



Problems Faced By the Eri Silk Rearers of Dhemaji District of Assam

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Abstract

The present study is undertaken to study the problems faced by the Eri silk rearers of Dhemaji districts of Assam. The main aim of the study is to focus on the different areas of problems faced by the Eri silk rearers while commercializing their products. The present study is qualitative in nature. Interview schedules have also been used for collecting necessary primary information. Secondary information has been collected from different related books, reports and from various published materials. It has been found from the present study that numerous problems like illiteracy, negligence of the new generation, irregularity in rearing, lack of capital, shortage of planted areas of land, lack of healthy seeds, natural vagaries, lack of knowledge of marketing are the major problems faced by the Eri silk rearers, which hinders them from putting their products in appropriate market and also in getting proper return after engaging in Eri culture.

Keywords: Silk, Eri, Commercial, Rearers, illiteracy, lack, Products, Marketing.

Introduction:

The silk industry of Assam mainly comprises the culture of Eri, Muga, and Mulberry silk. The production of natural silk are mainly concentrated in the Brahmaputra valley and is predominantly based in the rural areas. Natural surroundings, climate and humidity etc. play a vital role in the development of culture. Ecological condition of Assam provides help to the production of host plants for the silk worm and the silk fabrics. Its advantage, such as, employment potential, assumed and regular income of the farmers, reelers and weavers at frequent intervals all round the year, Non perishable nature of the final product and high export possibilities etc. caught the attention of people and other organizations too. The study tries to make an attempt to analyze the numerous problems faced by the Eri silk rearers of Dhemaji district of Assam.

Review of existing Literature:

So far as Eri culture is concerned a large number of literatures are available. The researcher has reviewed some of those literatures relating to the problems of Eri culture and brief descriptions of them are as follows:

‘Eri Silk Industry’, authored by Chowdhuri, S.N., published by the Directorate of Sericulture and Weaving, Government of Assam (1982) has describes about different aspects of Eri silk culture- such as types of host plant, life cycle, heredity and hybridization, Influence of Environment, Disease and Pest, Spinning, Weaving etc. In this book also, no comprehensive study has been made on Eri Silk marketing.

In a research work on ‘Participatory Profiles of Women in Eri Culture in Assam State of India’ conducted by Mech et al.(2012) has described about the significant role played by the rural women in eri culture. Although, their participation is minimum in host plant cultivation but maximum in silkworm rearing and post rearing activities. Further, the women play major role in taking decision on different activities. In this research work the researchers have concluded that participation of women in eri culture have significant association with the marital status and annual income. They have stated that since the women contributes a lot in socio-economic development of rural sector through eri culture, the rural women should be assisted financially for construction of rearing houses, development of adequate plantation, procurement of rearing appliances, etc through different sericultural development schemes. Besides, they should be properly trained on improved technologies through imparting training programme for further enhancing their participation.

Kakoti Ramesh Kumar (2012) in his research work entitled ‘Sericulture as well as Ericulture as a Source of Employment and Income’ stated that Sericulture provides immense scope for self employment. He has also said that for encouraging the rearers and to provide necessary information, Seri demonstrators should be engaged by the state government, who can play important role in providing necessary assistance and disseminating relevant information to the rearers. The author has rightly pointed out that sufficient Eri concentration centres should be opened. The state

government should provide food leaves to eri rearers through these centres. The activities of the middleman, traders of cocoon should be controlled, as they exploit the innocent rearers and deprive them from getting a reasonable return on their investment. The author has stated that traditional weavers should be motivated and trained to embrace the new technology on silk fabric production.

Statement of Problem:

Natural silk producers of Assam can be regarded as the economic force of rural Assam. Though the social condition and climate of Assam are very much congenial for the production of natural silk, the indigenous people of the state including the people under the study area have been facing different types of problems in the process of commercializing their product. Though government is giving assistance to the natural silk producers, majority of them are being deprived from getting benefits from different schemes of the central and state governments for different reasons. Therefore, an attempt has been made to study the problems faced by the Eri silk rearers in Dhemaji districts of Assam.

With some exceptions, most of the Eri silk rearers of Assam are facing problem while commercializing their products. Therefore, the study would investigate the following: -

- Problems that stand in the way of getting financial and other technical helps by the Eri rearers of Dhemaji district from the government.
- Problems that are being faced by the Eri rearers of Dhemaji district in obtaining optimum price of their products.

Objectives of the Study:

The study has been undertaken in order to fulfill the following objectives:

1. To study the problems relating to commercial production of Eri silk in Dhemaji district of Assam.
2. To study the cause of irregularity in rearing Eri silk in Dhemaji district of Assam.

Scope of the Study:

The present study is confined to identifying the problems of commercial production of Eri silk farming in Dhemaji district of Assam.

Research Questions:

Based on the reviews and objectives that are set for the study, the study addresses the following research questions:

- a) Whether there exist problems of natural silk rearing in the study area?
- b) Whether commercialization of the natural silk produced in the area is in substance?

Methodology: This paper is basically qualitative in nature. The study has incorporated both Primary as well as Secondary data.

Methods of Primary data collection:

Interview schedules have also been used for collecting necessary primary information. Personal interview with 150 number of Eri silk rearers has also been conducted in order to gather necessary primary information. Since the information to be gathered is of homogeneous in nature, the random sampling method has been applied to collect primary information for the study.

Secondary Data:

Secondary information has been collected from different related books, reports and from various published materials. Research articles published in different websites have also been used for collecting data that are found to be relevant for the present study.

Size of the Sample:

Dhemaji district has got five development blocks viz. Dhemaji, Bordoloni, Machkhowa, Sissiborogaon and Mukongselek. Out of the five development blocks, two blocks viz. Dhemaji and Machkhowa has been selected for collecting the information.

Problems associated with Commercial production of Eri Silk:

Production of Eri silk in Assam is yet to get momentum though there are sufficient potentials to increase the production. This study has identified a good number of problems that stand in the way of enhancing the Eri silk production in the study district. Following issues underlines the problems of Eri silk production in the study district.

(i) Lack of Education among the Rearers:

It was observed that most of the Eri silk rearers were not well educated to know the commercial approach of Ericulture. Ericulture was mostly carried out by the illiterate or semiliterate persons. Not a single postgraduate was found among the sampled rearing families. Very less number of the members of rearing families were graduates. Thus Ericulture was mostly run by the illiterate people of the society, who had no idea about scientific as well as commercial process of rearing of silkworms. Due to illiteracy and lack of information, the rearers could not avail the opportunities given by the government to them from time to time. Of course, for encouraging the rearers and to provide necessary information, there were Seri-demonstrators, engaged by the state government, who played an important role in providing necessary assistance and disseminating relevant information to the rearers.

In general, the rearers were found to have no interest in learning the improved technology on their own, which were due to the lack of exposure and entrepreneurship skill as well as scope of expansion of activities in the interior areas owing to other obstacles like financial capability, marketing, availability of loan etc. Moreover, due to their lack

of knowledge the rearers and weavers were the worst exploited by the middlemen and dishonest traders.

(ii) Negligence of the new generations:

It was observed that the new generation was reluctant to take up the Eri production rather they preferred to other types of job as their livelihoods. They had not studied the growing demand of Eri silk products among the elite people of the country.

(iii) Shortage of Planted areas of land:

One of the most prominent problem which was being faced by the Eri rearers was lack of sufficient area of land where Eri feeding trees were planted. Further Castor plants were seasonal in nature. The Eri rearers had to plant it every year. Moreover, the growth of feed leaves did not match with the growth of requirement of feed leaves, which was an important input of eri cocoon production. The root cause of shortage of feeds or less growth of area under plantation was the pressure of population on wasteland for crop cultivation, recurring floods, erosion of river, lack of protective measures from the government to preserve naturally grown food plants. During field investigation, not even a single-family was found who grew eri plant systematically and scientifically. Sometimes they sowed seed in their home sides. Even though ericulture was a part time occupation, the rearers still had much time to spend for the rearing of silkworm, provided there were sufficient feed leaves available for the purpose. Also, those rearers were mostly marginal farmers and hence on their own they could not expand cultivation much and had to depend on the naturally grown feed leaves.

(iv) Natural vagaries:

Eri rearers also faced problem from ant, fly, mosquito etc. Disease like Phutuka, Kasupotia etc. were also causing problems in increasing Eri silk production. The rearers had to take utmost care while rearing Eri silk worms, since Eri silk worms get easily infected by these diseases. It was due to these reasons large scale production of Eri silk worms became troublesome duties for the Eri rearers.

(v) Lack of modern machinery:

It was also observed from the study that lack of machine for cutting Eri cocoons also obstructed them in producing Eri silk in huge quantity as cutting by hand was very much time consuming.

(vi) Lack of Healthy Seeds:

The most serious and basic problem of the ericulture was the scarcity of quality and healthy seeds of standard breed for commercial rearing under natural atmosphere. The government institutions failed to supply required seeds to the rearers at proper time.

(vii) Lack of capital:

Two types of capital namely fixed and working were required for rearing eri worms. In ericulture, fixed capital consists in plantation ground, rearing house, and plantation equipments (like hoe, *dao* etc), rearing and grainage equipments (like microscope, ant locks, wooden rearing stands, chopping knife, chopping board, bamboo trays, cocoonage trays, leaf chambers etc). Usually, the working capital consists in costs of seeds, labour charges in maintenance of plantation and rearing (if employed), fertilisers of plant, disinfections materials etc. Due to poor economic conditions of the rearers, they could not afford to scientific rearing and as a result they did not obtain desired results. Hundred per cent of the sampled rearing families practiced this culture in their dwelling houses, which were not at all scientific. The poor rearers were unable to construct a separate rearing house even of a simple type without government assistance.

(viii) Irregularity in rearing:

It was observed during the study that Eri silk could not be produced more than two times in a year. Most of the rearers did not even rear twice in a year due to scarcity of feeding eri plant. On the other hand, in case of Muga silk four rounds and sometimes even five rounds production was possible in a year.

(ix) Lack of training:

Another problem which was prominent among the Eri rearers was the insufficient training. Due to lack of training about the rearing of Eri silk, the rearers were not aware of the modern method of rearing.

(x) Low Price:

Majority of the Eri rearers were getting inappropriate price from their products. Only those Eri rearers who sold their products after weaving had the opinion that they got appropriate price from their products. The price of Eri cocoon was very less compared to Muga cocoon due to which Eri rearers were unsatisfied with the price offered for their products.

(xi) Very low Turnover:

It was seen during the study that Eri producer's turnover during a season was very less. The reason behind this was scarcity of leaves, less plantation areas, lack of protective measures from the government to preserve naturally grown food plants due to which the Eri rearers could not produce Eri silk in huge quantity. Further very less number of Eri rearers sold their products after weaving as a result they got low price from their products.

(xii) Lack of training on marketing:

It was observed during the study that though some Eri rearers obtained training on rearing but none of them obtained training on marketing of

their products. Some of the rearers did not feel the need of obtaining training on marketing as their products get sold once it was produced though its price might be low and some of them never got an opportunity. As a result Eri rearers were lacking behind modern method of marketing.

(xiii) Marketing Problem:

In case of Eri rearers another major problem was low price of their products due to which they faced problem in marketing of their products. Further most of the rearers produced Eri products in very less quantity, due to which the return they got after selling their products did not put a major impact on their livelihoods. Till now market for Eri cocoon had been the buyers'. The middlemen traders purchased the cocoon from the rearers were moving from door to door. There was no organised market for the transaction of eri cocoon.

Therefore, the rearers had to sell their cocoon to the traders at the price offered by them. It was generally alleged that the activities of the middlemen traders of cocoon should be controlled, as they exploited the innocent rearers and deprived them from getting a reasonable return on their investments. Sometime middlemen traders made advances to the known rearers before the commencement of actual rearing and compelled the rearers to sell cocoon to them and in the process easily took the chance to exploit the rearers by offering a low contract price. However the role-played by the middlemen traders were indispensable for the rearers as the Government authorised persons did not reach to the interior areas for the collection of cocoon. The middlemen collected the cocoons from the rearers of remote areas, from where collection of cocoons by the government officials was difficult at the present set up.

The middlemen collected the cocoon regularly and supplied to the spinners, otherwise the spinners cum weavers would fail to get the supply of cocoons regularly. Of course, some of the middlemen collected and stored the cocoons at the time of harvesting and released the same gradually. In this process, they had to bear the associated risks of damage and thus the rearers were relieved from the burden of storing and risk. That was another reason for keeping big margin in the process and offer lower price to the rearers. From the above observations, it became apparent that the middlemen also played some constructive roles in keeping both ericulture and weaving industry in spite of their exploitative roles as well. Their exploitative roles could be reduced by the upward revision of Government procurement price and extension of financial and other helps by the government or organisation of rearers.

(xiv) Financial Problem:

Finance was the main pre-requisite of every productive operation. Although meager investment was required, the problem of finance in ericulture could not be underestimated. It was clear from the field investigation that the rearers had to depend basically on their own source of finance and they did not depend on other sources like friends, relatives, bank loans, government sources for their working capital. Although only a few among them borrowed from SHGs. As most of the rearers were poor, they could not undertake large scale rearing on commercial basis. Further, in order to rear huge quantity of Eri silk separate house was required but most of the rearers were not financially strong due to which that could not build a separate house for rearing it. It was due to this reason most of the Eri rearers could not produce their products in huge quantity for which they faced problems in commercial production of their products.

(xv) Lack of Government assistance:

It was observed that Eri silk rearers were not assisted by the government properly. Only a few among the sample Eri silk rearers obtained assistance from the government in the form of materials, training, finance etc. Some of the rearers stated that while getting assistance they had to pay commission due to which most of the Eri silk rearers did not even approach the government department for any types of assistance because they had no faith in getting assistance from the government department as they could not afford to give commission.

Thus, it can be concluded here that there were numerous problems faced by the Eri silk rearers like illiteracy, negligence of the new generation, irregularity in rearing, lack of knowledge of marketing which hinders them from putting their products in appropriate market and also in getting proper return after engaging in Eri culture.

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