

PETTY TRADERS OF ASSAM: A STUDY OF GUWAHATI AND RANGIA SUB-DIVISION

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Assamese society that has emerged over a long period of history is fundamentally a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-cultural, multi-lingual one in which Assamiya is the majority language. It is the mother tongue of more than two-thirds of the population of the state.

The current state capital of Assam, Guwahati, known in ancient time as Pragjyotishpura or the Eastern City of Light was the capital of Kamrup which finds frequent mention in the Great Hindu Epic Mahabharata and other Sanskrit volumes and historical lore.

The Assamese society may be divided into rural society and urban society. The rural society of Assam is predominantly a traditional male dominated society. Here the joint family tradition is still prevalent. The main occupation of the male is agriculture. The women are expected to keep the house and look after the children. In rural society, the religious beliefs of the people are high and there is presence of 'Namghars' and 'Satra'.

Opposite to the rural society, the urban society in Assam is quite modern. This modernity, however, is prevalent among the rich and middle class people where the working of the women folk in equal position with men is not looked down upon. But among the poor people, male dominance is still prevalent where the women are suppressed.

The capital city Guwahati has a buss of activities, both in the formal and informal sector, and provides livelihood to many. In this busy city women petty trader constitutes a major part of the informal sector. The petty traders are mostly from the city and some come to the city from such places as Mirza, Bijoynagar, Chaigaon , Palashbari, Changsari, Sonapur and so on. They join this trade to support the family with the growing complexities and of life and rising cost of living of the people, the income of the male member is not sufficient enough to lead a decent life. The petty traders work either as vendors or as hawkers. They are among the most active category of workforce in the informal section. Most of them come from impoverished rural families. They enter petty trade because they can enter this occupation or start their business with small amounts of capital. The women petty traders constitute a major part of the main distribution channel for a large variety of products of daily consumption – fruit, vegetables, readymade garments, stationery, newspapers, magazines, meat, fish, pan, cigarettes and so on. Their elimination from urban markets would lead to a severe

crisis for fruit and vegetable farmers as well as small-scale industries which cannot afford to retail their products through expensive distribution networks in the formal sector.

This petty trade, however is not confined to city alone, but is also prevalent in rural areas. Women in rural areas, along with their household chores and engagement in fields come out of their houses to sell small items and earn some money. Growing inflation and rising living costs have compelled the women of rural areas as well to contribute to their family earning.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

International Status:

Levin and others (1999) made a study on the “Working Women in an urban setting: Traders, Vendors and Food Security in Accra”, in the capital city of Ghana. The study revealed that more than 90% of the petty traders are women. This is because women in this area are less educated than men and as they cannot perform skilled work, they enter petty trade which does not require large investment in human, physical or financial resources. But the women petty traders cannot earn enough to run a family and hence has to face nutritional hazards.

Udong, Neihof and Tilburg(2009) conducted a study on the “Struggle for Survival: Women fish traders fighting institutional and cultural constraints in Niger Delta, Nigeria” and found that women in fishing community in Nigeria carry out many activities including trading in fish, fishing and petty trading. The livelihood strategies depend on their age and educational background among others. The case study also showed that specific institutional constraints such as lack of infrastructure, financial assistance, market information and Government or NGO’s support and cultural constraint such as polygamy and patriarchy affects the traders. Most of the women struggle on a daily basis to secure the livelihood of their household.

National Status:

Rao and Swapna (2015) made a comparative study of the socio-economic condition of the street vendors with the organized sector in khammam district of Telengana. Their study revealed that the position of women who are in petty trade is low when compared to when compared to the organized sector women as well as salary based private sector women. Khema (2012) made a study on the problems of women petty traders in India based on secondary data. He observed that majority of the women traders are discriminated on the basis of gender. Geetika and others (2011) conducted a study on “Women Working in Informal Sector in India: A Saga of Lopsided Utilization of Human Capital”. The analysis revealed that women petty traders are those who are able to manage their own profession and consider to be in a better position than their counterparts in other profession due to self employment nature of their profession. Moreover they can work on their own terms

without fear of being exploited by their employers. There was a sense of pride in them. But when it comes to earning, it was reasonable as compared to other job categories of informal sector.

3. OBJECTIVE

- I. To find out the reasons for taking up petty trade in Guwahati and Rangia.
- II. To compare the earnings of the petty traders of Guwahati and Rangia sub division.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- I. Are the factors that drive a woman to take up petty trade different in Guwahati and Rangia?
- II. Does taking up trade in urban and rural areas makes a difference in the earnings of the petty traders of the two places?

5. METHODOLOGY

The present study was conducted under the semi structured interview method. A schedule was prepared with relevant questions to specifically find answers to the objectives. For the 1st objectives, the reasons included economic independence, taking other jobs were not feasible as the trader has to look after the family, physically unfit to take up strenuous jobs, sharing the responsibility of running the family, ill-treat by in laws after husband's death, separated from husband, the trade needs small investment. For the second objective, five ranges of income were offered to select - a. Below 5000 (b) 5,000 – 8,0000 (c) 8,000 – 12,000 (d) 12,000-20,000 (e) 20,000 and above.

The respondents were contacted directly. The representative sample was randomly selected, 100 from Guwahati and 100 from Rangia. A total of 200 sample size. The data was treated for simple statistical analysis in order to find out the percentages. Tables and diagrams are used to analyze the findings.

6. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Objective 1: To find out the reasons for taking up petty trade in Guwahati and Rangia.

Literature review reveals that women take up petty trade for many different reasons. These reasons vary from becoming economically independent to physically unfit to do other jobs. Here I have identified seven reasons, viz. 1. Economic independence 2. Look after family as it is easy to maintain both home and work 3. Physically unfit to do other jobs 4. Share responsibility of earning with husband/other family members 5. This trade needs small investment.

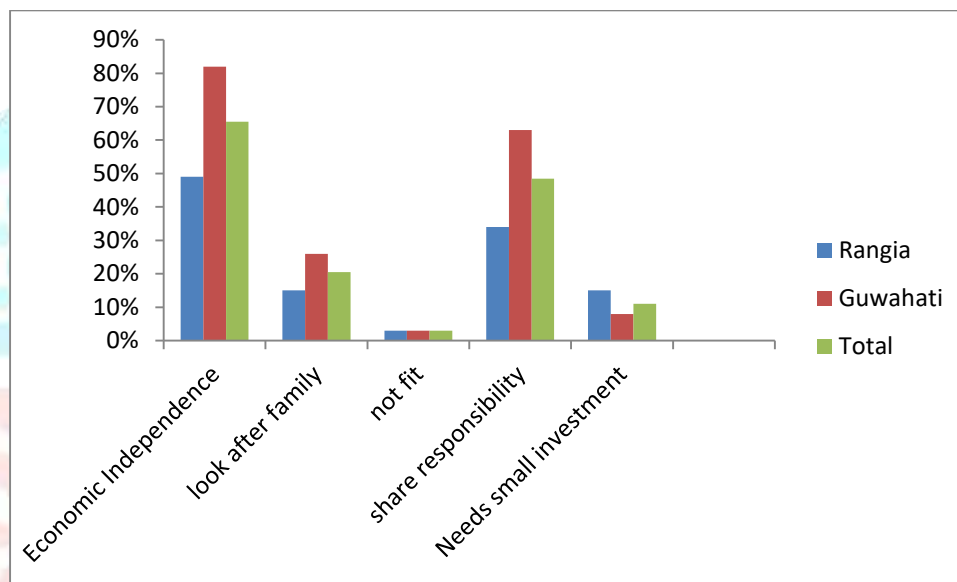
When questioned, everyone cited different reasons. However, it may be pointed out that reasons are not mutually exclusive, i.e., one respondent can have more than one reason of joining trade.

Table 1: Reasons for taking up petty trade

Reason	Rangia	Guwahati	Total
Economic Independence	49%	82%	65.5%
look after family	15%	26%	20.5%
not fit	3%	3%	3%
share responsibility	34%	63%	48.5%
Needs small investment	15%	8%	11%

Source: From field survey

Figure 1: Reasons for taking up petty trade



As evident from the above table and figure, majority of the petty traders join petty trade to become economically independent. This is true both in Guwahati and Rangia. In Rangia 49% of the respondents join petty trade to become economically independent and in Guwahati 82% of the respondents join the trade to become economically independent. One more major reason for joining petty trade is sharing the responsibility of earning with husband or other family members. In Rangia 34% and in Guwahati 63% of the respondents join petty trade to share responsibility of earning with husband or other family members. Other reasons such as physically unfit are not strong enough to draw the traders to petty trade.

Objective 2: To compare the earnings of the petty traders of Guwahati and Rangia sub division.

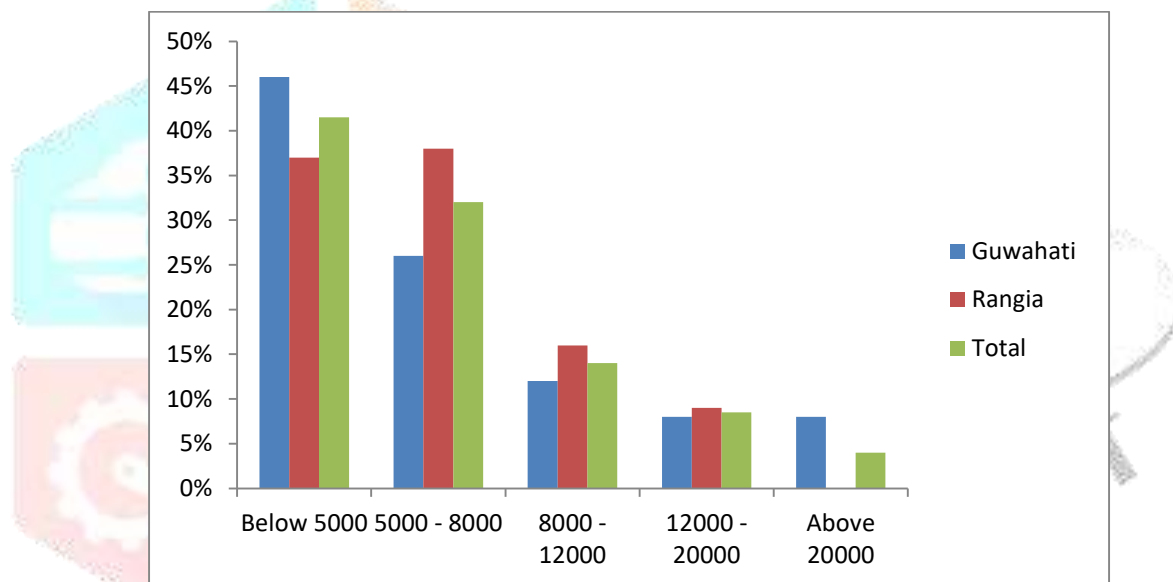
It is not that all petty traders earn a good amount of money. Their income ranges from less than 5000 rupees to above 20000 rupees. I have therefore categorized the income of the traders into five categories. They are below

5000, 5000 to 8000, 8000 to 12000, 12000 to 20000 and above 20000. The results are depicted in the following table and figure.

Table 2: Income of petty traders (in percentage)

Income	Guwahati	Rangia	Total
Below 5000	46	36	41.0
5000 - 8000	26	39	32.5
8000 - 12000	12	16	14.0
12000 - 20000	8	9	8.5
Above 20000	8		4.0

Figure 2: Income of petty traders (in percentage)



The above table and figure reveals that majority of the petty traders in Guwahati earn below Rs.5000 per month, whereas in Rangia majority earns between Rs.5001 to Rs.8000 per month. In the category of Rs. 5000 to Rs. 8000, the number of earners is more in Guwahati than in Rangia. But in the categories of Rs. 5000 to Rs.8000, Rs. 8000 to Rs. 12000 and Rs. 12000 to Rs. 20000, the petty traders of Rangia are more than the petty traders of Guwahati. But in the category of Rs. 20000 and above there are no petty traders from Rangia. Only a few petty traders from Guwahati earn above Rs. 20000 per month.

The above discussion reveals that there is disparity in the earning pattern of petty traders of Guwahati and Rangia.

7. CONCLUSION

Petty trade serves as a lifeline for many women, both in Guwahati and Rangia. The traders join petty trade to make an identity for themselves. This is because, from the survey, it is evident that majority of the traders join petty trade to become economically independent, irrespective of being from an urban area or rural area. They

put in a lot of effort, but earn only a meagre income. However, they do not lose hope, and work with a positive attitude to put in more effort to enhance their business and nurture a better life for themselves and their dear ones. It is therefore important that policy makers frame policies for their upliftment.

8. REFERENCES

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