Grass for Grassroots Artisan - A Study on Artisan’s Economic Dependency on Sabai Grass (Eulaliopsis Binata) in the Backward Region of West Bengal

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Abstract

Sabai grass plays an important role in the household economy of many regions of South Western part of West Bengal. The study has been done for the assessment and investigation of artisan’s economic dependency on Sabai grass and grass based products for sustainable living. Seventy five rope producers including growers were interviewed in Nayagram Development Block in Paschim Medinipur District of West Bengal, where the majority of the households are still engaged in the traditional Sabai rope making activity. The rope producers are facing problems of marketing infrastructure, institutional credit and product innovation. The present study further prescribed the scope of development of artisan’s livelihood through proper intervention of modern technology and skill development in the study area.

Keywords: Sabai Grass, Artisan, Economic Dependency.

Introduction

Sabai grass (Eulaliopsis Binata) (Retz.) Hubb is a popular NTFP available in North Africa, India, China, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia and Philippines. This grass is perennial in nature and locally known as ‘Babui’ or Bhabhar. In India, Sabai grass is very common, commercial, and industry based crop and grown in the tropical dry deciduous forest and subtropical broadleaves hill forest land of Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar, Punjab, Haryana, Jammu Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh [1].

In West Bengal Sabai grass is grown in some of the areas of ‘Junglemahal’ consisting of Paschim Medinipur, Bankura and Purulia Districts of the State. Sabai Grass is a commercial crop and second important raw-material source after bamboo for pulp and paper manufacturing in India [2]. Besides paper making, Sabai Grass is abundantly used for rope making by the ethnic community of ‘Junglemahal. This economic crop plays a significant role in cash income generation throughout the year.

Economic Importance of Sabai Grass

The potential worldwide availability of bone dry Sabai grass is around 2, 00,000 (MT) (Atchison, 1989). This thin and long grass with high quality fiber, constitute a major raw material for paper industries [1,3,4]. In India estimated use of Sabai grass in paper industry is around 82,000 tons and estimated availability of Sabai grass is 3,50,000 tons [5]. Among grasses, Sabai was used to the extent of 25% of total fibrous raw-material requirement in India.

Sabai grass is second important raw-material after bamboo for pulp and paper manufacturing in India [2]. Until 1952, Sabai grass represented about 22% of the total fibrous material pulped in India. Sabai grass is harvested twice annually in August-September and November-December. Some 0.3 to 0.4 million tons of grass could be harvested annually in India [6], but the figures for actual production are not available. Some 60,000 to 80,000 tons of Sabai grass are purchased each year by paper mills.
Sabai grass is popular for its flexibility, durability and strength and is widely used for making ropes and rope based decorative and utility items like cots, chair, table, carpet, door-mats, bags of different style, fruit basket, flower vases, coaster, tea container, bottle-holders, sofa set, table mats, wall hanging, photo stand etc. This grass is bleached, softened, naturally dyed and de-odorized for making various decorative items. Some handicrafts products made from Sabai rope are quite popular in the export market also. Value addition in Sabai grass handicraft product is six times higher than for prevalent Sabai ropes [7]. Sabai grass plays a pivotal role in tribal economics in the some region of India.

Sabai grass plays a significant role like other minor forest products for income generation in Paschim Medinipur District of West Bengal. The forest fringe disadvantaged populations of the Nayagram Development Block of Paschim Medinipur District are hereditary experienced in Sabai Grass cultivation and rope production using traditional hand twisting method.

The grass is grown inside the forest area as well as the private land also [8]. To meet up the excess demand of grass in this Block, some traders bring raw grass from nearby district (Mayurbhanj) of Odisha State and some other nearest areas (Gopiballavpur, Belpahari, Banshphahari) of Paschim Medinipur District. More or less every household in Nayagram Range is involved in Babui (Sabai) ropes making activity from the grass being cultivated in private as well as encroached forest land.

The West Bengal Tribal Development Cooperative Corporation (WBTDCC) collects Sabai grass occasionally, but they do not have enough storage facilities for this product, unlike Kendo leaves or Sal seeds. Therefore, most Sabai grass sales are undertaken by mobile agents or middlemen and because of this, the actual growers or collectors often gets very low prices.

Rope making is a household activity practiced by entire family including women and children memebrs. Basically the women artisan member of the family engaged in rope making and the male members of the family bring these ropes to rural periodic market known as ‘Hat’ for sale. Average three to four artisan members of a household primarily or subsidiary engaged in the traditional rope making activity for sustenance. This rope is widely used in the construction industry for tying, waving of caught, making of sofa sets, chair, tool etc. Different value added handicraft like door mat, flower vass, waste bin, fashion bag, cap, costar set, wall hangings, also been made from Sabai rope. Sabai Grass is practically considered to be “The Money Plant” which ensures continuous cash earning on an average fifteen years from the third year of its plantation.

Study Location

The study was conducted in the Nayagram community Development Block of Paschim Medinipur District of West Bengal. It is situated on the south western part of Paschim Medinipur District. It is bounded by the District of Mayurbhanj of Orissa in the western, southern and south western parts, southern parts are covered by the district of Balasore of Orissa, eastern parts are covered by the Keshiary and Sankrai Block and northern parts bounded by Gopiballavpur of Paschim Medinipur District. The total geographical area is around 50,144 ha., of which 22826 ha. cultivable land, 14285.46 ha. forest land, 4,434.81 ha. waste lands and 8538.56 ha. Land has been used for non agricultural purpose. As per the census 2001 Total population of the Block is 1, 23,937 consisting of 62,629 male and 61,308 female popuations. The illiteracy rate of the Block is 53.67%. The illiteracy rate of male population is 38.96% and female illiteracy rate is 61.04%. The low illiteracy rate of Nayagram Block stood first place among all other Blocks of paschim Medinipur District. The population density of the Block is 247 people per Sq km.

The climate is tropical in nature and the land is characterized by hard rock and stony uplands. 90% of the total cultivable area of this Block is covered by lateritic soil and 10% of the total area is covered by flat alluvial and deltaic plain. Net cultivable
area of the block is 22,826 ha, of which 11375 ha. (50%) is highland with very poor water retention capacity. These highlands are generally not suitable for cultivation of crops or orchards. But they are suitable for cultivation of Sabai Grass.

Three villages namely Chandrarekha, Biswanathpur and Norri under Chandrarekha Gram Panchayat of Nayagram Block have been selected as sample study villages. This Panchayat has been located in the Western side and closely proximate to the Mayurbhanj District of the Odisha State. Total geographical area of the Panchayat is 3237.36 ha. And the total population is 6783 including 3391 male population and 3392 female population.

The literacy rate of the Norri, Kesharrkeha and Chandrarekha is 33%, 49%, 44% respectively as per 2011 census. The occupational structure of these three villages reflects the backwardness of the people. 32 percent of the total population is non workers and 45 percent of the total working populations of these villages are household industry workers of which 84 percent are marginal workers. The main household industrial activities are sabai rope making, sal leaf plate making, bamboo basket making etc. People living in the adjoining forest areas collects and sale different types of NTFPs through unorganized village market, where the middleman or village collators hold the power in price fixation which results in deprivation and exploitation of primary collectors.

Problem of the Study

The artisans of this region are economically backward due to some reason which has been observed at the time of pilot study. These are as follows:

- Marginal land holding status of the artisan household results to poor access to agriculture or any other economic production.
- Inadequate physical facilities (like metal road, transportation, drinking water, regulated market), unorganized market linkage between producer and consumer, lack of marketing infrastructure, low bargaining power the artisan.
- Exploitation by traders or middlemen who has absolute control over the market and price fixation of the raw Sabai grass which is the main raw-material for rope production.
- Marketing mix related problem faced by the Sabai growers and rope producers in this rural household industry.

Under the above circumstances artisan of the study area engaged in traditional rope making activity and do not get reasonable share of profit due to their illiteracy, low bargain power, unorganized marketing practice and inadequate market information system. Though 35 percent earnings of the tribal households in India comes from the collection of unprocessed NTFPs, so far very little research has been done on the contribution of Sabai Grass in Household economy of West Bengal State. So it is required to study and analyse the occupational characteristics, income dimension, and livelihood dependency of the people residing in the backward tribal region of West Bengal. This paper will focus and investigate on these issues with respect to Paschim Medinipur District of West Bengal State.

Materials and Methods

For the purpose of this study, three villages of Nayagram Development Block of Paschim Medinipur District have been selected. The villages, namely, Chandra Rekha, Keshar Rekha and Norri come under the jurisdiction of Chandrarekha Gram Panchyat amongst the twelve Gram Panchayats of Nayagram Development Block. The study villages are located in the South Western side of the Block and closely proximate to the Mayurbhanj District of Orissa State. Amongst these three villages Chandrarekha is declared as most deprived village consisting of 99.24 percent S.T. population.

The villages were selected on the basis of the followings:

- Seventy percent and more household are engaged in Sabai Grass based activity.
- 50 percent and more household belong to Schedule Tribe (ST) community.
- Extent of artisan’s economic dependency on production and marketing of Sabai grass and grass based ropes.

- Proximity of rural periodic markets, locally known as ‘Haat’ in the nearby areas of the study villages.

- Locally available raw grass which is used as only raw-material in rope production.

Household survey was done to obtain demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the target households. Attempt has been made to investigate the Sabai Grass based income and other source of cash income which contributes to their livelihood system. The assessment of livelihood dependency has been done by investigating the people’s engagement in the activities like cultivation or collection, processing and marketing of Sabai Grass and rope in the study area. The preliminary study was carried out in the study villages during January-February 2012 and the first phase of survey was conducted in the month of March, April and May 2012 and second phase have been done in the month of January to February 2013.

The data was collected from the seventy five households through pretested questionnaire schedule, focus group interview etc. Open ended and semi structure questions were asked to the rope producers and traders to understand the patterns and dimension of rope trade in the local as well as national market. Thorough Survey was conducted in three weekly periodical markets namely, “Kesbarrekha Hat”, “Baligeria Hat” and “Dhumsai Hat” of the Nayagram Block to identify the different kinds of intermediaries or trade channels engaged in the grass and rope business. Secondary data were collected through the Census data, survey report, books, journals, research papers and publication of the academic institutions etc.

Cultivation of Sabai Grass, harvesting, rope processing and marketing practices has been recorded from each household. Each household’s monthly cash income from Sabai rope production has been calculated on the basis of total quantity of production per month multiplying the rate per kg of rope(Quantity x Rate per unit). The cost of raw-material (grass) and other marketing cost has been deducted from the total amount earned every month from rope trade.

The cost of labor involved in rope production is not usually accounted for with the production cost of the rope. Some of the grass cultivators sale raw grass to the grass traders or neighbours for immediate earnings at the time of financial crisis. The cash earnings from grass sale have been separately accounted for at the time of calculating total monthly income. To assess the socioeconomic condition, livelihood dependency on different economic activity...
and different source of cash income, descriptive statistics, ANOVA has been used to analysed the data obtained from the questionnaire.

Result and Discussion

It has found form the survey that Sabai grass is a local resource which is grown in the forest areas as well as cultivated in the private land also. Rural indigenous community like Schedule Caste, Schedule Tribe and other backward community people produce different quality of rope from this grass throughout the year. According to Mr. Subrata Routh, Secretary, Nayagram Thana Sabai Rope Association, this rope is locally graded in four types: VIP (First Quality), VIP (Second Quality), Medium Fine and Medium. Table 1 describes the socio-demographic information of the artisans. This grass based rope making industry treated as a rural household and cottage industry, where almost all family members including children of a household are engaged in this economic activity for their livelihood generation.

Out of 75 respondents 88 percent are male and remaining 12 percent are female. Among the female respondents, 78 percent are widow and 22 percent are married. During the study it was found that most of the rope producers belong to Schedule Tribe community and most of them are from middle age group (31-49 years) due to their more active participation in production and marketing of Sabai grass based crafts. It has been found that the middle and high age group artisans are more interested to remain engaged in this cottage industry. But the artisans below the age of 30 are not so willing to devote him or her in this livelihood activity like other artisans of the family.

This is because of their intensity to shift from the traditional profession to other economic activity in the organised sector. After completing the higher education, educated teenagers and youths prefer to have a job in the public or private sector in the urban areas for better earnings and for better livelihood generation. This demotivation comes due to the low profit margin and low entrepreneurial support from the Government and other agency in these areas.

The educational profile of the sample artisans depicts that around 70 percent rope producers does not have any formal education means they are illiterate. 16 percent attended the primary education, 6.67 percent attended upper primary education and 5.33 percent attendee high School or college education. The artisans are educationally backward because of their low awareness, less encouragement from parents or family members, poor economic condition and unavailability of proper education infrastructure in the area. The distribution of the respondents by social group shows that majority of the Sabai artisans are from the Schedule Tribe Community, i.e. 62.67 percent. 22.67 percent respondents belong to Schedule Caste category and 14.66 percent are from the other backward community.

Most of the respondents live in a ‘Katchha’ mud type of houses, i.e. 96 percent of the total sample respondents, whereas only 4 percent respondents live in Semi-Pucca houses. There is no Pucca or concrete house found during the survey in the study areas. It was found, that majority of the artisan’s housing condition is moderate in nature. Only 22.67 percent houses found in good condition and 29.33 percent houses are in dilapidated condition.

The rope twisting profession in one such profession, where all family members, from children to elderly, devoted average 5 to 6 hours a day for rope twisting to finishing. Majority of the rope making artisans inherited the rope twisting skill and techniques from his/her forefathers. Now a day this handmade rope faces tremendous competition with the modern plastic or PVC ropes. Though they realize that the profit margin is very less and decreases day by day, the ethnic community intends to continue with this profession because they do not have any other alternative options of livelihood.

All the selected artisans in the study villages are engaged in Sabai rope making activity which is treated as their main cash earning
activity. The average yearly cash earnings from all economic activities is around Rs. 14457 of which Rs. 6628 has been generated only from Sabai grass based rope making industry. The percentage share of cash earnings from Sabai based industry is around 46 percent to their total cash earnings. Rank wise, wage earnings is the second important economic activity and production and marketing of Sal leaf plate is the third important economic activity of the sample households. Average 248 kg, approximately 2.5 quintals of rope has been produced by a family in a year in the target villages. This indicates the higher economic dependency on Sabai grass based activity in the study area.

Table 2: Household cash earnings from different livelihood activity: (N=75)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of livelihood Activity</th>
<th>Mean Cash Income/Yearly (in Rs.)</th>
<th>Rank of Economic Dependency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Production &amp; marketing of Sabai grass and grass based ropes</td>
<td>6627.64</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sal Leaf plate making</td>
<td>1595.49</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collection &amp; sale of forest wood &amp; other Minor forest produces (NTFP)</td>
<td>1095.33</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wage labour</td>
<td>3140.4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>25.33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sale of livestock</td>
<td>959.33</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other skill based earning</td>
<td>158.67</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small business</td>
<td>571.33</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>283.33</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table no. 3 shows that, the Schedule Tribe families produce approximate 273 kg of rope per year and Schedule Caste families produce 238 kg of rope a year for their sustenance. ST families depend more on Sabai grass based cash earnings activity in the ‘Junglemahal’ area of Paschim Medinipur District. The distribution of respondents by social group shows that, 47 percent ST families and 41.17 percent SC families hold average 28.94 dec. and 8.82 dec. of land under grass cultivation respectively.

Table: 3. Distribution of cash earnings among three social groups. (N=75)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Groups</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Mean Quantity of Rope Production, (In kg)</th>
<th>Mean Cash Earnings from Sabai Grass based Activity(In Rs.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ST</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>272.51</td>
<td>7364.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>237.78</td>
<td>6189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBC</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>160.55</td>
<td>4174.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It can be analysed from the table no 4 that, 35 percent grass cultivators are marginal in nature and only 7 percent are small farmers. 59 percent artisan families do not have any Sabai grass land that means they are land less. Small framers earn more profit than land less and marginal farmers. Small farmers earn 75.41 percent of their total earnings from Sabai based activity where as landless farmers gets 42.49 percent of their total earnings from the same.

Table 6 presents the perception of the respondents about their high level of dependency and reasons for adopting Sabai grass based activity as their main livelihood activity. 38.67 percent respondents expressed their views that they have adopted Sabai grass based activity because of there are no other economic activity is available for livelihood generation in the primary or secondary sector in the nearby areas. 22.67 percent respondents viewed that they have adopted this profession due to the easy availability of Sabai grass in the local areas.

The result of ANOVA test (in 5% level of significance) indicates significant relation between household cash earnings and productive Sabai land ownership in the study area. Land ownership plays a pivotal role in household cash earnings. Level of education does not have any significant influence on household cash earnings but the size of the family significantly influenced on household cash earnings [9-14].
Suggestions and Conclusion

From the present study it is concluded that majority of the artisans, basically the ethnic community like STs, SCs and OBCs depend on Sabai grass based activity, as their main livelihood activity. Around sixty three percent Schedule Tribe artisans are engaged in this profession and hold approximate eighteen Katha of productive Sabai growing land per household. Major household cash earning generates from Sabai grass based activity. Land holding size and size of the family members are important factor and have significant contribution to household income.

The average cash earnings of low income group household is around Rs.8,382/year, middle income group is Rs.14,710/year and high income group is Rs.23,409/year. Sabai grass is one and only raw-material required for rope production. Forty one percent households produce Sabai grass in their own land or as share cropper. If the yield does not fulfill the requirement of raw-material, the households purchase grass from the local market which is known as ‘Hat’.

Provision for design-development, enhancement of knowledge about effective marketing practice, financial and technical assistance for Grass cultivation, purchase of grass at low price in the harvesting session, Government approved support price for different grade of ropes are required, to sustain in the present scenario as expressed by the respondents. Priority should be given for cooperative formation and SHG development to have the collective financial support. The tribal craftsmen need to concentrate on product diversification and technological intervention in terms of production and marketing of different decorative and utility handicrafts.

Government and non-government organization should come forward to help them by organising effective training programme on product design, quality control and packaging. The ethnic community born with inherited skill, but it is required to empower them by giving some motivational and entrepreneurial skill development training. Govt. should help the artisan to take part in different local, national and international mela, exhibition, and trade shows to promote Sabai grass based crafts in national and international level. The Government and non Government functionaries should make the artisan aware about the different developmental projects, and welfare schemes.

References

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