

Corona virus Disease (COVID-19) and livelihood: Impact on Dairy Farmers of Kamrup District, Assam, India

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Abstract

In the lockdown period, the dairy industry in Assam as in other parts faced lots of difficulty which impacted the livelihood of several dairy farmers. As per reports, the dairy farmers had to throw away their milk in the river and pond due to loss of supply provision. This article presents the scenario of milk farming uplifting living condition and economic status of the Dairy farmers. Field report reveals that covid19 virus had a severe impact on dairy farmers livelihood. Coronavirus had negative impact on their daily activities and even milkmen could neither sell milk nor could buy fodder for the cattle. The present study was conducted in Gorkha population concentrated in the 10th mile area of Guwahati (Kamrup), Assam. Basically, this area has the community engaged in rearing cow and goat and with milk business they supply milk to the greater Guwahati area. The study was based on qualitative research using in-depth interview and telephonic interview to collect information. The study has used both primary data and secondary data. The study was conducted in the rural area in order to find out the basic challenges encountered by the dairy farmers during first part of lockdown days due to COVID19.

Key Words: COVID-19, Dairy Farmer, Livelihood, Challenges.

Introduction

COVID-19 is the short form of “Coronavirus disease 2019”. It is the official name given by World Health Organization (WHO) and its infection was first recorded in Wuhan, China in 2019. Corona virus is highly contagious and it has affected many countries. The coronavirus mainly spreads from person to person and also can also spread from contact with infected objects. This deadly virus has affected large number of people all over the world. World Health Organization has mentioned that most of the infected people will develop mild to moderate symptoms.

Coronavirus had claimed more than 156000 lives and infected nearly 2.3 million people around the world (BBC news, 28/4/2020). More than 1.9 million coronavirus infections have been reported and over 119,483 people have died worldwide as on April 14, 2020

(TOI, 2020). Governments of all countries are struggling to control the pandemic. Different countries announced social distancing and lockdown across the country. This really affected the world economy. Because of COVID19, there has been a widespread loss of jobs in several sectors. Agriculture, allied Activities, poultry farming, dairy farming and agricultural related activities are badly hit by the COVID19 pandemic. The present and future effects of the pandemic COVID19 are being discussed globally as it has significant consequence on majority of population. Population living in rural areas with agricultural activities and rural labour migrants are worst affected sector by COVID19 in India. The paper presents the status of dairy farmers in Assam (India) and the study presents description on history, migration of the Nepali community to Assam with respect to the dairy farmer community especially with regard to the situation of dairy farmers of Kamrup district of Assam and situation related to COVID19.

The colonial period has witnessed the greatest human movement and settlement of people resulting in the transfer and distribution of diverse population groups in different parts of the world. Commercialization and industrialization of the economy under the aegis of the colonial state also served to stimulate the natural migratory movement of people. After the British occupation of Assam, under the patronage of the colonial government, large number of Nepalese migrated to this region in search of life as *Gopalak* (cow rearers) and soldiers. The British came to Assam with lot of hope and aspiration, but they could not reach their goal as Assam was not a populous state. The devastation and depopulation during the period of civil wars and Burmese invasions had left 'vast tracts of waste land throughout the province'. Encouragement was given to the immigrants to come and settle in the province. In an industry-less country, Assam had no other option but to increase its land revenue. Lands were leased out to the people in favourable terms. British government had not missed any opportunity to maximize their revenue collection. Accordingly grazing which was free from time immortal in Assam was taxed. To attract the people and increase the revenue of the region, Company introduced the Wasteland Rules on 6th March, 1838. According to the Rules, one-fourth of a land grant was to remain revenue-free in perpetuity. The remaining portion of the grant, too, was to remain revenue-free for initial five to twenty years, according to the nature of the wasteland concerned (Guha, 2006). 'Large scale' Nepali migration into the Assam began only with the colonial intervention. British official viewed the native people as 'lazy', 'opium addicted' and 'indolent' and encouraged the surplus Nepali population to immigrate to Assam. The active policies pursued by the colonial government opened up the valley to the Gorkhas. The colonial government required a labour force for all and sundry work from clearing forests to lumbering to domestic help, which was effectively provided by the 'versatile Nepali'. Apart from the recruitment of Nepali martial classes in police and military, what seems to have attracted the Gorkhas to Assam was the vast expanse of greenery dense forests and hills, abundance of wastelands full of lush green vegetation. This was, indeed, was an ideal scenario for cattle-breeding (Chetry, 2016). So, the rise of dairy farming industry in Northeast was a part of the development of the colonial

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economy in the region. In Assam, the Gorkha dairymen presently constitute the largest milk producer and supplier in the state supplying to 80% of the region's population, with an annual turnover of approximately 20 crores (Gurung, 2018).

Milk is a complex food that contains vital nutrients for young mammals. Milk is the only food of the mammal during the first period of its life and the substances in milk provide energy and antibodies that help protect against infection. For humans, milk and dairy products make a significant contribution to meeting our body's needs for calcium, magnesium, riboflavin, vitamin B₁₂ and B₅ and therefore play a key role in our development (<https://dairyprocessinghandbook.tetrapak.com>). Consumption of cow milk had probably started with the domestication of the cow. Cow milk is a source of other milk products such as cheese, cream, butter, Ghee, Curd, ice cream etc. The United States, India, China and Brazil are the world's largest milk producers and exporters. According to Food and Agriculture Organization of United Nations (2020), India is the world's largest milk producer, with 22% of global production, followed by the United States of America, China, Pakistan and Brazil (www.fao.org).

Milk production has become an important source of income for millions of rural families. Milk production and milk farms are providing employment to the rural youths and income generating opportunities particularly for women farmers. Milk production/farms also include all family members to produce more and earn more. This activity not only leads to employment generation, but also regulates monthly income. It provides nutritious food, generates opportunities especially for women and generates income to save for future.

Universe of Study

Assam is one of the eight states of northeast India. Northeast India is differently understood and placed in the background of its geo-political entity and historical context. Geographically, Northeast is at the extreme north-eastern part of India, and has international boundaries with Bhutan, Tibet, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Assam, the gateway to the Northeast India is most strategically situated in the Eastern Himalayan region between 24.480 to 27.90 North latitude and 89.420 to 96.100 East longitude. The region is geographically isolated from the rest of India because its only land link with the rest of the country is through a narrow strip of land in the state of West Bengal. Therefore, northeast is a geographically 'recognizable entity'. For that matter, northeast is unique making it unique from the mainland India in terms of its topography, climate, ethnic groups, unique caste structures, races and groups - each having its own distinct culture and customs.

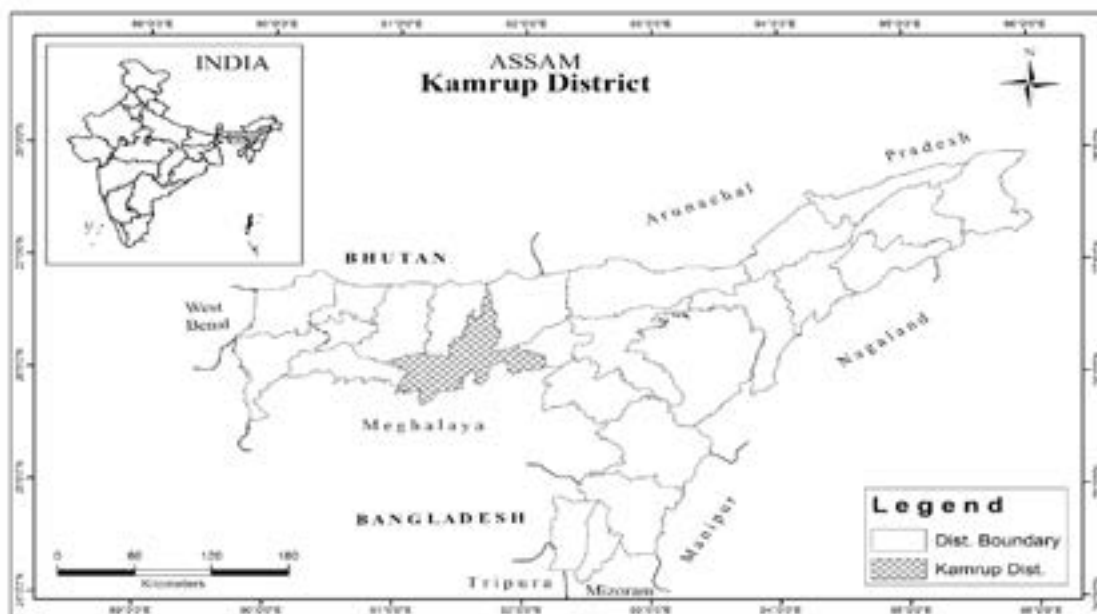


Fig. 1. Map showing Kamrup district of Assam

The present study was carried out in Amerigog, 10th mile, Guwahati, Jorabat area, Kamrup District (Fig.1), Assam. Amerigog is located in Sonapur circle at 26.29°N latitude and 91.65°E longitude of Kamrup district, India. The study was carried out taking the Gorkha Dairy farmers as the respondents.

Methods and Methodology

The present study is mainly qualitative in nature and the data were obtained by using questionnaire approach. The study is based on qualitative research and used in-depth interview and telephonic interview to collect information. The researcher has used telephonic interview as a tool to collect information due to lockdown and to maintain social distance due to COVID 19 pandemic. Secondary data were collected from reviews of relevant literatures, books, newspaper and e-resources. The objectives of the study is the contribution of Dairy activity to the farmers economy and to study the challenges and problems faced by Dairy Farmers due to COVID19 pandemic and lockdown in the year 2020.

The researcher selected the farmers with milk farming as the only livelihood for them and it also considered the problems and challenges faced by them due to COVID19. The selected village of the respondents is dependent on milk farming. In Assam, only 40 thousand liters of milk is being marketed per day helping the economy of individual families. A small milk farmer residing in the area produces milk while the large milk farmers produce milk and also other milk products. Milk is the only product which has

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the highest demand in urban areas. Non-milk producers are engaged in producing other by products Milk chocolates, sweets and milk shakes and make their business. This makes the two groups dependent on each other for their livelihood. COVID19 tremendously affected these livelihood earners linked with dairy farms. The dairy farmers were also worried about fodder shortage, rise in fodder prices and inaccessibility of forage due to nationwide lockdown. Lockdown had affected their daily routine and transportation of milk in the markets. *On 24 March 2020, the 21day lockdown of India was announced to control the spread of COVID-19 which created a long-lasting impact on Indian farmers. Farmers engaged in allied activity, small entrepreneurs and marginal farmers cultivating unpreserved commodities were worst hit.* Millions of farmers across the country were throwing away their perishable produce; fruits, vegetables and milk being disposed of into compost pits and irrigation canals.

Discussion

The Gorkhas living in Assam, are mostly descendants of those who migrated from elsewhere to work in various sectors by the British. Now, Gorkhas in Assam basically work in agricultural fields, rearing animal and are into milk business. They have assimilated with the greater Assamese society and culture, and also have maintained their identity as well. Upadhaya (2017) mentioned in his article '*Cattle Culture of Gorkhas and Dairy Development of Assam*' that cattle farming is known to be the primary and culturally inherited business of the Gorkhas in Assam. Therefore, it is obvious that this community contributed a lot to the development of the dairy sector in the state. Development of any sector in an economy basically depends upon the primary stakeholders. In Assam, the Gorkhas are the primary dairy farmers, prior to the British regime. If one looks impartially at the first few Town Milk Supply Schemes established in Guwahati, Jorhat, Tezpur and Dibrugarh, they were made functional before 1980 and the location of the catchment area was identified by the survey conducted at the far end of the Second Five Year Plan for setting up Dairy plants under Town Milk Supply Schemes. It reveals that such plants were stalled where Gorkha settlement was concentrated. From the field observation in this study, it was found that there are three types of dairy farmers available in the village of Amerigog, 10th mile, Jorabat area (Kamrup) and they are, (a) Small Milk Producer (1-3 milch animals), (b) Medium Milk Producer (4-6 milch animals) and (c) Large Milk Producer (more than 6 milch animals). These farmers' rear different breeds of cattle like Indigenous breeds and Cross breed cattle. Indigenous breeds are Red Sindi, Sahiwal and Cross breed cattle includes Jersey, Holstein, Friesian etc.

In the study area, it was found that very few respondents attended school and passed class XII examinations. After passing their education, they came back and joined the family dairy farming business. They revealed that rearing cattle was part of their culture, milking the cattle as livelihood option and it was the basic source of income. The household income was dependent on the amount of milk sold in the market. The more the milk production, the higher they are sold in the market, which led to surplus household income.

Farmers kept limited amount of milk for own consumption and major part of milk was marketed along with use in production of other milk products. Dairy farmers preferred to employ their family members as labor to operate dairy activities. Basically male members of the family took care of the and it became a fulltime job. These Gorkha dairy farmers community have adopted appropriate technology to manage cattle and the health and hygiene of milch cattle. Dairy farmers were given training on Animal husbandry and dairy farming by Government of Assam (Department of Animal Husbandry and Veterinary, Government of Assam, India). Cattle falling sick, weak and unable to produce milk was found to have negative effect on milk production by the farmers. In such crisis they needed immediate care and medication from the veterinary doctor. Such treatments happened to be costly and as such cattle sickness negatively affected their daily income. Dairy farmers in the studied Kamrup district had appealed to the state government to help them out of the COVID19 crisis to reduce price of fodders and to make arrangement for cold storage facilities to preserve the milk and other milk products.

Problems and Challenges

Dairy institutions include dairy farmer groups or organizations, cooperatives, service providers, market agents, research and development organizations, governmental organizations and community-based organizations. These dairy institutions were not in the mainstream program during the COVID19 pandemic and nationwide lockdown. These dairy farmers and organizations were also not prepared for such situation in the midst of the COVID 19 lockdown and post lockdown scene. This nationwide lockdown severely impacted their livelihood.

In Assam during lockdown period in the year 2020, the dairy farmers faced problem in distribution and selling of milk. As the lockdown period was extended, difficulties arose among the farmers. It severely impacted dairy farms, individual dairy farmers and milk cooperatives as well across Assam during the ongoing 40-day lockdown period. Dairy farmers faced difficulty to arrange fodder for livestock as feed carriers have stopped due to lockdown period. Farmers were worried that their cattle may fall sick due to feed shortage, rise in fodder prices and unavailability of forage and fodder during the coronavirus lockdown. The traditional dairy farmers in Jorabat area of Kamrup district were waiting for the state government to relieve restrictions and help them out in this crisis. A major reason, as stated by one of the respondents is “the closure of all hotels, restaurants and sweetmeat shops that were the bulk buyers”.

Milk distribution became difficult during the lockdown so the farmers tried to make the milk products such as paneer and ghee from the unsold milk. They sold it in the nearby villages. However, villagers did not prefer buying paneer as fish and meat was available in their home. These farmers sold the milk byproducts to some extent but was not sufficient to run the family. Farmers on large scale threw away milk on the roads and river as they could not sell it due to restriction on transport, closure of market and due to lockdown.

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Dairy farmers faced fodder crisis, cattle food grain and medicines which also became costly during the COVID19 period. They appealed to the government to reduce prices to sustain their economy. The farmers stopped feeding costly fodder to their cattle to save their earnings which reduced the quantity of milk production.

The Sitajakhala Milk Cooperative Society is one of the oldest and largest dairy cooperatives of Assam located in Morigaon district. Sitajakhala Milk Cooperative Society chairman Ranjib Sarma told PTI, “The lockdown has affected the operations of the cooperative in multiple ways. Our daily procurement at this time of the year is between 17,000 litres and 18,000 litres.” He added “another problem we are facing is the fear psychosis among villagers, who are trying to restrict entry of people from the cooperative or other villages. This is creating difficulty in movement of traffic which has affected distribution of fodder and milk,”(Indian Express, 19 Apr 2020). He also added the price has been reduced to Rs 50 per liter from Rs 54 for disposal of its daily production. The commercial dairy farmers of Assam were looking up to the state government to build an effective milk marketing chain that would give farmers a fair return of their investment, and assist farmers by paying at least Rs 5 per litre (Indian Express, 19 Apr 2020).

Conclusion

Rice cultivation is the main occupation in Assam and Tea occupies second as commercial crop cultivated in Assam. Animal husbandry is another important allied sector in the state and plays an important role to meet the need of non-vegetarian population. Dairy farming is providing milk and milk products to Assamese population. Assam is an agriculture state, accounting for livelihood of about four fifths of population and is the key sector to the state economic growth.

Dairy sector has great economic and social significance in India. According to livestock census 2017, there are 166 million indigenous cattle, 33 million crossbred cattle and 105 million buffalos in India. In India, 80 million families are engaged in dairy sector including traditionally domesticated animal. India is endowed with the largest livestock population in the world. It accounts for about 57.3 per cent of the world’s buffalo population and 14.7 per cent of the cattle population. The value of output of milk was Rs. 3,05,484 crore in 2011-12. The total milk production in the country was 127.9 million tonnes per annum at the end of the Eleventh Plan (2011-12) and the demand was expected to be 180 million tonnes by 2020. So there is scope to increase the milk production and make it a profitable business. Milk farming is expected to help the farmer towards a better livelihood and income generation.

Livelihood in rural areas of country has had the worst effect, though the corona virus has not reached there yet during the study period. While the government announced several measures, including exemption of agriculture and fisheries from lockdown restrictions in late March 2020, there has been a lacuna in delivery and implementation at the ground level. There have also been gaps in reaching relief

in cash and kind to the poor, needy and vulnerable. As we notice the effects of pandemic, proactive measures by the state with humanitarian perspective are called for as we begin operating in a 'new normal': more relief in kind (e.g. making the PDS universal, ensuring whoever is needy gets the necessary support and is not left starving due to bureaucratic hurdles like lack of ration card) (Bhabani, 2020).

The present study found that dairy farming is also an important livelihood option like other agricultural activities. Study showed one family or whole community can depend on dairy farming as livelihood opportunity and earn money. These dairy farms are providing nutritious food to hundreds of families, earning income and creating employment as well. Dairy farms in (Jorabat and Sonapur) in Kamrup area of Assam are providing milk and milk products for many years and people are dependent on them for the supply. Many sweet owners of Guwahati City are also dependent on these dairy farms. But due to COVID19 several Dairy farms could not sell their milk and these farmers had to throw away milk in the streets and ponds. Therefore, data and studies on dairy sector is important from the research point of view as it has large scale ramifications and impact not only on smaller community but also to the contribution it makes to the overall economy of a region.

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