

PROBLEMS AND CONSTRAINTS OF PEASANT AGRICULTURE: A CASE STUDY OF TULSIJHARA VILLAGE, KOKRAJHAR DISTRICT, ASSAM (INDIA)

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ABSTRACT

The agricultural sector is the most important to the state's economy contributing 56 per cent to the state's total income. But the peasant agricultural sector in Assam is deeply affected by undesirable factor resulting into low and erratic growth of it. It is observed that the peasant agriculture is subsistence in nature carried out to satisfy the family's immediate needs and at the same time embarked or handicapped with number of constraints like natural calamities (flood, drought) and socio-economic factor.

The aim of the study is to discover the basic problems of peasant agriculture in Tulsijhora village, Assam. Illiteracy, poor financial condition, use of traditional agricultural tools, continuous fragmentation of land with small land holding size, lack of awareness of the government's various agriculture development initiatives etc are some of the main reason for the backward state of the peasant agriculture in the village. Various literature reviews and field survey in the village were undertaken to get an insight picture of the peasant farmers.

Keywords: Rural farmers, agriculture, constraints.

I. INTRODUCTION

Peasant agriculture contributes 47 per cent of the state's total income and engage 56 per cent of the state's total workers (Das, 1984). The Green Revolution caused the widespread development in the regions like Punjab, Haryana, but so far as Assam is concerned, little does it has its impact on the peasant agriculture in Assam. Agriculture is the main occupation in Kokrajhar district. The socio-economic base of the farmer in Kokrajhar is the major determinant imposing a pulling-back effect and compelling the farmers to remain stagnant on peasant mode of production. It is known that small farmers face several challenges in the access to inputs and marketing. Peasant agriculture is a system which connects the labour with their land and inspite of different socio-economic constraints they were successful in maintaining a subsistence mode of farming. But their deprived situation compels them to work hard to meet their basic needs and to satisfy the consumption expectation.

Therefore in order to explore the major constraints and problems of peasant agriculture in Kokrajhar (Assam), a case study is being carried out in Tulsijhara village which is completely an agrarian village characterized by the subsistence nature of farming systems.

II.OBJECTIVES

This paper aims to explore the constraints and problems of peasant farmers.

III. STUDY AREA

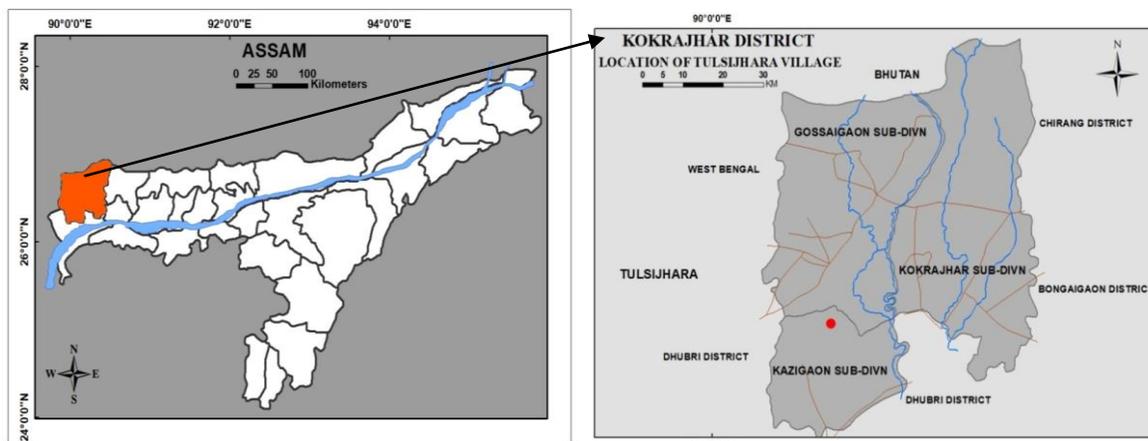


Fig 1. Location map of Tulsijhara village

Kokrajhar district covers a total area of 3129 sq.km. Kokrajhar district is confined between 90 ° 8'20" E to 90 ° 43'55" E longitude and 26 ° 2'8"N to 26 ° 51'20"N latitude. Tulsijhara village located under Kazigaon sub-division of kokrajhar district covers total geographical area of 82 sq.km. It consists of total population of 261 person and total number of household in the village is 61 according to 2011 census.

IV. METHODOLOGY

Total 89 households were selected for the research purpose. Collection of land holding data for all the selected households from the *mandal* (village level field surveyor) and the classification of households into different landholding size were carried out. Various socio-economic data, agricultural practices and the major problems of the peasant farmers were collected with the help of a schedule. Focus group discussions were executed comprising of 10-12 people to collect village-level information about agricultural practices, and the challenges of peasant farming in order to have the indebt analysis.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Educational level of the villagers

Educational level	Total number of persons	Percentage (%)
Illiterate	11	12.35
Can sign only	12	13.48
Primary	31	34.83
Secondary	20	22.47
HSLC	7	7.86
HS	5	5.61
Graduate	3	3.37

Source: Field survey, 2017

Education and skills are some of the important aspects for development and improving farming practices and productivity. Table 1 shows the literacy levels for agriculture workers. It shows that literacy level of the peasant farmers is low and is in declining trend. Majority of the farmers (34.83%) have completed the primary education level. It is important for the farmers to have a reasonable level of awareness regarding information on agriculture. The low level of farmers' education limits public dissemination of knowledge. The survey clearly shows that they have little awareness about the various agricultural facilities and even if they have the knowledge, their economic base limits them from accessing the various facilities. Because of illiteracy they have the limited access to information on various effective farming practices, agricultural inputs, marketing facilities etc. The village does not have any post-graduate or any other with significant educational attainment. Maximum dropout is seen after the completion of secondary education. Therefore the educational attainment is discouraging particularly after secondary education.

Landholding size and fragmented plots:

Table 2: landholding size of cultivable land

Landholding size classes (in ha)	No. Of households
<0.13	16 (17.97 %)
0.14 – 0.39	38 (42.69%)
0.40 – 0.78	27 (30.33%)
0.79 – 1.17	5 (5.61 %)
>1.17	3 (3.37 %)

Source: field survey, 2017

The small holding character of peasant agriculture in the village is very prominent as shown in the table 2. It may be noted that 42% of land holdings belong to farmers with 0.14 – 0.39 ha. Only 3.37 % holds land more than 1.17 hectare. Average landholding is relatively small, although there are some large landholdings. The small and medium landholding farmers are engaged in subsistence farming systems but most of the large landholders rather than cultivating their lands, rent out their land to poor

and landless peasants. Of the total households, 68.66 % percent were tenants who along with their own fields also worked in the land of others on a sharecropping basis. In current sharecropping practices, tenants provide half of the total harvest to landlords but they have to bear costs of labour and other farm inputs themselves. About 7.86 % percent of the total households were landless and made their livings mainly through wage labouring in the farm and non-farm sectors like casual labouring in the construction sector (road, house construction), fencing within the village, and cutting of trees etc which yield them a meagre income insufficient to meet the needs. Subsistence farming dominates the economy where a large part of production is consumed by the family itself without any aim for expansion of production.

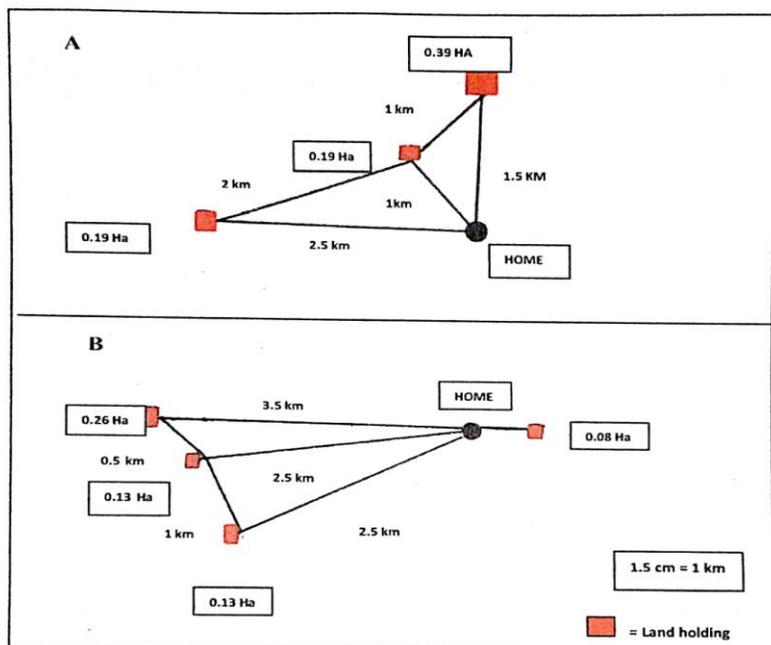


Fig 2: Scattering of land holdings

Source: based on primary survey

Fragmentation of land into numerous spatially separated plots and scattering of the plots is another important constraint found in the village. Continuous land fragmentation and scattering of plots among the family members leads to smaller size of land allocation to each one of them with the inefficient resource allocation, losses on extra time travel among the plots, inadequate monitoring and inability to use certain types of machinery is hindering the agricultural productivity. The villagers revealed that distance between the plots and from homestead to the plots waste the labour time by travelling between the two, become hindrance in transporting the inputs from homestead to parcels, continuous supervision or monitoring and protection of land become difficult, loss of working hours, problems of transporting the agricultural implements and products etc. Owing to the difficulties of crop protection from animals especially during winter season, the plots located at far distance remain vacant particularly in rabi season. During winter the animals are left free to graze freely in the fields.

Shortage of labour availability

Out-migration of young generation is quite prevalent in the village leading to labour shortage because the small landholding is unable to meet the needs of the family. For the upliftment of their economic condition, the youngsters move out of the village to nearby town and engaged themselves in off-farm activities like construction work, shopkeeper, driver etc to contribute to family income and cover up the food and other household expenses. The shortage of labour availability was quite evident from the fact of high wage rate in the village. According to sources, just 5-6 years ago, daily wage rate was Rs 80, which has now increased to Rs 300. Further, many participants in the focus group discussions reported that finding male workers during peak agricultural season is much more difficult now leading to high labour demand followed by high wage rate.

To sum up, Tulsijhara village has witnessed recent phenomena of increased labour shortage triggered by outmigration of villagers for off-farm employment. The migration of local people provided

poorer households with the opportunity for sharecropping and benefitted the labour working in other's agricultural fields while some of the households gave up farming on account of shortage of labour availability and unable to meet the rising wage rate. For them sharecropping was not profitable. The sharecroppers were those who had adequate family labour to offset the cost of labour. But at the same time, the large landholders chose to cultivate some portion of the land themselves sufficient enough to meet their food requirement located close to their home and keep the distanced land uncultivated rather than hiring costly labour. Most poor and landless peasants are stuck in poverty, food insecurity etc.

The application of modern inputs such as fertilizers, irrigation, mechanical inputs and adoption of HYV seeds indicates the degree of agricultural modernisation. Most of the modern agricultural inputs and implements are not well suited to valley's ecological and socio-economic conditions like fragmented landholdings and scattered plots, inadequate and uneven distribution of rainfall, poor soil fertility, unfavourable topography and distance from markets, poor infrastructure and institutions etc. (Deka and Bhagabati, 2010).

Agricultural inputs

Majority of the farmers use animal and human power while carrying out agricultural activities such as land preparation, transplanting, harvesting, weeding, and threshing. The small landholding size does not facilitate the use of modern agricultural equipments like power tiller. With the continuous fragmentation of the land among the increasing population, the individual is left with small landholding size. The villagers still use the traditional equipments like bullock drawn ploughs, wooden harrows, wooden planks to pulverize the soil clods, compaction and smoothening, and hand tools such as spade, hoe, sickle, axe, etc. Peasant agriculture is handicapped by the limitation of mechanical input.

The village is devoid of irrigational facility which hampers the cultivation of crops with the erratic monsoon. Most of the fields are located near to ponds, *jaan* (rivulets), natural depression etc. which acts as reservoir of water during winter season facilitating the supply of water to the fields. Most of the individuals dig out a pond in the midst of their agricultural field to retain the excessive water during monsoon. With the low monsoon rainfall, retaining of water in the agricultural fields becomes a prime concern. Farmers construct the dykes all around the field to retain the water. A small stream called Parbotjhora flows all along the middle of the agricultural fields which has been the main reservoir of water. Villagers create the man-made dongs (rivulets) by diverting the water of Parbotjhora stream towards their fields and traditionally used for irrigation. They also use the shallow elongated depression called canal (*khawai*) for irrigating the paddy fields by diverting the direction of the canal towards it. However, due to lack of irrigation, cultivation is difficult particularly in the relatively higher lands when there is little or no rainfall.

Majority of the farmers does not use the chemical fertilizers to manure their fields. The domesticated animals are set free during the dry season to graze freely and the lands receive enough cow dung and urine. Thus the land is fertilized by indigenously prepared bio-fertilizers. Grazing of the livestock also control the growth of weeds. Use of fertiliser in the village is at the minimal because, the villagers were unaware of the government supply of fertilisers at a subsidised rate and they had the view that use of fertilizers would make the soil infertile. At the same time, the use of HYV seeds is also minimal. The villagers stated that they were afraid of cultivating the HYV seeds thinking that it may turn out to be a risk for them by giving them the low productivity and at the same time, the lack of irrigation facility and the erratic monsoon with the inadequacy of timely supply of water are some of the other factors. So, they stick to their traditional seeds. Moreover, the peasants having very small size of land holding do not like to take the risk of adopting a new variety immediately.

Credit facilities

The dependence on money lenders is the highest for peasant farmers in the village. The moneylenders charge them a high rate of interest. But the farmers have no other option but to borrow the money from the landlords. According to the survey, out of the total 89 households, 47% are under debt of the landlords. Most importantly the farmers were not aware of the bank credit and even those who had the knowledge of bank credit facilities are not interested to take the loan from the bank. The reason behind is the unavailability of bank in their village or nearby areas. To carry out the bank procedure they have to travel a long distance which they find it tiresome. At the same they find it risky and hard to offer their land as security to the banks as this is the only asset they possess. The banks also hardly offer loan to the

farmers finding it risky to lend them because agriculture is the main source of income which is uncertain and erratic. Because of their practice of dependency on money lender, most of the peasant farmers are under debt. The reason for their debt are many like burrowing money to carry out the agricultural activities, education of their children, conducting marriage of their child, health expenditure etc.

Lack of marketing facilities

The village Tulsijhora is located in a very remote corner of Kokrajhar district. It is completely cut-off from the main urban centres of kokrajhar. The village face the incredible challenges of marketing their farm produce. Poor transportation facilities, distance from main market centres, low productivity are some of factors affecting the sell of their products. The unmetalled road is in dilapidated condition difficult to use during rainy season. Majority of the peasant farmers earn some income by selling their products in the local rural market locally called as *haat*. They travel for nearly 6-7 km to Tipkai to sell their products in the *haat*. However Wednesday is the market day in Tipkai where the villagers earn relatively a good income as compared to the other days of the week. Basically the different kind of products like vegetables, fruits which are locally grown in their field or collected from the forest are sold in the market.

Off-farm activities

Peasants find it better to find temporary or permanent work apart from agriculture in order to feed the families. Erratic and low productivity is the main reason behind for people getting diverted from agriculture to various off-farm activities. Thus peasants tend to take on several activities even if that particular activities yield them a menial income.

Table 3: Subsidiary occupation of the household survey (in %)

Subsidiary occupation	Composition (in %)
Poultry	16%
Daily wage earner	31%
Pig farm	13%
Shopkeeper	6%
Vegetable seller	15%

Source: based on primary survey, 2017

Total 81 % of the total villagers have adopted the different subsidiary occupation along with agriculture to meet their domestic needs and the remaining 18% who hold relatively larger farm size i.e, more than 0.78 hectare are stick to agriculture only.

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