

The Socio-Economic Aspects Of The Small Tea Growers In Titabar Subdivision Of Jorhat District, Assam

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Abstract:

This research explores the socio-economic aspects of the small tea growers in Titabar Subdivision of Jorhat District, Assam. Through the study attempt will be made to understand the local farming, the socioeconomic conditions of the small tea growers and the problems they face in the trading of tea leaves. The economic condition of the people of the study area was insolvent before the advent of small tea plantation. But gradually the socio-economic condition of the people is growing because of the growing ratio of small scale tea plantation. The first-hand data is collected through semi-structured interviews and close observation. For the secondary data previous study in that direction has been consulted. The findings show that the small scale tea plantation plays a significant role in shaping the socio-economic condition of the people of the locality. Though they have to face lots of hurdles in different aspects but it has some significant positive aspects also. Attempt has been made to discuss all the aspects in a descriptive manner.

Keywords: Socio-economic condition, Small Tea Growers, Agrarian Change, Titabar.

Introduction:

Assam is the largest producer of tea in India and the tea produced in this region is the finest in the world. Though the species grew widely in the hills and forests of Assam since time immemorial but the organized tea plantation in Assam is associated with the colonial period. The recorded history of tea industry in North East India is nearly 170 years old and it can be traced back to 1837 A.D. as the first experimental tea estates in Assam was established in 1837 at Chabua in Dibrugarh district in upper Assam. But latter on the first tea company, namely the Assam Tea Company started production of tea on a commercial basis in Assam and it is followed by Jorhat Tea Company in 1858. With this history of organized tea industry in Assam, the history of the tea community of Assam also develops. The tea industry requires huge manual labor force for the ground work. As there were shortage of labour during the initial stage so the planters had to hire huge numbers of people from different regions of colonial India. The people were imported from different places, e.g. the Mundan & Gonds from Bihar, Santals, Tantis & Bhumij from Bengal & Bihar, Orangs from Bihar & Orissa, Goalas from Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh & Uttar Pradesh and Bogas from Tamil Nadu (Kar, 2005). These people had different culture, dialects, rituals, religious beliefs with different identity. But, in due course of time they started to assimilate with the local people and adopt the local culture leaving behind their own cultural traits. This assimilation grew a new

identity among the people of different identities which is now regarded as tea garden community. In the same way the local people also started to assimilate with the tea garden community and started to learn about the various aspects of tea plantation including the plucking and other related affairs. They have started to understand the revenue generation capacity of the tea plantation. In due course of time when the bought leaf factory started to grow in Assam after 1994 the local people started to see everything from a renewed point of view. According to record the first bought leaf factory was established in Assam in 1994 by DGP group. But the history of small tea growers in Assam is older than that. They came into existence after 1978 and they used to sell their green tea leaf to the big factories under organized tea garden managements. But the emergence of bought leaf factories changed the scenario in Assam rapidly. Kaberi Borah and Dr. Ashim Kr Das mentions in a previous study that Tea cultivation on small holding belongs to a farm or production unit that allocates its labour, land or other resources for subsistence or semi subsistence from it. The growers produce only green leaves; manufacturing and distribution parts are managed by different persons or groups. The first effort to popularise tea cultivation in small holding in Assam was made in 1978 by Late Sonewar Bora (the then Agriculture Minister of the state). His intention was to utilize available fallow land and attract young generation to agriculture sector and thereby to solve unemployment problem (Baruah, 2011). These growers have taken the advantages of congenial weather for tea cultivation, suitable land and other infrastructural facilities that were readily available in Assam. As the published data, the first commercial tea plantation in a small plot of land was started in Golaghat district of Assam during 1978. A preliminary study revealed that in 1990, there were 657 STG (Baruah, 2008) which increased to 70000 (approx) with a land coverage of 1, 18,000 acres in the year 2011; contributing nearly 29 p.c. of the total tea production of the state. On the other hand the acreage under tea estates declined from 4, 09,684 hectares to 4, 01,512 hectares or about 1.99 per cent, during 1991-2006.

There are various factors that help in the growing of small scale tea plantation in the study area. Previously the farmers could make a little bit of money by cultivating different crops in their lands. But the income from those practices was not satisfactory. The small tea plantation has brought a massive change in the lives of the farmers. No other crop with such investment and labor can ensure provision of continuous flow of income. When tea is planted in those lands where previously other crops were grown, the calculation comes in. In some cases, other crops might give better income. But those require more investment along with more labor. Small Tea Cultivation ensures consistent earnings in regular intervals during the season. This is not something very usual for farmers who cultivate and produce traditional crops. The earnings through other crops do not assure the constant flow of money. It is one of the main reasons for farmers taking up small tea plantation. The area under study has another aspect. They can earn additional income from other plantations simultaneously. The tea plantation needs shade. The farmers use to plant species like Sanchi trees for shade which have lots of demand in the present day market. The tea plantation need less effort in comparison with other crops and the risk factor is also less. They have to plant once and the income can be generated for many years. As it requires less effort it can be managed as a side business along with other professions. There are many people who cultivate tea after having other professions. Combination of other ventures along with small tea plantation is quite common in the study area.

Objective of the Study:

The prime objective of the study is focus on the development of small scale tea industry in Assam with particular emphasis on the study area. The area under study falls within the jurisdiction of Jorhat District of Assam where there is the extensive production of tea. The area under study produces a substantial amount of tea where the small tea growers play a very significant role. Another objective is to study the socio-economic aspects of the small tea growers in the study area after understanding the local farming, the socioeconomic conditions of the small tea growers and the problems they face in different aspects.

Methodology:

Research methodology is the most important aspect of any study. It facilitates the materials and provides reliability and validity to it. The study is designed to find out the local impacts of small tea plantation on the farmers of the study area. The methodological orientation of the study is qualitative, and it is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data has been collected through fieldwork mainly in local villages of Titabar Subdivision where there is considerable numbers of small tea growers. The fieldwork was conducted during July 2018 with a view to getting insights into the various aspects of the small tea growers at stages of cultivation, selling, the problems they face prior to and post-selling raw tea leaves. While personal observation is the most significant technique of acquiring primary data, the study also employs an interview schedule and focus group discussions to gain primary data from various strata of small tea growers. And, the study also employs journals, newspaper reports, and other published sources to obtain the secondary data. Fifty leading members from different tea producer families are selected randomly for the study. Discussions were made with them on the basis of the objective of the study. All necessary steps were maintained throughout the research process for upholding the ethical standards.

The Socio-economic Status of the Small Tea Growers of the Area:

The socio-economic status of the small tea growers of the study area can be viewed from various angles. The economic status of the respondents can be studied by the size of the land holding they have and utilize. The farmers in the study area utilize their lands for tea cultivation and rice production equally. In the same way they utilize some portion for other crops also like vegetables which are suitable and used by common families in the locality. This implies that the small tea growers in the study area equally emphasize for a balanced production of crops like tea, vegetables for day to day use and rice which is the prime food of the people of the region. In the same way they lay emphasis on the production of other profitable plants like Sanchi which are used in the aroma industry. From the data collected from the field, it can be observed that all the small tea growers sent their children to school. The portion of small tea growers who send their children to school is 100%. But children drop out of school for various other reasons like students' lack of interest to go to school, students focusing on running petty business, etc. But the problem that the farmers faced earlier to send their children to school was poverty. They were not able to collect tuition fees for their children. This problem has been eradicated after the advent of small tea cultivation. To ensure the children go to school, other areas should be addressed like students' lack of interest to go to school, improving the quality of education, etc. The occupation of a person or household can reveal information about the household's financial situation. Small tea cultivation is such a venture that the farmers of the study area

manage to have another venture alongside it. They cultivate tea along with other crops. Another prominent occupational combination is business along with tea cultivation. Some employees in the government sector as well as corporate sector also involve themselves in the tea cultivation. It has been revealed that a good number of the people of the locality rely on small scale tea plantation for their household income. Establishing a tea plantation is a once-in-a-lifetime investment. Once planted, it continues to produce well for about a hundred years. The annual maintenance cost for a tea plantation is lower than the return because it is only done once, which is possibly why this activity is so popular in the studied area. A significant fraction of the small tea growers found that tea growing and business ownership made for a popular occupation combination. A greater percentage of small tea growers relied on tea production as their primary source of income. Due to the constant likelihood of price fluctuations for green leaves, there may be a variation in the annual income from the green leaves. When the cost of a green leaf is great, so is the income.

Challenges Faced by the Small Tea Growers:

The small tea growers in the locality face various problems because of numerous reasons. These problems are the forms of exploitation. In every sphere of the production process they face lots of problems.. And the small tea growers are located in the lowest tire of this hierarchy. They face a lot of challenges in the total process of production and marketing in both individual and collective levels. These challenges have impacted the lives of small tea growers to a huge level. The small tea growers have witnessed fluctuation of price of tea leaves. The bought leaf factories are owned by wealthy people and they fix price of the green leaves on the basis of their own wish. The small tea growers are in the opinion that sometimes they do not get the proper price for their green leaves. It has been noticed that when the production is high during the peak season the proprietors of the tea factories fix the prices of the green leaves in a unbelievable price. But the price of the made tea remains high during the all financial years. It is a common concern among the small scale tea growers in the region. They seek government intervention in the matter. They have a organized body namely “Khudra Chah Khetiok Sanstha” and they try to raise the issue through the organization also. One of the farmers opined that recently there is a new practice started to grow in the factories which is known as deduction. In the name of that practice the factories started to deduct a percentage of green leaves in the name of quality. Besides this the factories apply a deduction in the name of “Rain Cut” or “Moisture Cut” on the raw leaves of the farmers. The factory officials claim that during the rainy and winter season, due to the rain and moisture, the leaves become wet and the weight increases due to weight of the water. This is reason for this deduction of price. The government should put some particular directives regarding the matter. Another aspect which has dire impact in the sector is the increased rate of fertilizer, weed medicine, vitamin, and pesticides. It increases costs and reduces the profit margin of small tea planters. It is true that the concerned authorities provide subsidy for the fertilizers, yet the price of these fertilizers is going out of reach of the tea growers. Along with the fertilizers, prices of agrochemicals including pesticides are also increasing. Moreover, the increase of the prices of the fertilizers and agrochemicals has resulted in the unavailability of these materials. All these challenges ultimately put a

negative impact upon the production and profit margin in case of small scale tea growers affecting the socio economic aspects as a whole.

Measures that should be taken:

The small tea growers of the locality provide some feedback which will develop the present condition of the tea production. They are of the opinion that tea is one of the highest consumed beverages in the world and they are aware about it. They are very much conscious about the quality and at the same time about the profit margin also. They want that there should be a definite rules and regulation just like the other industrial sectors. If there would be some definite operating guidelines, the bought leaf factories will not be able to deceive the farmers in the name of some unethical rules like deduction, rain cut, quality concern etc. The concerned authorities should make some provisions for the fixation of the rate of the green leaves. If it happens, the owners of the bought leaf factories will not be able to exploit the farmers by fluctuating the rates of the green leaves on the basis of their own concern. A very important aspect is that the factory owners are heard to have formed a syndicate. The syndicate fixes the price of raw tea leaves. The syndicate members often only consider their own benefit overlooking the situation of the small tea growers. The small tea growers propose that they should be ethically motivated so that the factory owners alongside their profit also take the situation of the small tea growers into consideration. The small tea growers also propose that the factory owners can play a significant role in the betterment of the tea industry. It is often heard that the managers appointed at the factories show nepotism and provide privileges to the small tea growers and the mediators who have connections with them. The factory owners should look into the matter and put some positive approach regarding the matter. The farmers are of the opinion that most of the small tea growers come from the rural and interior places. The transportation is a prime concern for them. The present state government should take some positive steps for the betterment of the roads in the localities where there are possibilities of high production of tea leaves by the small tea growers. It will decrease their cost of transportation and at the same time duration of transportation from farmer's places to the factories. In the same way the affiliating authorities can take some positive steps for the establishment of bought leaf factories in the prime locations focusing the areas of tea production by the small tea growers. The small tea growers who are socio economically in a better position opined very clearly that they are very much conscious about the quality of their production. They think positively about the sustainable development of the tea industry where the small tea growers play a pivotal role in present day scenario. They expect that the competent authorities should show the necessary gestures by creating some sustainable policies for the development of the small scale tea plantation. From the observation it can be assumed that the small scale tea plantation has a far - reaching impact upon the socio economic profile of the people of the study area. The people openly accept that the small scale tea plantation has played a catalytic role in the development of the socio-economic profile of the area and they are grateful.

Conclusion:

Tea is an important plantation crop in India where Assam plays the pivotal role. The area under study that falls in Jorhat district is not different from it. In common perception tea is cultivated in large tea plantations covering several hectares of land. But the small tea growers use small plots under their holding for tea cultivation. Assam has the largest area under small tea gardens in India. The land holding pattern of the study area shows that the people use their lands that are suitable for tea cultivation in large numbers. They obviously get benefit from it and it has positive impact upon the socio economic profile of the area. Tea cultivation on small holdings is a good alternative for the farmers since it gives work and income throughout the year and it does not involve risks like crop failure as involved in other farming. Just like the small tea plantation transforms the socio-economic profile of the people of the locality in the same way the small tea growers are also transforming the small land holdings into tea plantations. It has contributed a lot to the tea industry as a whole. There are examples that some of the small tea growers are presently working on organic tea where they do not use agrochemicals and fertilizers. They solely rely upon organic fertilizer or bio fertilizer like cow dung, vermicompost etc. Such type of endeavor will surely contribute to the economic, social and environmental benefits resulting in the sustainable development of the tea industry. The concerned authorities should encourage the farmers for such type of innovative practices through adoption of scientific and systematic policies.

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