens, allied agricultural activity, medium and marginal farmers, rural economy.

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INTRODUCTION

Economic development of a nation cannot be achieved by ignoring the economic growth and development of the rural communities. In the developing and under developed countries the main thrust of economic growth arises out of the growth of rural economy. In such countries including India, the national planning bodies play higher importance in economic growth of rural areas and chalkout various strategies for economic up gradation of the rural masses. Following the recommendation of the planning bodies, the Govt. of India implemented various rural development programs since the first fifth year plan period. The Govt. has created a number of micro financial institutions for promoting and financing economic activities of the rural areas. Apart from such plans and programs, the government has provided various financial and policy incentives for encouraging the growth of commercial agricultural activities in rural areas. The growth of small tea gardens in the economic landscape of rural areas in a number of Indian States including Assam is of recent origin. These small tea gardens play a major role in socio-economic transformation of rural India.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The relevant literature consulted for the present work are: Pk Dhar's³ "Indian economy its growing dimensions", which provides wide elaboration on problem and prospects of Indian economy. This book highlights mainly infrastructure, market and financial constraints before the growth of rural economy in India.

The paper "Small tea plantation in Assam an analysis" authored by H. Goswami and J.K Gogoi² provides a meaningful explanation on financial and management problems of the small tea growers of Assam, including government policy loopholes in containing the monopoly of capitalistic large scale tea plantations on internal and international markets of Tea from India.

Another paper of A.P Das and S.E Kabir¹ titled "Tea Cultivation in the Plains of North East India ", provides a detail history of tea plantation in North East India including Assam since the British colonial rule and the circumstances behind the growth of small tea plantations in rural Assam since 1970.

All the above works provided a conceptual base in structuring the present paper.

IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

After the national independence of India, steady growth of population and workforce and shortage of agricultural land tended to make the agricultural landscape of India overemployed. The situation became serious particularly in a State like Assam, where industrial and commercial development took place at a very low pace. Most of the medium and marginal farmers in a State like Assam started searching for alternative commercial activities, particularly allied agricultural activities, where from they could earn adequately for supporting their families. The emergence of small tea gardens of Assam is a fallout of the socio-economic frustration of the medium and marginal farmers since 1970. The growth of small tea gardens over the last five decades brought in significant economic changes in the rural areas of Assam. In the present context, the small tea gardens play a major role in elevating the economic status of the farmers of rural Assam, which deserves attention from the researchers, planners and policy makers for making the small tea gardens a viable dimension of rural economic growth.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The study area- Sonitpur district is situated in the central part of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam, extending from 26° 30' N to 27° 01' N latitude and from 92° 16' E to 93° 43' E longitude. The district has a total geographical area of 5324 sq. km. and a total population of 19, 24,110 persons (2011). The district has a total of 60 large scale tea plantations exceeding 50 acres in size and 11,840 small tea gardens of the sizes below 25 acres. These small tea gardens appear to generate higher income, employment and entrepreneurial skills among the farmers community, creating an atmosphere of enthusiasm for further ramification of commercial farm activities such as dairy farming, goateries, piggeries, duckeries, pisciculture, herbs gardening, etc. Small tea gardens being the initial facilitators in the line of commercial farming, need a study on their role in up gradation of the rural economy.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study are –

1. To investigate into the growth pattern and concentration of small tea gardens in Sonitpur district; and
2. The role of small tea gardens in income and employment generation in the rural areas of the study district.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on data and information collected from both primary and secondary sources. The secondary sources of data and informations are Tea Board, Assam; All Assam Small Tea Growers Association (AASGA), Sonitpur Branch; ABITA and DIC. The primary data are collected personally by the investigator from 15% samples (172 STGs) spread over the entire district, selected at random accommodating various size status. The interpretation and findings presented are computed on the basis of the above mentioned data and information.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis and assessment of the changes brought in to the rural economy of the study area are based on 172 studied samples selected at random from 11840 small tea gardens spread over seven revenue circles of the district; the table below presents the changes in income status of the beneficiaries of the small tea gardens in various revenue circles in 2017.

TABLE I

Revenue Circle	No. of Studied Samples	Average Annual Family Income before starting STG (in Rs.)	Average Annual Family Income after starting STG (in Rs.)	% of variation
Dhekiajuli	21	54500	117700	116.0
Tezpur	18	42900	114000	165.7
Chariduar	45	37800	101500	168.5
Naduar	21	54600	129500	137.2
Biswanath	47	95500	232900	143.9
Helem	10	21600	51600	138.9
Gohpur	10	22100	54200	145.2
Total	172	329000	801400	143.6

The average annual family income of the farmers before the establishment of small tea gardens ranges from Rs.18, 702 to Rs. 28,200. But, the average annual family income has gone up to Rs. 48,900 to Rs. 68,300 registering an increase of 116% to 168.5%. It may be noted that the small tea growers succeeded in enhancing their family income to more than 100% even under a volatile market condition. A stable market condition with assured price of green tea leaf can provide annual earning compatible with other commercial activities. The Table II represents the revenue circle wise employment generated by the small tea gardens to the rural workforce.

TABLE II

Revenue Circle	Employment And Transport (in person)	Employment in supply of essential services (in person)	Employment In packaging (in person)	Employment In marketing (in person)	Total indirect employment	%of indirect employment to the district total
Dhekiajuli	88	14	36	81	219	22.4
Tezpur	38	04	06	26	74	7.6
Chariduar	92	14	16	30	152	15.5
Naduar	122	22	20	32	196	20.0
Biswanath	144	36	34	30	244	24.9
Helem	32	06	06	08	52	5.3
Gohpur	28	04	04	06	42	4.3
Total	544	100	122	213	979	100

As presented in the above table, the small tea gardens in Sonitpur district could be able to generate 4-22% indirect employment to its rural workforce, which appears to be a significant impact of the small tea gardens on the rural economy of the district.

THE MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE PRESENT WORK ARE:

1. Over last five decades, since 1970, the small tea gardens of Sonitpur district succeeded in enhancing the average annual income of the farmers more than two fold
2. The small tea gardens of the study area were capable of generating employment to 4 to 22% of the workforce, which is considered as the most significant parameter of rural economy; and
3. Despite of poor transport infrastructure, volatile market, inadequate govt. support policy; the small tea gardens serve as a path finder for rural economic growth.

CONCLUSION

Commercial farming activities in the study area is of very recent origin and small tea gardens are the pioneers in this direction in the rural economic landscape. Despite of a number of govt. plans and programs for improving rural economy through generation of employment and poverty alleviation; the small tea gardens along with their associated entrepreneurial activities appear to be an effective tool for rural economic up gradation. The small tea gardens also serve as facilitators in opening up various commercial agricultural activities in the rural areas apart from maintaining a viable growth trend for themselves.

RECOMMENDATION AND SUGGESTIONS

On the basis of analysis and discussion, it is observed that a sustainable growth of the small tea gardens in the study area which serve as an effective tool in up gradation of rural economy through generation of significantly high income and employment; deserve the following support services:

1. The small tea gardens need market support from the govt. through policy in order to acquire an assured and compatible price for their product,
2. Policy support in market for the small tea gardens is also likely to generate still higher employment to the rural workforce,
3. The large capitalistic tea gardens established during the British rule maintain a monopolistic control both on market and price of green tea leaf produced by the small tea growers, which need to be neutralized through policy support, and
4. The Tea Board, India needs to take special attention and incentives for quality management and in removing financial constraints of small tea gardens in the study area.

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