Traditional Food Items of SHGs: A Study of their Marketing Channel and Constraints in the Context of Assam, India

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ABSTRACT

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) play a vital role in promoting marketing of traditional food items and empowers rural communities through small-scale food processing, local marketing, and sustainable micro-enterprises. Commercialisation of traditional food of Assam would certainly help a section of its people to become economically independent and also enable them to maintain a decent standard of living. Based on both primary and secondary sources of information, this paper investigated the marketing channel of traditional food items and problems faced by the SHGs while marketing these products. Ninety (90) members from 18 purposively selected SHGs of Assam were interviewed to collect required information and Garrett's Ranking Technique was used to rank the problems faced by the SHG members while marketing the traditional food items. The study identified three channels of marketing traditional food items of which use of retail channel is the most. The tough competition from the other products produced by big companies has been found as the most significant problem faced by the SHGs with the highest Garrett mean value followed by limited financial resources and lack of knowledge on proper packaging.

Key Words: Traditional food, Marketing channel, Garrett's Ranking Technique, Garrett mean value

INTRODUCTION

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are small group of people, usually composed of 10-20 members, coming together for gainful engagement and sharing employment opportunities among each other. They have been able to effectively recycle the resources generated among the members for meeting the productive and emergent credit needs of members of the group. SHGs plays an exclusive role in bringing about change in the standard of living of its members (Sharma, 2001). The idea of self-help groups is to increase the financial capabilities of poor and marginalised, by nurturing their entrepreneurial skills and engaging them into productive activities (Agarwal and Lenka, 2016). The Government of India has emphasised on the formation of SHGs as a solution to the problem of unemployment of country's masses. The SHGs across the country are involved in the manufacturing of various food items like achar, ladoos, jams, juices, homemade papad etc., compost fertilisers, handicrafts, agarbattis, cleaners etc. and trying to sell these to a viable market (Gandhi and Udayakumari, 2013; Dhiman and Rani, 2014). Self-Help Groups (SHGs) play a vital role in promoting marketing of traditional food items and empowers rural communities through small-scale food processing, local marketing, and sustainable micro-enterprises. Traditional food, also termed as ethnic food reflects the identity of a particular place and its people. Ethnic food is commonly defined as food that is deliberately considered as something connected to a specific land or area (Belasco,1987). Traditional food also portrays a country's culture in context of its ethnicities, customs, heritage, belief or national origin (Verbeke & Lopez,2005). Moreover, traditional food symbolises the culture of a specific ethnic group (Guerrero et al,2009; Sedda &Stano, 2022).

Assam, the land of diversified culture and tradition, is endowed with rich traditional food diversity. As per the report of Census of India,2011, about 12.4 per cent of the total population of Assam constitutes tribal people. They have their own customs, traditions and food habits. Different communities of Assam have their traditional styles of preparing food. Special ingredients added by them make their food unique. Traditional

foods prepared by the people of Assam have medicinal values and provide the necessities for a sound and healthy life. Commercialisation of traditional food of Assam would certainly help a section of its people to become economically independent and also enable them to maintain a decent standard of living. In earlier times, the traditional food products were mostly prepared in individual households for personal consumption. Self-Help Groups took initiatives to produce these products for commercial purpose to generate income. Now a days, people of Assam prepare traditional food items for both personal and commercial uses. This initiative has certainly popularised the traditional food items among the buyers from the states itself and people of other states as well.

Objectives

This study makes an attempt

i) To examine the marketing channel of some traditional food items of Assam produced by SHGs
ii) To identify the problems faced by the SHGs while commercialising these food items.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Suguna (2006) in her study revealed that majority of the SHGs depend heavily on local consumption for sale of their products. Their dependence is very high on government assistance and they lack skills for taking their produce to the market. Besides, very few products of SHGs are able to make an impact in local and national markets. This study also pointed out that shortage of capital remains the main problem for SHGs. Satapathy and Mishra (2011) in their study conducted in the tribal areas of Koraput district in Odisha reveals some major constraints of SHGs. They found lack of effective marketing along with other variables like technological skillset, personal, social and economic factors as the concern areas of the SHGs. Krishnaveni and Haridas(2013) in their research focused on the SHGs and their Marketing Problems and found that SHG members experienced many problems such as to conceive the right product ideas, inadequate product packaging, accessibility to good quality raw materials, unavailability of good machinery and quality equipment, getting timely financial assistance from banks, achieving profitability and timely repayment of the loan, lack of knowledge about marketing of their products and achieving sustainable business practices. Boyce et al. (2014) have highlighted the use of social media by the self-help and mutual aid group members which keep on meeting on face-to-face basis. The study was conducted in United Kingdom during the ESTEEM project on 21 groups for a period of 3 years which indicates that social media is an increasingly important resource for SHG members in United Kingdom and emphasises on the various benefits that social media yields to SHG members. Gogoi (2019) analysed traditional food pattern and diet intake pattern of the Bodo Kachari Tribe of Assam and found that the Boro women folk prepare a number of traditional mouth-watering delicious cuisines their dietary pattern consists of leafy green vegetables, vegetables and root & tubers as well as edible insects. Sarda and Palwe (2023) in their study threw light on the problems of self-help group members and pointed out education, marketing, product quality and training as the main problems faced by the women SHGs. Goswami and Goswami (2023), in their study, examined the market value of traditional snack items of Assam. The study found that these traditional snacks have considerable demand in the market and possess significant market potential. However, they face intense competition from Western snack products, which poses a challenge to their wider commercialization and market expansion. A review of the existing literature reveals that limited attention has been given to the marketing channels of traditional food products produced by Self-Help Groups (SHGs). Moreover, no study has comprehensively examined the constraints faced by SHGs in marketing these traditional food products. This research gap provides the rationale for the present study.

METHODOLOGY

This study has used both primary and secondary sources of information. Secondary information has been collected from books, journals and e-sources to support the analysis. As primary source of information, members of few Self-Help Groups (SHGs) of Dibrugarh, Jorhat and Golaghat districts of Assam are interviewed. These SHGs are selected purposively on the basis of convenience of the study. From each district,

six SHGs are taken and hence, total number of SHGs under consideration becomes eighteen. Five (5) members from each SHG are interviewed to collect information for the study. As such, total number of respondents becomes 90. They are interviewed separately so that difference in opinion could be covered up. The problems faced by the SHG members while marketing the traditional food items are ranked by using Garrett's Ranking Technique. This is a quantitative technique applied to rank the problems mentioned by the respondents on the basis of their severity. As part of this technique, respondents were first asked to rank the problems faced by them. Then percent position of each rank is calculated using the following formula

$$\text{Percent Position} = 100\left(R_{ij} - \frac{0.5}{Nj}\right)$$

Here,

R_{ij}= Rank given for ith problem by the j^{th} individual

N_j= Number of problems ranked by j^{th} individual

The estimated percent position of each problem has been converted in to Garret's score using Garret ranking conversion table. The Garret rank scores are applied to respective number of responses for each rank which are then added together to get the total value of all ranks given to a particular problem by all respondents.

After that, Garret Mean value for each problem is calculated by dividing total value of each problem by the total number of respondents. The problem having the highest Garret mean value is considered to be the most severe problem. Accordingly, problems faced while marketing traditional food items are ranked and prioritized.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

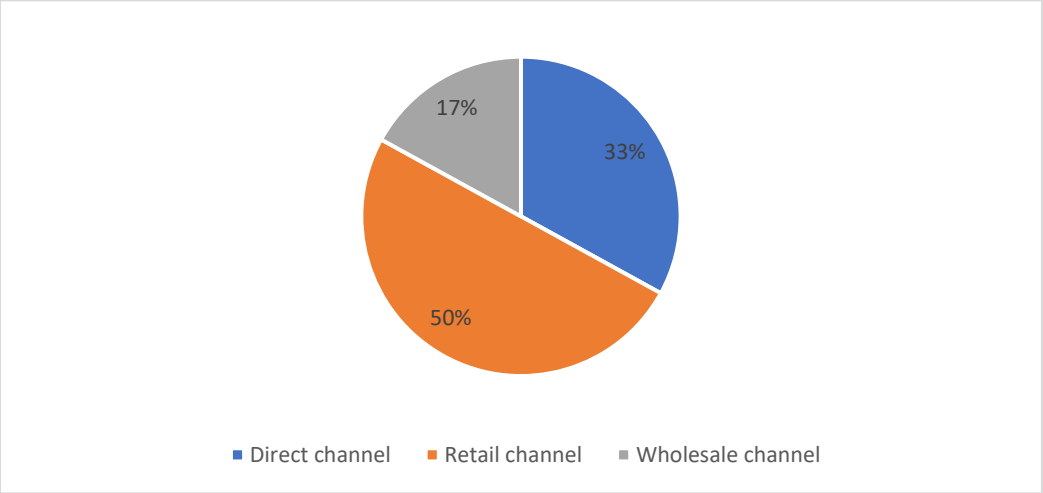
Traditional food is cooked with local ingredients without any adulterants, colour or artificial flavours. Traditional food are those foods which originate from local plants and animal resources (Earle L, 2002). All traditional or ethnic food items of Assam can broadly be categorised in to two types, those which are perishable and those which can be stored for certain period of time without adding artificial preservatives. The first category ethnic food items can readily be prepared and sale in different restaurants and hotels on demand of the consumers. This paper highlights the traditional food items which can be stored for certain period of time and used for commercial purpose like ladoos, pickle, traditional snacks, fruit juices, bamboo shoots etc.

Members of these SHGs are asked some questions regarding the sale of traditional foods, their demand in the market, income from the selling of ethnic food in the market, whether all members of SHGs are involved in the preparation of these food items or not, problems faced by them etc. The SHGs from these three districts are considered as different cases to know the market demand of the traditional food items.

The members of SHGs prepare variety of traditional food items like ladoos, pithas, pickle, Bamboo-shoot, etc. They sell these food items in different places of the States. Group leaders reported that their average monthly income from the sale of traditional food items is about Rs. 22,000/- per month. Member informed that sometimes they are unable to meet the high demand for such products during festive season as all members are not interested equally to prepare these products.

The study identified three channels of marketing traditional food items. These marketing channels are direct channel, retail channel and wholesale channel. The following pie-chart shows that 50% of the surveyed SHGs uses retail channel while selling their food items. That is, majority of SHGs are found to sell these items to the retailers and retailers keep these items in their shops for final selling to the consumers. About 33% of total SHGs directly sell these traditional food items. Members of SHGs informed that known people directly

Figure1: Marketing Channels for the selected traditional food items of surveyed SHGs



Source: Authors calculation based on surveyed data

purchase these products from their homes and sometimes, they directly sell in different fairs installing outlets. The wholesale marketing channel is being used by 17% of the total number of SHGs surveyed. The distributors buy these food items from the SHGs which want to sell their products in other districts and states. Then, distributors sell these food items to retailers who finally sell to the consumers.

Problems faced by SHGs while commercialising these traditional food items:

Members of these SHGs mentioned the following problems which they often face while commercialising the products prepared by them-

- Lack of cooperation of all members
- Limited financial resources
- Lack of education and training of members
- Lack of knowledge on proper packaging
- Lack of proper knowledge of modern marketing techniques
- Tough competition from the products produced by the big companies
- Less promotional activities
- Lack of institutional support

Based on the ranks given to the problems by the respondents, percent position and Garrett scores have been calculated. The total ranks given by these respondents is eight. Using the Garrett's Score, Garrett's mean value for every problem has been calculated which is depicted in the following table:

Table 1: Rank-wise problems of commercialisation of traditional food items

Problems	Garrett's Mean Value	Ranks
Tough competition from the big companies	45.7	I
Limited financial resources	40.67	II
lack of knowledge on proper packaging	20.8	III
Less promotional activities	16.87	IV

Lack of institutional support	15.83	V
Lack of cooperation of all members	14.8	VI
Lack of education and training of members	13.33	VII
Lack of proper knowledge of modern marketing techniques	8.8	VIII

Source: Calculated by Author

The tough competition from the other products produced by big companies has been found as the most significant problem with the highest Garrett mean value followed by limited financial resources and lack of knowledge on proper packaging. Respondents mentioned that shopkeepers or vendors do not want to keep food items like pithas, ladoos, jolpans, in off seasons as they face loss due to the low demand and easy availability of different food items produced by big companies. Majority of people always prefer to eat food items produced by big companies only. Usually, sale of some traditional food items is found to be higher during festive seasons. But, limited financial resource acts as hindrance in meeting higher demand for such traditional food items during festive seasons as most of the respondents are poor and cannot invest large amount in preparing such food. Limited promotional activities, lack of cooperation, limited institutional support also prevent such traditional food products in getting large share in the market.

CONCLUSION

The paper identified three channels of marketing traditional food items- direct, retail and wholesale channel, of which retail channel dominates the selling of traditional food items of the surveyed Self-Help groups. The tough competition from the other products produced by big companies has been found as the most significant problem with the highest Garrett mean value followed by limited financial resources and lack of knowledge on proper packaging. However, there is ample scope of increasing market share of these traditional food items provided that bottlenecks to commercialising these items are removed. Self-Help Groups which have expertise in different activities can collaborate with each other for increasing the production and sell of such ethnic food products. For example, the SHG which lacks knowledge on proper packaging can take help from the SHG which has facility of packaging products. Moreover, advertising will also help to capture market and encourage other ethnic food producers to set up their own business. In this regard, government should extend supports to the people engaged in the commercialisation of these food items. Government can take up promotional measures to popularise these food items and boost up their sales. Commercialisation of these food items will definitely enhance entrepreneurship development, generate employment as well as self-sustainability among the people of Assam.

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