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Livelihood Dependence Of Farmers On Rural Periodic Markets: A Study In Sonitpur District, Assam

Dr. Bidyut Jyoti Kalita

Assistant Professor
Department of Commerce
J.D.S.G. College, Bokakhat

Abstract

The structure of rural marketing in Assam and the wider North-Eastern belt of India shows distinct variations from the rest of the nation, largely because of the difficult geographical features of the region. In Assam, the rural marketing framework mainly revolves around three categories: periodic markets (including traditional fairs), everyday bazaars, and itinerant sellers. Among these, the weekly markets stand out as particularly significant within the agricultural exchange system, especially in a state where almost 80 percent of the territory is identified as countryside. Nearly three-fourths of the inhabitants remain dependent on agriculture, either directly through cultivation or indirectly through allied activities, making these markets vital. Close to 85% of cultivators in the state are marginal or small-scale farmers, who rely heavily on weekly haats not only for disposing of their agricultural produce but also for acquiring farm necessities and household items that they cannot produce on their own. For them, reaching nearby haats is both more convenient and less costly compared to traveling to urban trading centers. These markets thus serve a decisive role in determining the commercial value of agricultural surpluses and in sustaining the livelihoods of rural farming families. The present study tries to analyze the scale and form of farmer participation in weekly markets within Assam, with special reference to the Sonitpur district. The researcher employs a descriptive methodology, making use of information collected from both firsthand surveys and secondary references.

Key words: Periodic market, farmers, agricultural marketing

Introduction

Agricultural marketing can be understood as a chain of activities that begins with the intention of presenting farm produce in a marketable form and encompasses every element of market organization—financial, institutional, technical, and economic. It covers both pre-harvest and post-harvest processes such as collection, sorting, preservation, transport, and circulation. Periodic rural bazaars hold a central place in the daily existence of villages, particularly in Assam, where farming continues to be the chief source of livelihood for more than three-fourths of the people. These trading gatherings are organized at fixed intervals, usually once or twice each week, and function as essential centers where cultivators participate as

both sellers and purchasers. They constitute the most ancient and customary channels of farm exchange in Assam as well as the wider Indian context. For small and marginal producers, these haats provide the initial link with consumers, helping them to obtain fair returns for their harvests and secure farming inputs and household necessities unavailable at home. Beyond facilitating the circulation of surplus produce, such markets also generate rural work opportunities and tie distant areas with broader commercial systems. In Assam, government records indicate the presence of 735 primary village markets along with 405 wholesale markets. Alongside these formal structures, numerous unorganized local fairs play an equally important role in sustaining small cultivators. Nevertheless, these institutions face hurdles including weak physical facilities, poor coordination, unstable pricing, and exploitation by intermediaries. Even so, they continue to fulfill both economic needs and social purposes by granting villagers access to commodities, services, and communal interaction.

Review of literature

Singh and Bajaj (2012) observed that haats have emerged as a significant component of the rural marketing system in India, functioning not merely as trading spaces but as an innovative marketing strategy contributing to rural development. Their study highlights that rural consumers demonstrate a strong preference for haats owing to their ability to provide essential commodities at affordable prices, thereby enhancing both accessibility and cost-effectiveness. This suggests that haats not only serve as traditional exchange centers but also play a pivotal role in strengthening rural market structures and consumer welfare. Saha (2014) rural haats are the nerve

centre of the rural marketing system of India. It's a readymade distribution system which caters to the need of the rural population in India. Generally organized on weekly basis, these haats play an important role in the economy of India.

Gogoi and Saha (2020) stated that agricultural markets in Assam is still operating to a great extent in its traditional form. Even with participation and support from government and private agencies, the way of marketing and dominance by the middlemen have not changed much from the past. The main reason is the financial crisis among the farmers, which leads them to enter into contracts during cultivation with the village traders or middlemen at a very low price. Even if, the producers prefer to sell it directly in the market, the physical access to such is obstructed by bad road conditions and high cost of transporting the produce. Kalita (2023) stated that periodic markets are an important economic and social institution for rural people in Assam. Rural farmers are dependent on these markets for their livelihood. They earn their living by selling their agricultural produces in these markets. Besides, they also procure the required household items such as groceries from these markets. Besides, specialty products including furniture, electronic items etc., are also procured from these markets. These markets are also crucial avenues for selling rural crafts etc. In spite of having such an immense importance, rural periodic markets are not free from constraints. Deogam (2023) Haat bazar bind communities in one thread through exchanging views and fulfilling one another's need. Along with the growth in the agricultural sector, various artisans get identified like bamboo work, natural painting and political exchange. Today Haats is losing its old glory as it is totally becoming a place of economic activity. Kalita & Bhuyan (2021) stated that due to limited holding and small amount of production, it is difficult to attain production cost efficiency at the grower's level. Besides, the marginal and small grower's regularly face several other constraints while marketing their produces, which has widespread negative influence upon their farming decision in the subsequent crop years

Objectives

1. to study the livelihood dependency of farmers in the primary markets of Sonitpur district of Assam

Methodology

The present study employs descriptive research design and draws upon both original field data and secondary information sources. Four village-based weekly haats within the Tezpur subdivision were deliberately identified, considering several parameters such as location, market magnitude, diversity and arrangement of trading activities, nearness to towns, socio-economic context, and demographic surroundings, so as to capture a representative picture. Altogether, 100 cultivator participants were chosen through a non-probability, convenience-oriented sampling method. As the chosen markets are relatively similar in size, structure, and operational style, an equal distribution of 25 respondents from each market was maintained for proportional coverage. Firsthand details were collected through a structured schedule administered via personal interviews with farmers at market premises. Additional insights were compiled from published works, scholarly articles, and institutional reports available online. The scope of this research remains limited to the 100 sampled respondents, and hence the outcomes and suggestions apply only to the specific study area under consideration. Furthermore, the inquiry does not address the cultural dimensions or non-economic participation of villagers in these periodic markets, leaving such themes outside its purview.

Analysis and Findings

In rural Assam, the haats or weekly trading centers function as vital micro-level exchange systems. Covering a small physical range of roughly two to three kilometers, these markets operate intermittently—once, twice, or at most three times in a week—depending upon local demand and settlement density. The limited spatial reach of such markets ensures accessibility for farming households who lack adequate means of transportation. The average daily attendance of 500 to 2,000 individuals reflects not only the scale of participation but also highlights the importance of these platforms as localized nodes of both economic and social interaction. Their operational design indicates that they are structured to meet the immediate consumption and livelihood requirements of surrounding rural populations rather than long-distance commercial trade.

The vendor base in these rural bazaars primarily consists of cultivators who offer surplus agricultural produce—that is, commodities remaining after satisfying family needs—for direct sale to proximate consumers. This illustrates a production-to-consumption linkage that bypasses intermediaries and minimizes marketing costs for small and marginal farmers. Furthermore, the presence of larger periodic assembly markets, extending to a broader geographical zone of three to eight kilometers, demonstrates a hierarchical market structure. While village haats serve subsistence and localized exchange, these assembly centers integrate a wider farming community into a more extensive marketing network. This dual-layered arrangement suggests that rural Assam's market system balances both immediate household-level needs and wider regional circulation of goods. Their role extends beyond the sale of crops to include livestock and a variety of household or non-farm commodities, showing that these markets are multifunctional rather than purely agrarian. This spatial positioning suggests that rural markets are deliberately embedded within the mobility patterns of villagers, ensuring consistent footfall and engagement.

The marketing framework is dominated by sequential exchanges, beginning with cultivators who directly offload their produce to local-level dealers. These intermediaries subsequently channel goods to wholesalers and retail vendors, thereby completing the supply chain that delivers commodities back to rural households. This recurring cycle, organized on fixed market days, reflects a self-sustaining system of distribution where village-level markets act as the foundation of the wider rural economy. The layered structure highlights both the efficiency of direct farmer-trader interactions and the dependence of rural consumers on a rotating schedule of exchange.

The main characteristic of this framework is the direct exchange between farmers and buyers, centered on the sale of locally grown products. However, this system is not without challenges. A major hurdle faced by many farmers is the lack of sufficient financial support and physical infrastructure, such as reliable transportation and storage facilities. As a consequence, farmers often have no choice but to make pre-harvest deals with traders at suboptimal prices. This situation prevents them from earning fair

compensation for their labor and production costs, thereby limiting the potential income they could derive from their agricultural efforts.

Periodic markets serve as the central hubs of economic engagement across rural regions of Assam. These gatherings act as the initial link between small-scale farmers and potential buyers or alternative market outlets, offering a platform through which cultivators can earn value from their harvests. The primary participants in these local markets are marginal farmers, who operate on limited resources and production scale. For them, visiting nearby rural haats is more practical and affordable than accessing distant urban or wholesale markets, especially given their restricted surplus output. Based on the extent and nature of their involvement in these markets, farmers can be grouped into distinct participation categories.

Farmers with comparatively larger harvest quantities usually show reduced personal involvement in market operations. For such producers, dependence on intermediaries or local agents becomes greater, since handling bulk sales on their own is often unmanageable. In contrast, cultivators with smaller outputs display stronger direct engagement, as their limited surplus can be conveniently disposed of within a single market session. Moreover, households engaged in multi-crop farming systems frequently prefer to entrust selling responsibilities to traders, thereby reserving more time and effort for agricultural production. On the other hand, growers practicing narrower or less diversified cropping patterns are more likely to oversee both cultivation and marketing activities themselves.

Survey findings indicate that nearly two-thirds of cultivators, around 64 per cent, restrict their participation to a single weekly market. Farmers generally choose the closest market outlet for selling their surplus produce and meeting household or farm-related needs, minimizing both travel time and costs. Movement to secondary markets occurs only when unsold quantities remain after the first transaction or when specific goods—such as livestock, wooden furniture, or other specialized items—are unavailable in the nearest market. Analysis further shows that the typical distance farmers are willing to cover does not exceed 25 kilometers, reflecting the localized nature of these exchanges. In terms of logistics, bicycles, pushcarts, and small tempo vans constitute the major transport modes, with bicycles emerging as the most affordable and widely preferred means of moving agricultural produce. This pattern underscores the significance of proximity, cost-effectiveness, and transport limitations in shaping farmer participation in Assam's rural marketing system.

In addition to the exchange of farm produce, rural marketplaces also serve various other economic functions. People visit these markets to purchase daily necessities such as groceries, clothing, farming tools, wooden household items, and even for buying livestock. These marketplaces offer a broad spectrum of supporting services that cater to the needs of villagers and cultivators alike. Common service-based activities include bicycle maintenance, flashlight and umbrella repairs, barber services, and similar small-scale tasks. Beyond economic transactions, many individuals also attend these markets for social or recreational reasons—such as leisure, celebration, casual gatherings, or simply spending time chatting with friends and family members.

Only about one-fifth of cultivators prefer to sell directly by occupying a spot in the marketplace. More than half of the respondents reported using a mixed strategy—sometimes marketing produce on their own and at other times relying on intermediaries—depending on time availability, demand fluctuations, and situational constraints. This flexible approach, however, comes at a cost, as turning to middlemen often results in substantial loss of potential earnings. In several cases, traders were observed to capture profit margins exceeding 35 per cent, highlighting the exploitative nature of intermediary control within rural markets.

An examination of farmer reliance on intermediaries shows a heavy structural dependence. Nearly three-fourths of cultivators admitted to consistently using traders' services, while only around one-tenth reported seeking such support occasionally. Significantly, the field survey revealed that no farmer was completely free from intermediary involvement, indicating that traders remain an unavoidable component of the rural marketing chain. This pattern underscores the limited bargaining power of producers and the entrenched role of middlemen in shaping market access and income distribution in Assam's rural economy.

Conclusion

Periodic markets continue to serve as both economic lifelines and social spaces for the rural population, with farming households depending heavily on them for income generation and sustenance. Yet, despite their critical role, these local markets remain constrained by weak infrastructure, dominance of intermediaries, and systemic inefficiencies, which collectively prevent cultivators from securing fair compensation for their efforts. Strengthening these institutions through better facilities, transparent pricing, and curbing the excessive influence of traders can establish a more equitable platform for small and marginal farmers. Such interventions would not only reduce exploitation but also motivate greater farmer participation in the marketing process, thereby enhancing both rural livelihoods and the overall efficiency of the agricultural economy.

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