



ISSN (E): 2277- 7695
ISSN (P): 2349-8242
NAAS Rating: 5.23
TPI 2021; SP-10(7): 698-701
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www.thepharmajournal.com

Received: 10-05-2021
Accepted: 12-06-2021

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Challenges faced by small and marginal farm holders of Kokrajhar district during COVID-19 lockdown

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Abstract

The COVID-19, the pandemic is the worst and the greatest global humanitarian challenge the world has faced in more than 100 years. The virus has spread widely, as it is very efficient at human to human transmission. With its spread and the rise in number of cases in India, governments worked swiftly to slow its spread by implementing a nationwide, 21-days lockdown on 24 March 2020. However, the lockdown came with an economic cost and have huge impact on all the sections of society with complete closure on enterprises across all sectors. Even though emergency services and agricultural activities were exempted, in the initial phases of the lockdown the agricultural front were witnessed disruption in activities relating to harvesting and marketing of agricultural crops and commodities. A marginal and small farm holder which constitutes a big part of the agricultural economic system within the country and constitutes more than half of the national population comprises 86.08 per cent of India's cultivated and uncultivated land. Small holder contributions in food security and poverty alleviations are thus disproportionately high and increasing. Having a greater role in supplementing nation's food requirement, they are hit hardest due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns. Therefore, the present study was done to assess the impacts of lockdown within small farm holder in term of challenges faced by small and marginal farmers in the district.

Keywords: covid-19, lockdown, disruption, small farm holder, marginal farm holder, challenges

Introduction

The agricultural & allied sector is of immense importance for the economy in India, contributing nearly one-sixth to the Indian national income and employment to nearly 50% of the workforce. It ensures food security of the nation and also influences the growth of secondary and tertiary sector of the economy. World Development Report, 2008 released by World Bank emphasizes that growth in agriculture is, on average, at least twice as effective in reducing poverty as growth outside agriculture directly, by raising farm incomes, and indirectly, through generating employment and reducing food prices. Indian agriculture has done pretty well during the recent period with annual growth ranging between 3.5 per cent and 5 per cent during the last five years.

Indian agriculture is the home of small and marginal farmers and the future of sustainable agriculture growth and food security in India depends on the performance of small and marginal farmers. According to Agricultural Census data, 2015-16 it was reported that total the operational land holding in India aggregate to over 146 million hectare. Small and marginal farmers account for around 86.08 per cent of India's cultivated and uncultivated land. But their share in operated area is around 47.34 per cent. According to Human Development Report, Assam 2014, 96.6 percent of farmers in Kokrajhar belong to small and marginal category. Kokrajhar, a district of Assam, located on the north bank of the river Brahmaputra sharing its international boundary with Bhutan in the north and interstate boundary with West Bengal in the west, bounded by Dhubri district on the south, Chirang and Bongaigaon district on the east. The district lies roughly between 89°46 E to 90°38/ E longitudes and 26°19'N to 26°54/ N latitudes with a total area of 3169.22 sq. km and a total population of 887142 (Census-2011). But the farmer's of the district has been under a lot of difficulties as of late due to COVID 19 pandemic with India's cross-country lockdown in March 2020, the automatic response was a mass departure of traveler work back to their main residences. Study on the impact of a recession in Kerala (Zachariah & Rajan, 2010) [6] indicated that the total 36 per cent (about 63,000 emigrants) of emigrants returned home owing to the economic recession in the state of Kerala. Parganiha *et al.*, 2016 [3] also stated that agricultural labourers area migrating to different parts of the country for earning their livelihood and there is in-equilibrium between

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demand and supply.

With the rise in Covid -19 positive cases, the numbers goes up to 4364 in the Kokrajhar district during the period from April 2020 to February 2021 as per Department of health and family welfare, 2021. The COVID-19 pandemic has occurred at a time when it coincided with the commencement of the harvesting of Rabi crops that are higher value cash crops, bringing about significant liquidity issues. Add to this constraint non-availability of seeds and fertilizers, machinery for hire, non-availability and unwillingness of labour, disruptions in transport and the limited functioning of financial institutions. Fear of the pandemic, uncertainty about markets and the lack of information and clarity on lockdown were other factors. Faced with significant losses from a late harvest, the urgency was further accentuated by threats of unseasonal rains and hail storm that imposed restrictions on the hours for field work and lead to the loss of the masses.

The Covid-19 pandemic and resultant announced lockdown and implemented within a few hours' notice, cast a spell of uncertainty across all walks of life and for business, industry and commerce and led to most challenging public health crisis and the worst global economic crisis in recent times, which have brought the agricultural sector into sharp focus and heightened its responsibility to feed and employ thousands who might have lost livelihoods.

Methodology

The methodology includes collection of information from the

farmer's field during the year 2020-21 in the context of outbreak of corona virus. The present study was carried out in all the six blocks of Kokrajhar district of Assam. A simple random sampling technique was employed in this study and was assumed that the characteristics of the sample approximate the characteristics of the total population (Leedy and Ormrod, 2005) [2]. Considering the travel restrictions amidst Covid-19, the study was done through different virtual platforms such as telephonic interview method. The information was collected from 150 farmers of 25 villages across the Kokrajhar district. For collection of information we have randomly selected 6 farmers from each location. While maintaining all necessary measures of social distancing, a structured interview schedule was used for the data collection. The small and marginal farmers were selected based on the criteria such as each farmers having at least 1 to 2 or less than 1 hectare of agricultural land (own or leased). The interviews with the target respondent were held with the help of a well-designed survey questionnaire to collect the data and information which were analysed by using frequency, percentage and rank in MS-Office excel application.

Result and Discussion

The overall representation of respondents for different age group is shown in figure 1. The figure shows that majority of the farmer's belong to age group of 50-60 (57 nos.) followed by age group 40-50 (55 nos.).

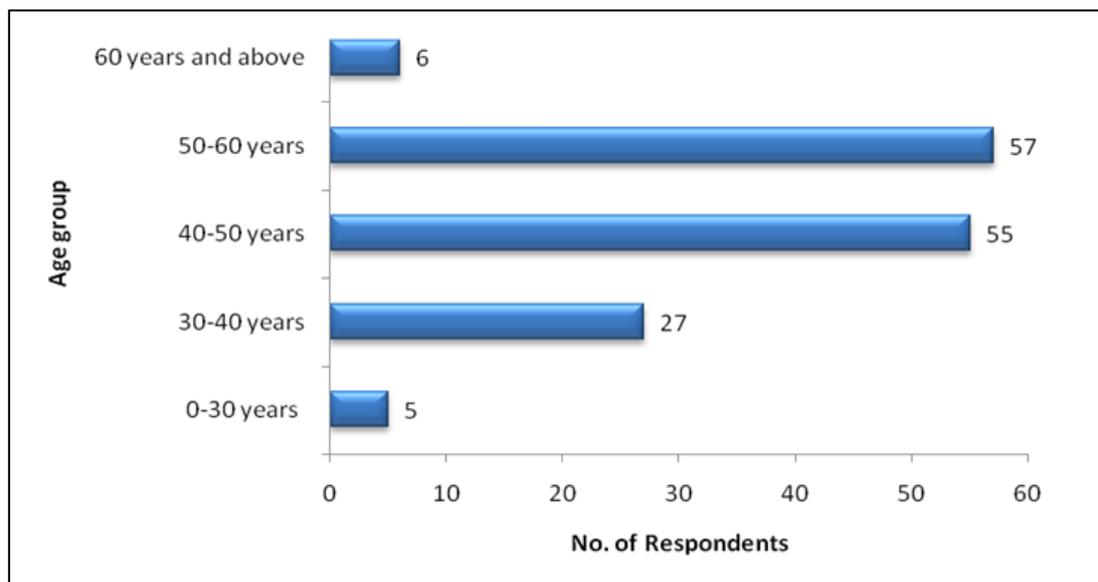


Fig 1: Different age group of the respondents

Figure 2 demonstrate the gender distribution among the respondent during the study. The overall representation of male is 81.33 per cent whereas, 18.67 per cent are female. Figure indicated that a fare number of females are involved in

the farming activities who took part in the survey to share challenges in their views. Shanthy, 2009 also reported low labour efficiency of women agricultural labour.

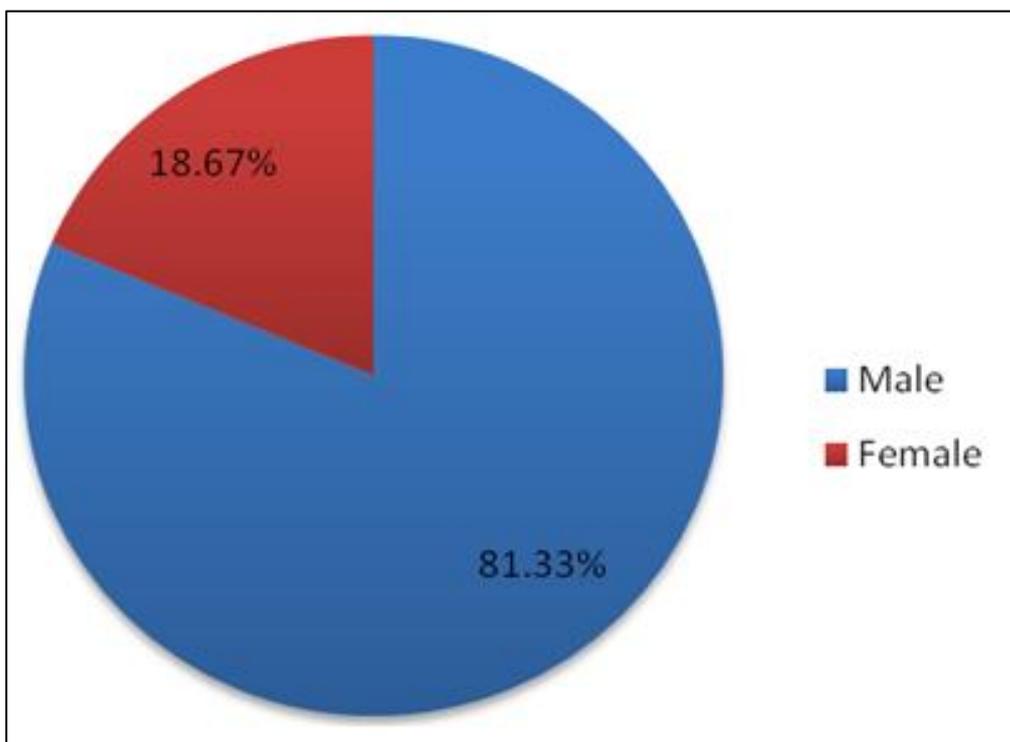


Fig 2: Gender Distribution of the respondents

Table 1: Challenges faced in the last harvesting season

Sl. no.	Challenges faced	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
1.	Covid-19 related restrictions	120	80.0	I
2.	Transportation issues	112	74.7	II
3.	Marketing problems	99	66.0	III
4.	Low price of produce	80	53.3	IV
5.	Unavailability of cold storage facilities for perishable products	75	50.0	V
6.	Climate issues	72	48.0	VI
7.	Non-availability of labour	70	46.7	VII
8.	Untimely harvest	64	42.7	VIII
9.	Financial issues	52	34.7	IX
10.	Non availability of agricultural inputs	50	33.3	X
11.	Non – availability of essential animal husbandry services	35	23.3	XI
12.	Lack of outside merchants for procuring of products	24	16.0	XII

The study result clearly revealed that Covid-19 has impacted agriculture and farming sector adversely, which will affect life and livelihood of farmers in short term and long term. The study revealed that 80 per cent of the respondent reported that sudden lockdown and restrictions imposed during Covid-19 hamper the farmer's access to local as well as agriculture markets, limiting their productive capacities and hindering them from selling their produce and consumer to purchase the produce. 74.7 per cent and 66.0 per cent of farmer's have faced difficulties in transportation and marketing of their farm produce. As many farmers faced difficulties in marketing of their produce they were forced to sell their produce at low price to their neighbors, nearby areas and others. 53.3 per cent farmers confirmed selling their produce in low prices. Later State Government has facilitated to market the vegetables directly to the consumers at home to avoid overcrowding in the markets. Since, the major crops in the study area are fruits, vegetables and greens, and restrictions was imposed during harvesting of rabi crop, lack of proper cold storage facilities ranked as fifth problem as reported by 50.33 per cent of respondents.

46.7 per cent of respondent have identified non availability of labour as one of the key issues faced during last harvesting

leading to losses. 42.7 per cent of the respondent state that they faced with significant losses from a late harvest. Shortages of labour is also identified as one of the major issues in disrupting timely harvesting, the urgency was further accentuated by the onset of unseasonal rains and hail storm that impose restrictions on the hours for field work and lead to the loss of the masses. De *et al.* (2005) ^[1] also opined that India has been traditionally vulnerable to natural disaster due to its unique geo-climatic conditions, floods, droughts, cyclones, earthquakes and landslides have been recurrent phenomena in India.

34.7 per cent of respondent have acknowledged covid-19 restriction made them financially more vulnerable as the farmers faces monetary losses in term of their farm produce. Failure of production in the last season may also lead to a cyclical effect in the farming; since the farmer's affordability to purchase farm inputs may also be negatively impacted due to reduced income level, leading to another issue of availability and access to farm inputs like seeds, fertilizers and other planting materials for the next season. About 33.3 per cent and 23.3 per cent of the respondents have shown their concern over the availability of agricultural inputs for next season and availability of essential animal husbandry services

respectively. Since, the animal husbandry activities were also affected greatly during the lockdown period.

The data revealed that respondents faced difficulty in getting farm inputs, animal feed and vaccines. Since, most of feed manufacturing companies, fertilizer shop and agricultural input shops are closed during lockdown; there was severe shortage of feed (in-case of poultry, fish and dairy cattle) and agricultural inputs (seeds, fertilizers, pesticides). Further, lack of transportation facilities and delay in arrival of vaccines and essential medicines led to death of many livestock especially poultry birds by Ranikhet disease. Of all the challenges faced by the respondents, marketing of farm products to outside market was the least problem at the district.

Conclusion

COVID-19 pandemic widely impacted different aspects such as Livelihood, Food security, Livestock etc. Sadly enough, the pandemic also affected the farm laborers. The country wide lockdown and unlock phases continue to bleak the future of millions of unorganized sector agriculture workforce. This study reflects on the multiple challenges of COVID-19 on the farming sector and the complexities of issues faced by the farming communities of the district during the lockdown. The problems faced by the farmers may be long-lasting and may take several months to build back their lives and livelihoods affecting the supply chain of the agriculture sector and overall food securities of the communities.

Acknowledgement

The authors are thankful to the local farmer of the villages selected for the study for providing information and for their active participation and other who are directly or indirectly involved in carrying out the study successfully and for their kind assistance and support.

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