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SUSTAINABILITY ISSUES OF JUTE FARMING IN ASSAM: AN ANALYSIS FROM FARMERS PERSPECTIVE

KEY WORDS: Sustainability, Jute Farming, farmer's constraints

Dr. Bidyut Jyoti Kalita

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

ABSTRACT

Jute is one of the major cash crops, primarily cultivated by the marginal and small farmers in Assam. In this era of environmental awareness, natural fibers are regaining its acceptance among consumers across the world. In this context, sustainable fiber production is becoming a crucial issue. This paper is an attempt to analyse the issues of Jute farming in Assam primarily from growers' perspective. The study is based on primary data collected through field survey of the researcher. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were followed. Multistage sampling procedure has been used and a total of 150 jute growers were interviewed to have the desired response. Responses were obtained in a face to face conversation with the help of a structured schedule containing open and close ended questions. It was observed that there is apathy among the farmers regarding farming this cash crop due to its associated constraints. Increasing cost of cultivation, inadequate market facilities etc., often discouraged the farmers for expansion of acreage.

INTRODUCTION

Jute popularly known as the golden fiber is one of the cheapest and strongest fiber among all the natural fibers. India and Bangladesh is the leading producer of raw Jute in the world. Jute fiber is primarily used as packaging material for agricultural commodities. Among all the natural fibers, Jute occupies the foremost position after Cotton for its inherent attributes i.e. uses and utilities. Apart from its technical advantages like strength and length of the fiber, the significance of jute basically lies in its biodegradability in the contemporary times. In this context of growing awareness on environment, jute and allied fibers, as eco-friendly packaging materials are recuperating their popularity (Sadat & Chakraborty, 2015). Conventionally used as packaging material, the use of Jute is expanded to all aspects of our life through product diversification. Different types of products having decorative appeal and utilitarian aspects are made from jute. Jute is the product of the fertile soil of South Asia and specifically a product of India and Bangladesh. More than 90 per cent of world jute is grown in these two South Asian nations. India is the largest producer of raw jute contributing more than 50 per cent of world production. West Bengal, Bihar and Assam are the three largest jute producing states in India. In spite of having a promising demand, the present jute farming scenario shows a fluctuating trend rather than a stable upward movement in the study region. Jute industry contributes significantly in the socio-economic development of the agrarian communities by supporting their livelihood. Cultivation of jute is also an important source of food security for the weaker sections of the rural community. To capture the prospects supported by the environment, it is crucial to find out the challenges faced by the jute growers in the study region. This is also vital to realize the required volume of fiber regularly in an uninterrupted manner. Environmental sustainability can be ensured through uninterrupted supply of the natural fibers. Thus it requires assessment as well as removal of the constraints of the Jute farmers.

Literature review

Jute fiber was known in India since ancient times and Jute clothes were being manufactured in the country even in the 16th century. (Bhaattacharya, 2013). In the year 1855, the first Jute mill in India was established at Calcutta. Earlier, the raw jute produced was sent to the jute mills of England for further processing. Since the establishment of this first jute mill and till the time of partition of the greater India in 1947, there has been a remarkable growth of jute farming and processing. The growth of Jute industry since independence is discouraging due to the partition of the greater India. As a result of partition, most of the jute growing areas were gone to then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and jute mills were remaining in India. Jute cultivation in Assam was started

during the end of 19th century, under the patronage of the British. The socio-economic circumstances of the farm households in the world's jute-producing region are greatly impacted by jute farming. Through the cash generated by the production of jute, farmers in Bangladesh are able to improve their socio-economic circumstances (Sheheli & Roy, 2014). In India in general, and the eastern area in particular, this labor-intensive crop has a considerable economic impact on farm households. Its cultivation and processing are important sources of income in rural India, providing a living for 40,00,000 farm families. In addition to its economic value, the crop has socio-cultural significance for farming communities (Debbarma et.al. 2015). Rahman (2008) has claimed that the jute industry has an effect on social and economic growth and is essential in lowering poverty and hunger. The money generated from the sale of jute fibre and the wages paid to employees make a significant contribution towards their food security. Chapke (2013) has evaluated how the demonstrated jute technologies affect farmers' livelihoods in West Bengal. His research showed that the applied technologies enhanced the jute fibre yield and gave farmers an extra Rs. 5000 per acre in surplus. The farmers spent this extra money 50% more than they had previously on food, family members' health, children's education, and participation at social and entertainment events. Jute also offered a number of non-price benefits with a variety of plant parts other than fibre applications, which were as significant to them Parthier (2007). The following objectives were chosen for the present study based on the aforementioned literature.

OBJECTIVES

- (i) to study the economic relevance of jute farming among the agrarian communities in Assam,
- (ii) to highlight the production related constraints faced by the jute growers.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on both primary as well as secondary data. Secondary data were collected from various books, journals and primarily websites of National Jute Board (NJB), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Office of the Jute Commissioner; Ministry of Textile Government of India (GOI) etc. The study is carried out in two Agro Climatic Zones (ACZ) of Assam viz., Central Brahmaputra Valley zone and North Bank Plains. Two districts, one from each zone (Nagaon and Darrang) were selected purposively. 5 Agricultural Development Officer (ADO) circles were selected from each of the two selected districts. 10 per cent VLEW (Village Level Extension Worker) *elakas* were covered. At the final stage, 15 farmers from each of the selected VLEW *elaka* were interviewed by selecting through non-probabilistic convenience sampling procedure. Thus the total sample size

becomes 150 Jute farmers. The findings and suggestions were limited to the select ACZs and generalization cannot be made for other jute growing states. Besides, the findings are limited to jute crop only and not for other fiber crops. The study is based on purely from farmer's perspective and, industry and consumer perspectives are not taken into consideration.

Analysis and findings

Purpose of growing Jute crop

An effort is made to analyse the reason of continuation of jute cultivation in the contemporary times. It was observed that 84% of farmers plant this fibre crop with price expectation, that is, a profitable return. This fiber crop is an important source of livelihood in the riverine areas as others crop cannot be grown in those kinds of lands. It was also observed that marketing of jute fiber is related with festivals among the farmers. They prefer to sale the fiber before the festivals to meet the cash requirements of festivals of their families. This implies the significance of jute income among the jute farmers and their families. These evidences justify that, 84% of the farmers undertake jute farming for remunerative return. Another 11 percent of the farmers raise this crop because of the requirements of Jute stick. Jute stick is the leftover of the process of fiber extraction. Jute stick is an important item among rural household for its diverse utilities. Jute stick is used as cooking fuel among the rural households. Besides, it is also used for construction of house walls. Another utility of this stick is use as fencing of boundary wall. Besides the jute stick fencing is also use in the vegetable garden of the farmers. Thus, jute stick is having a stable demand in the rural jute growing areas and this is another significant purpose of growing this fiber crop.

Utilizations of income from Jute cultivation by the farmers

Income from Jute has a favourable impact on the development and well-being of farm families. Therefore, it is essential to analyse how jute income utilized by the farmers. It was observed that, income from Jute farming is mainly use for labour payment and financing *Rabi* crops for the next crop season. The other three areas where farmers spend their jute incomes are festival needs, education of the ward and medical treatment accordingly.

Production related Constraints of the growers

The market price of the raw Jute is determined on the basis of its quality (strength and colour etc.). The quality of the fibre again depends upon the optimum utilization of quality inputs. Optimum use of input is controlled by two main factors in the study area i.e. Availability of the inputs at the time of requirement and the cost. Availability of jute seeds during the time of sowing is an issue faced by the growers. Increasing prices of jute seed is another constraint faced by the farmers of the area. Another issue in the process of production of raw jute is availability of labour during the peak season of fiber extraction. Shortage of labour supply also influence the prevalent wage rate of labour. Another major issues faced by the farmers are insufficiency of retting space. Distance from farm and retting space increases the cost of transportation.

Suggestions

It is suggested for spreading more scientific knowledge among farmers regarding jute farming. They should be equipped for value addition through quality production. Besides, ensuring availability of market information is another suggestive steps which will ensure remunerative return to the growers. Popularizing the jute cultivation by focusing its environmental friendly aspects and its diverse utilities among new generation is another suggestive outcome of the study. Good quality seeds should be available for farmers at low price. Besides, marketing process should be conducive for the growers. Creation of community retting tank or revival of traditional water bodies for retting can help to a large extent.

CONCLUSION

Jute cultivation has important economic and ecological effects. It is crucial to ensure the sustainability of this fibre farming in the era of assuring environmental sustainability. Only sustainable farming can assure a steady supply of fibre in the near future. Global environmental consciousness is opening up new opportunities for this natural and renewable fibre. It is crucial to strengthen the production and add value through product diversity at the grower level in order to seize these opportunities. It needs accurate diagnosis and elimination of production-related constraints as well as the development of capacity among growers.

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