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RURAL LIVELIHOOD DIVERSIFICATION IN THE HILL ZONE OF ASSAM: A REVIEW

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ABSTRACT
This article seeks to review the nature, extent, and determinants of rural livelihood diversification with special reference to the Hill Zone of Assam. It is quite evident that the hill dwellers of Assam are facing problems due to the difficulty of terrain, small & fragmented land holding, low yield, market imperfection, crop failure, etc. Agriculture is still the prime source of livelihood. The extent of livelihood diversification is also very low. The prime objective of this paper is to identify some crucial issues relating to livelihood diversification in Assam and its Hill Zone. Moreover, the study is also trying to attract the attention of researchers as well as policymakers about the scopes and challenges relating to rural livelihood diversification.

KEYWORDS*: Rural Livelihood Diversification, Hill Zone of Assam, Income, Rural Development*

I. INTRODUCTION

The inception of contemporary development studies on rural livelihood diversification originated from the developing countries of South Africa. In those nations, livelihood options are being given priority as strategies of development to eradicate poverty and its complexities. The concept of rural livelihood diversification originated as a result of the substantial contribution of Frank Ellis of the Overseas Development Group of the University of East Anglia. Diversifying one's source of income is a means of overcoming market failure, adjusting for seasonality and shocks, and balancing patterns of consumption and income (Ellis, 1998, 2000; Sharma 2018). Livelihood incorporates assets, activities, and capabilities essential for the means of living (Chamber & Conway, 1992). Due to the coexistence of pull and push factors, rural households adopt combination of both farm and nonfarm alternatives to diversify livelihood strategies.

Pull factors are associated with the improvement in employment scenarios and prospects outside the agriculture sector. Nonetheless, push factors are responsible for the vulnerability that exists in the agriculture sector (Ellis, 2000).

India is predominantly an agrarian economy gradually adopting diversification as the prime strategy of its livelihood. Approximately two-thirds population of India works in agriculture and allied fields. The rural households involved in agricultural activities are facing problems relating to small and fragmented land holdings, low yield, crop failure, market imperfection, etc. For rural households in India, where agriculture is primarily at the subsistence level, diversification is increasingly important as a means of ensuring livelihood security. Agriculture is becoming a residual sector due to excessive strain from the expanding population (Sharma et al., 2022). But rural India's lack of industrialization, lack of infrastructure, lack of access to vital resources, lack of skilled labor, and remoteness prevent its rural residents from pursuing a variety of livelihood opportunities. For rural households, food security, and well-being are not guaranteed by low earnings and limited employment prospects. As a result, young people from rural areas are increasingly likely to migrate to urban areas in quest of better job possibilities. Remittances are increasingly being used as a source of income for rural migrants, who are also participating in the unregulated labor markets (Mamgain, 2004).

The present study has attempted to review contemporary studies relating to rural livelihood diversification with special emphasis on the Hill Zone of Assam. Moreover, the review article is also trying to identify the nature, extent, and causes of rural livelihood diversification. The prime objective of this paper is to draw the attention of Government Agencies and policymakers to various aspects of rural livelihood options and constraints relating to it. The review paper consists of five sections. Section II discusses the extent and determinants of rural livelihood diversification. Section III discusses the rural livelihood diversification in the Hill Economies of India. The section elaborates on the constraints and opportunities of livelihood diversification in India. Section IV elaborates on rural livelihood diversification in Assam with special reference to the Hill Zone. Section V deals with the conclusion

II. EXTENT AND DETERMINANTS OF RURAL LIVELIHOOD DIVERSIFICATION

The majority of developing nations worldwide rely heavily on the agriculture sector as their main source of income. However, because of the small size of land holdings and lack of livelihood assets, the agriculture sector in these countries is unable to ensure the livelihood security of the rural masses. In many countries, acute poverty has always been a major concern. Poverty is typically said to be caused by low income and food deficiency. The process of diversifying sources of income is further hampered by low levels of monetization and, as a consequence, a low level of revenue is generated in rural areas for livelihood diversification (Ellis and Freeman, 2006). Rural households employ alternative livelihood options to reduce poverty and overcome the risk and vulnerability connected with the agriculture sector (Barret, 2001). However, different livelihood strategies are influenced by factors such as geography, spatial features, socioeconomic status, and diversification preferences. Numerous scholarly works on the diversification of livelihoods have noted that geographically complex factors such as market failures force rural people to choose other livelihood options. The factors that affect the head of the household's decision to choose various livelihood strategies include the size of the land holding, location, ecology, size of the household, level of education, and mean working years (Mahama et al., 2017). According to another study, the majority of rural households in Western Ethiopia practice subsistence farming. Additionally, the alternatives for a living are more limited than varied. The household's dependence ratio, the educational attainment of the household head, the household's connections to cities, credit availability, and the household's access to irrigation facilities, etc, are the main factors that influence livelihood diversification (Ayana et.al, 2021).

Diversity in geographic areas and socioeconomic backgrounds gives rise to differing degrees of livelihood diversification strategies. The difference in the household's resource endowments is the reason for the variability in livelihood diversification. To gain from development, wealthy households with ample resources choose to combine both farm and nonfarm sources of income. Conversely, low-income households choose alternative sources of income to lessen the vulnerability of socks (Khatun and Roy, 2016). The extent of livelihood diversification has a tremendous impact on the income level of the household. Empirical evidence shows that the income level of livelihood-specialized households is much lower than that of households with diversified livelihood portfolios. The livelihood diversification dynamics can be augmented by combining both farm and nonfarm activities in rural areas. By imparting vocational training and enhancing the expenditures on education among the rural masses a conducive environment for livelihood diversification can be created (Sharma, 2018). According to a study conducted in Central Nepal, diversifying one's source of income significantly reduces poverty. Rural households engage in nonfarm occupations in addition to agricultural ones. Businesses and commercial farming appear to be two essential livelihood diversification tactics. The influencing factors of livelihood diversification include the size of the land holding, accessibility to markets and highways, availability of financing facilities, and level of education and training (Khatiwada et.al, 2017).

III. RURAL LIVELIHOOD DIVERSIFICATION IN THE HILL ECONOMIES OF INDIA

For most of India's hill economies, agriculture is the main source of income. Hill people continue to practice primitive subsistence farming. Additionally, the agricultural production techniques are extremely antiquated, and mono-cropping is widely used. The majority of India's hill areas have long relied on shifting cultivation as their primary source of income. But because the government continues to forbid and regulate the practice of slash and burning, hill dwellers are increasingly migrating to other places to make a living. Studies have found that due to the intact fertility of soils hill areas become conducive for commercial crop production. Presently, the plantation of horticultural crops and livestock rearing are becoming prime sources of livelihood in a few hill economies of India (Kuki, 2015). But factors like market imperfection, low level of educational attainment, lack of credit facilities, dearth of cold storage, and lack of irrigation facilities hurdles the process of commercial crop plantation. For high yield from horticultural crops and employment generation, it becomes imperative to take skill development initiative among the hill dwellers in the hill economies (Kamei, 2013).

India's hill economies are endowed with innumerable natural resources. However, due to stringent government regulations, local communities are unable to use these resources. The subsistence character of agriculture combined with sporadic industrial growth cannot guarantee a solid income and a high rate of workforce participation. Lack of alternative job opportunities hill dwellers migrate from their place of residence to ensure a better livelihood. But this kind of outmigration does not have any impact on the quality of livelihoods of rural households. Because remittances created through outmigration are just assisting households to survive only at the subsistence level (Mamgain, 2004).

Rural hill economies that depend on agriculture suffer numerous challenges as a result of crop failures, uneven soil, and a lack of irrigation infrastructure. Due to the small and fragmented land holding modernization of agriculture is not possible. The livelihood security of rural people is also threatened by low crop yields. However, the pace of agricultural mechanization is hampered by population pressure, which forces households to diversify their sources of income (Sharma, 2018). To achieve sustainable development, the issue of food security in mountainous areas needs to be given top priority. Nonetheless, many research studies indicate that trans-local livelihood diversification is becoming the norm in hilly regions like Ladakh. Food systems in the state are changing from being supply-oriented to production-oriented. In general, rural households are growing more reliant on the public distribution system and the food market. The substantial change in land utilization patterns hurts the production of food crops in this mountain economy. Additionally, remittances and outmigration are emerging as viable means of support (Dame, 2018).

IV. RURAL LIVELIHOOD DIVERSIFICATION IN ASSAM WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE HILL ZONE

Assam is one of the North Eastern states of India having three physiographical divisions viz., the Brahmaputra Valley, the Barak Valley, and the Central Zone. The state possesses 7.8 million hectares of total geographical area and 3.12 crore of population (Population Census of India 2011). Agriculture is the mainstay of livelihood for 75 percent of the population of the state. The Central Hill Zone of Assam consists of three districts viz., Karbi Anglong, West Karbi Anglong, and Dima Hasao. All three districts of the zone are administered by the Autonomous Councils under the six schedule provisions of the Constitution of India.

The agriculture sector of Assam is subsistence in nature. Monocropping practices and the application of conventional agricultural methods only give a subsistence level of yield of food grains (Mandal, 2011). However, the sector's output and return are low due to low agricultural spending and little interest in farming. Crop diversification could be a key tactic to boost profitability in agriculture (Saikia, 2015).

Research has shown that households with farming as their primary source of income have a high degree of livelihood diversification. Families with non-farm activities tend to be less diversified since they have a stable source of income. Conversely, lower-income farming households diversify more (Neog and Borgohain, 2020). Yet another study done on the Bodo community of the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTAD) area of Assam has also revealed that livelihood diversification is moderate for the larger number of rural households in the community. Empirical evidence also showed that the livelihood diversification index is high among the rural households involved in the farm sector. Households that are involved in the nonfarm sector having a high level of income tend to diversify less (Swargiary and Mahanta, 2020). Moreover, most of the rural households diversify due to the seasonal characteristics of the farming activities. The major share of the household's income seems to be divided from diversification in nonfarm sources. In rural areas of South Assam along with farming activities diversification of the nonfarm activities plays a crucial role. The income composition of the household is highly influenced by the level of education of the family members. Therefore for strengthening the rural poor through nonfarm diversification the spread of education is quite evitable (Dey et.al, 2013).

Shifting cultivation and wet paddy cultivation in the low-lying area are the prime sources of livelihood for the rural households of the Hill Zone of Assam. The shifting cultivation is also known as "Jhum" cultivation among the hill dwellers of Assam. The Undivided Karbi Anglong district only accounts fifty four thousand Jhum-cultivating families or Jhumias. This accounts for 11 percent of Jhumias of the entire North East India (Population Census of India, 2011).

The Jhum cultivation practiced by the hill dwellers of Assam involves a slash-burning process. It has a tremendous negative impact on ecology. But instead of the continuous effort of the government to control shifting cultivation the hill dwellers are still practicing Jhum cultivation. There is immense scope for commercial crop production in Karbi Anglong. Plantation of rubber, tea, and bamboo could be a better means of income generation as well as poverty alleviation. But the Jhumias do not want to take the risk of livelihood failure by leaving their age-old traditional farming practice (Bos et.al, 2020).

The environment of the three hill districts of Assam is conducive to ginger cultivation. Ginger produced in Karbi Anglong is inscribed with Geographical Indication (GI). Livelihood based on ginger cultivation has immense potential for the growth of agricultural productivity and as an option for livelihood security (Panme, 2021). Apart from Jhum cultivation the rural hill dwellers of Assam are also practicing livestock farming. However, livestock rearing practice is not taken commercially because of the high cost of production, poor resource base, and dearth of skills required for livestock rearing. Accessibility to credit and proper training for skill development are required for the development of the livestock rearing venture (Sharma, 2016).

Chutia and Bhuyan (2019) employed three indicators viz., the Ecological Security Indicator (ESI), the Efficiency Indicator (EI), and the Social Equity Indicator (SEI) in their district-level study on sustainable livelihood security in Assam. In terms of ESI, EEI, and SEI values, the Dima Hasao ranks 14, 9, and 1 among all the districts in Assam. It is ranked third in the Sustainable Livelihood Security Index (SLSI). Nonetheless, Karbi Anglong ranks among the districts of Assam at 18, 25, and 17 according to the ESI, EEI, and SEI indicators, respectively. Karbi Anglong's SLSI rank is 24.

IV. CONCLUSION

It is evident from the above discussion that different studies have been conducted by many researchers in the Hill Zone of Assam. The yield and income from using primitive farming practices are only sufficient for subsistence. Subsistence agriculture is no longer a viable solution for issues of rural development, poverty reduction, and livelihood security because of the existence of several crucial issues like fragmented land holdings, low productivity, fragmented farm sizes, wage gaps, etc. In addition, younger generations with greater education levels favour employment in the high-paying nonfarm industry only. The Government of India has implemented numerous initiatives and programs for Assam's Hill Zone; yet, disparities in development and income between the rural and urban people persist. It is necessary to properly implement the development programs intended for hill dwellers to guarantee alternative livelihood strategies and sustainable rural development. Thus, diversifying rural livelihoods could be a strategy to maintain livelihood security. Beyond farming, additional nonfarm activities should be given priority to improve the living standards of the hill people.

Different studies have been done on livelihood diversification of Assam, but it is emphasized in the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys. The research on the diversification of livelihoods in the hill zone of Assam is limited to three dimensions viz., poultry farming, shifting cultivation, and ginger cultivation-based livelihood. No such research studies have been found that take a comprehensive approach to include every facet of both farm and nonfarm-based rural livelihood for the Hill Zone of Assam. In light of this, the current study aims to raise awareness among academics and policy-makers regarding the extent and challenges associated with the diversification of rural livelihoods.

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