



To cite this article: Mamata Borthakur (2026). PARTICIPATION TREND OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN COMMERCIAL ACTIVITIES IN RANGAPARA REGION OF SONITPUR DISTRICT, ASSAM: A SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASSESSMENT, International Journal of Research in Commerce and Management Studies (IJRCMS) 8 (2): 391-399 Article No. 691 Sub Id 1177

PARTICIPATION TREND OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN COMMERCIAL ACTIVITIES IN RANGAPARA REGION OF SONITPUR DISTRICT, ASSAM: A SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASSESSMENT

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38193/IJRCMS.2026.8229>

ABSTRACT

Since the dawn of history tribal people have practised self-sustainable agricultural and allied agricultural activities. Prior to the introduction of monetary & market- based economy by the Britishers in Assam, the tribal people of the region were accustomed to bartered system of economy. The entry of the tribal people of North East India including Assam into commercial activities has been a slow and steady process, which restricted their economic growth parameter within specific limits. But, over last few decades the tribal people appear to catch the vibes of commercial activities contributing significantly to their socio-economic lives and living. The present paper intends to evaluate the trend of commercial activities adopted by the tribal women of Rangapara region which covers Chariduar and Rangapara Community Development Block areas of Sonitpur district of Assam. It is interesting to find that the tribal women who had long been served as housewives & agricultural fieldworkers of their male counterparts playing active roles in adopting commercial activities over last four decades. Such a role of the tribal women adversely motivated their male counterparts, too, to opt for certain other commercial activities. The work also makes an assessment on income & employment generated by the commercial activities of the tribal women in the study area.

KEYWORDS: Tribal women, Commercial farms, Household activities, Traditional, Economy

1. INTRODUCTION

Tribal people all over India are known for their traditional concept of sustainability, particularly as regards the use of economic resources and environment. They have long been practiced self-sustaining economic activities with optimal use of natural resources. But, the fast-growing market-oriented economy imparted adverse effect on the socio-economic condition of the tribal communities. Under such circumstances the tribal people started opting for commercial agricultural & other economic activities to cope themselves up with the current socio-economic setup. It is interesting to note that the tribal women have been taking the lead in shifting the mindset of the tribal communities from self-

sustaining economic activities to commercialisation. All the commercial farms started by the tribal women are the converted from their earlier household family setup meant for family consumption & selling out only the surplus proportion of production prior to their conversion. It is, therefore, desired to assess the commercial economic activities undertaken by the tribal women that imparted gradual motivation of various tribal communities towards their involvement in commercial activities.

The study area - Rangapara region is situated in the central part of the North Bank plain of the Brahmaputra River in Assam. Its geographical location is from 26⁰36'N to 27⁰01'N latitude and from 92⁰ 16' E to 92⁰ 44' E longitude. The region is comprised of Rangapara and Balipara Community Development block areas of Chariduar revenue circle of Sonitpur district. The region has a total geographical area of 1234.92 sq. km. with a total population of 3,43,749 persons (2011) including 1,76,589 male and 1,67,160 female population. With a rural population of 3,25,356 persons and urban population of 18,393 persons the region has a population density of 339 persons per sq. km of area. The region has Scheduled Tribe population of 1,39,033 persons (2011) including 69,963 male and 60,070 female population, which constitutes 40.5% of the total population. The two major tribes of the region are – Bodos and Mising apart from the presence of certain other minor tribal communities such as Nishis, chakms and Garos. All the tribal communities inhabiting the region are found to be settled close to the foot-hill forests along Assam-Arunachal Pradesh inter-state border and along the riverbanks of Bardekorai, Bharali and Belseri - all of which are tributaries to the Brahmaputra. Thus, the habitational areas of the tribal communities are exclusively rural, remote and environment friendly suited to their traditional self-sustaining economic activities. But, last few decades induct transformation of their traditional economic practises into market-oriented activities. Such shift of mindset among the tribal communities is considered as their step to adjust themselves to the process of globalisation of economy. As among all the tribal communities, women are considered to be the modulators of socio- economic fabric, the shift of the tribal communities towards commercialization of economic activities also found to be initiated by the tribal women folk. It is also interesting to note that initiatives of the tribal women to commercialise their household economic activities started motivating their male counterparts to start certain other commercial agricultural activities such as – household tea farming, rubber farming, banana farming, betel nut farming, herbal gardening, etc. With such a consideration, it is attempted to evaluate the role of tribal women in introduction of commercialisation of economic activities among the tribal societies of the study area.

2. OBJECTIVES

The following are the objectives of the study:

- (1) To examine the trend of growth of commercial economic activities initiated by tribal women in the study area,



- (2) To examine the causes behind motivation of tribal women to convert their traditional self-sustaining economic activities to commercial production units, and
- (3) To evaluate the volume of income and employment generated by the tribal women through commercialisation of their household economic activities.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions based on the objectives to be investigated are:

- (1) Do the tribal women folk make use of their traditional skill in converting their household economic activities meant for family consumption to commercial production units?
- (2) When from motivation among tribal women towards commercial economic activities started generating?
- (3) Do the tribal women attempted to start commercial activities out of their skill areas?
- (4) To what extent the tribal women are benefited economically from commercialization of their household economic activities?
- (5) Are the commercial units created by tribal women able to generate employment for other workers?

4. METHODOLOGY

The study is based exclusively on primary data collected from all the 92 commercial farms/units owned by tribal women in the study area. Primary data & information are collected from the field using questioners prepared by accommodating questions relevant to the objectives and research questions as presented above. Primary data and information collected from the field are used for classification of farms/units, income and employment generation assessment etc. Secondary data and information related to population, area, etc. are collected from District level Statistical Report, published by the Directorate of Economics & Statistics, Assam. The data and information collected are tabulated, interpreted and presented in the form of tables, graphs and diagrams in the work.

5. ANALYSIS

Conversion of a traditional economic activity meant for fulfillment of family needs to commercial unit necessarily aims at generating higher income. Initiation of such a process of commercialization sets out a growth trend with the lapse of time and imparts significant changes in the socio-economic landscape of a region. The table given below presents the growth trend of commercial farms/units established by the tribal women of the study area through conversion from household units since 1990:

Table 1: Growth trend of commercial farms/units started by tribal Women in Rangapara Region, 1990- 2025

Type of commercial farm/economic activity	Till 1990	2000	2010	2020	2025	Total
Piggery	1	3	5	7	2	18
Goat farm	1	1	3	6	3	14
Poultry farm	3	5	6	7	1	22
Duck farm	1	1	2	3	1	08
Fishery	1	2	3	3	2	11
Berry farm	1	0	2	2	2	07
Handloom fabrication unit	1	2	3	5	1	12
Total->	09	14	24	33	12	92

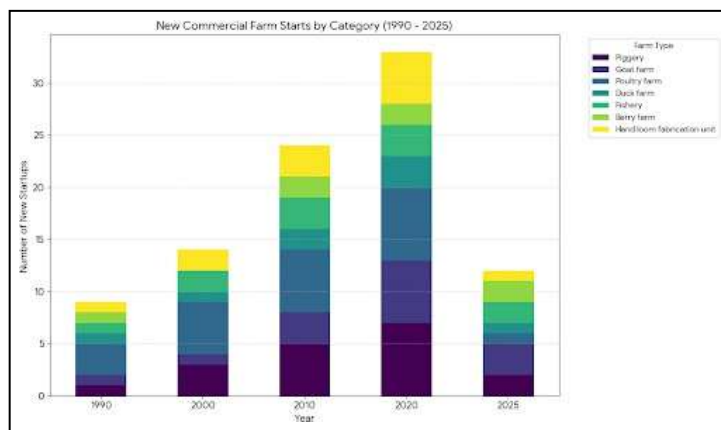


Figure 1(a)

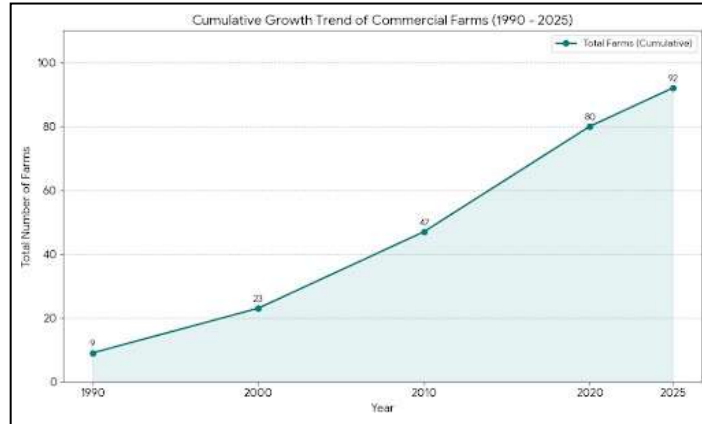


Figure 1(b)

As observed from **Table 1** & **Figure 1(a)** & **1(b)**, the motivation of tribal women towards commercialization of their household farms/units took place during 1980–1990, as because the number of such farms in 1990 was only 09 (with only 9.8% of growth). Since 1990, there is a steady growth of commercial farm/units reaching the peak growth during 2010–2020 (with 35.9% growth). Such a growth trend indicate that conversion of household farming/units gained popularity among tribal women of the study area after the year 2000. The uninterrupted growth of commercial farms in the region also indicates that the tribal women folk obviously find the conversion of household farms/units into commercial farms/units high income generating. Such an observation necessitates income growth pattern of these newly established commercial farms. **Table 2** presents the income growth pattern of the commercial farms developed by tribal women of the study are:

Table 2: Income growth pattern of the commercial farms/units owned by Tribal women of Rangapara region.

Type of Commercial farm	Net annual Income from selling surplus from household farm (in Rs.)	Net annual income from 100 units of the commercial farm (in Rs)	Difference in net income (in Rs)	% of income growth
Piggery	30,000.00	1,05,000.00	75,000.00	750%
Goat farm	24,000.00	96,000.00	72,000.00	300%
Poultry farm	26,000.00	85,000.00	59,000.00	226.9%
Duck farm	15,000.00	62,000.00	47,000.00	313.3%

<i>Fishery</i>	5,000.00	22,000.00	17,000.00	340%
<i>Berry farm</i>	2,000.00	35,000.00	33,000.00	1650%
<i>Handloom fabrication farm</i>	20,000.00	78,000.00	58,000.00	240%

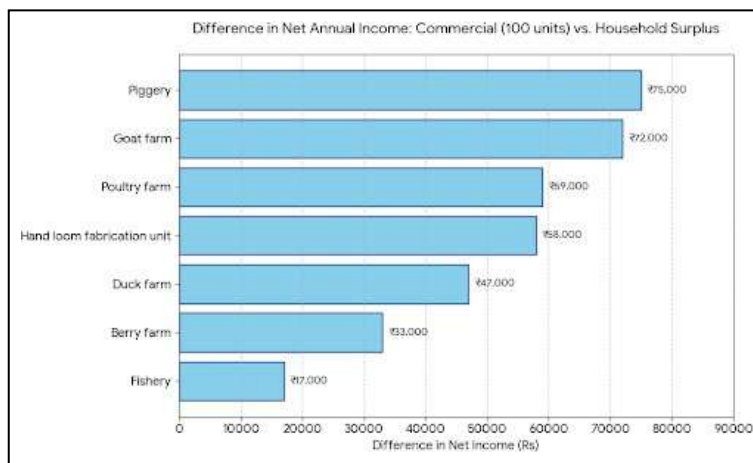


Figure 2

As presented in **Table 2 & Figure 2**, a comparison of income between pre-existed household farms/units and converted commercial farms/units provides a basis to assess income growth of tribal women opted for conversion of their household farms/units to commercial farms/units. As there is considerable variation in intake size of the commercial farms/units, income against 100 units of intake is compared with earlier income of the same farms/units in their earlier household form and income growth is determined in percentage. It is observed that the net income growth of various commercial farms/units ranges from 226.9% to 1650%. The high proportion of income appears to be generated by the berry farms—which are seasonal production farms and lowest income growth is generated by duck farms. This analysis provides only a proportionate income generation pattern of commercial farms/units established by the tribal women, but the volume of income growth generated by them vary widely depending on farm size/intake size. Above Table provides a clear indication that the endeavour of the tribal women to enhance their income status through converting their household farms/units to commercial units are found to be highly promising. Thus, all the above farming/economic activities preserve high growth potentials. The table below shows volume of employment generated to the non-family members by these commercial farms/economic activities in the study area:

Table 3: Employment generated by the commercial farms/economic activity in Rangapara region, 2025

Type of Commercial farm/economic activity	Full time employment generated (in persons)	Part-time employment generated (in persons)	Total employment generated (in persons)	% of employment generated to the total
Piggery	36	14	50	13.5%
Goat farm	38	10	48	13.0%
Poultry farm	72	28	100	27.0%
Duck farm	10	12	22	5.9%
Fishery	24	14	38	10.3%
Berry farm	18	22	40	10.8%
Handloom fabrication unit	54	18	72	19.5%
Total->	252	118	370	100.0%

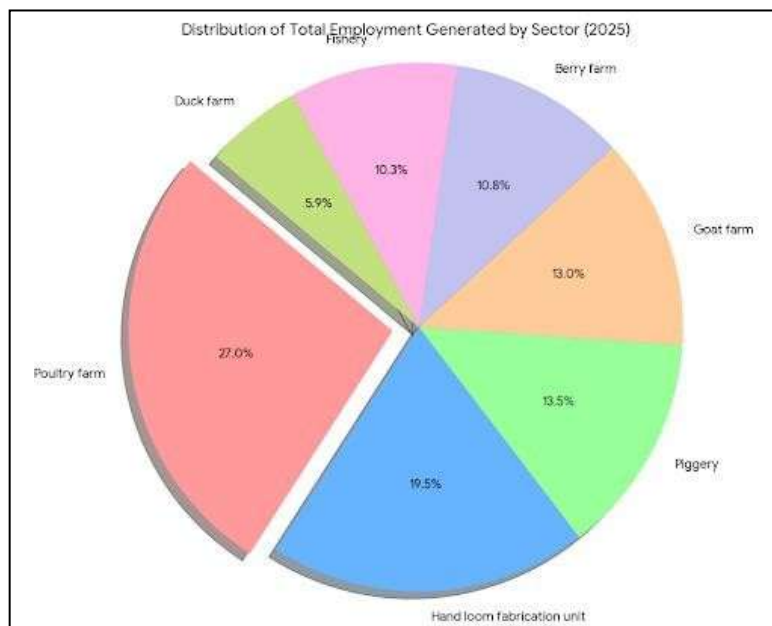


Figure 3



It is observed from **Table 3 & Figure 3**, that all the 92 commercial farms set up by the tribal women in the study area provides employment to 370 persons (including 252 full time workers & 118 part-time workers), who are non-family members to the farmers. Out of the total workers 68.1% is full time and 31.9% is part-time workers. The highest employment is provided by poultry farms (27%), followed by hand loom fabrication (19.5%), Piggeries (13.5%), goat farms (13.0%), berry farms (10.8%), fisheries (10.3%) and duck farms (5.9%). As regards full time employment, poultry farms provide the highest employment (72 or 28.6% of the total full-time workers, followed by hand loom, goat farms, piggeries, fisheries, berry farms and duck farms respectively. From **Tables 2 & 3**, it is clearly observed that the commercial farms/units established by the tribal women of the study area preserve high income and employment growth potential capable of imparting significant positive changes in socio-economic life and living of tribal population of the region.

6. FINDINGS

Following are the findings of the study:

- (1) The motivation among the tribal women to convert their household farms/ economic activities to commercial production units took place during the early nineties of the last century,
- (2) The commercial farming/economic activities initiated by the tribal women folk maintains a steady growth momentum since 1990 reaching the peak growth during 2010 – 2020,
- (3) The move of the tribal women folk towards commercial farming and other economic activities appears also to motivate their male counterparts to start commercial activities in certain other economic areas.
- (4) The growth momentum of commercialisation of traditional economic activities among the tribal women of the region continues even at present, even if they need financial and other logistic support from the government,
- (5) The pattern of commercialisation of economic areas by the tribal women clearly indicates their preferences are related mainly to direct consumable items,
- (6) The conversion of household farming/economic activities by the tribal women could be able to provide them 227% to 1650% growth in income attracting more and more tribal housewives to enter into such commercial activities, even if many of them are restrained from doing so by their existing economic condition.
- (7) The establishment of commercial farms/economic activities not only makes tribal female owners of such activities financially independent but makes them strong earning members to their families, and
- (8) The commercial farms/economic activities started by the tribal women prove such units as significant income generators and as effective tools for future employment generation for remote rural areas.



7. CONCLUSION

The initiative of the tribal women in the study area for positive transformation of their economic fortune can be considered as a guiding model for socio-economic development of the economically backward communities living over the remote rural areas of India. The changed mindset of the tribal communities towards socio-economic aspirations is likely to serve as a guideline for the planners to upgrade socio-economic empowerment of the tribal communities. The only requirement is to provide them policy support, financial incentives, secured market.

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