



Rejuvenating Economic Empowerment: A Study on Women-led Entrepreneurship in Molasses Production in Manipur

MD FAIZUL HAQUE

Research Scholar, P.G. Deptt. of Commerce, Magadh University, Bodh Gaya

&

DR. SURESH SAH

Associate Professor, HoD, Commerce, K.L.S. College, Nawada,

Magadh University, Bodh Gaya, Bihar

Abstract

Women in Manipur have exhibited their entrepreneurial spirit by engaging in various occupations to secure their livelihoods. Historically, some women were involved in selling locally-made liquor, although this came with the burden of societal stigma and discrimination. Subsequently, a group of women entrepreneurs ventured into molasses production, paving the way for their own success stories and inspiring others to pursue better earning opportunities. This research delves into the socio-economic landscape of Scheduled Caste (SC) women engaged in molasses production in Kakching, Manipur. The study aims to assess the current status of women's participation in molasses entrepreneurship, evaluate the potential for sustainable economic growth, identify challenges faced by women in successfully conducting their trade, and explore the prospects presented by India's Look East Policies. The study concludes by offering insightful recommendations based on the research findings.

Keywords: *sugar beet juice, molasses entrepreneurs, women workforce, work culture, resource mobilization*

INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship plays a pivotal role in driving socio-economic development, as highlighted by various scholars (Prasain, 2003: 41). This study focuses on molasses, a byproduct of sugarcane refining that holds versatile significance. Molasses, a viscous brownish-black liquid, emerges as a residue following the crystallization of sugar from sugarcane or sugar beet juice (Cleeseby, 1963: 345-48). Distinct types of molasses—light, dark, and blackstrap—result from varying boiling processes (Curtin, 1973). The origins of molasses production trace back to ancient India, with the technique of extracting sugar from cane juice dating back to 500 B.C. (Columbia Encyclopedia). Though slow to diffuse, this process later spread worldwide, facilitated by Arab invaders introducing it to Spain during the Middle Ages.

Throughout history, molasses has carried diverse significance, ranging from its role in trade to its connection with catastrophic events. Notable instances include the Molasses Act of 1733, imposing duties on sugar and molasses imports to North American colonies from non-British territories, and the 1919 Great Boston Molasses Flood, resulting from a ruptured molasses storage tank. The contemporary focus is on molasses as a finished product, obtained through a multi-stage production process involving sugarcane extraction, boiling, and subsequent shaping. In Kakching, a distinct work culture endures wherein women strive for self-sufficiency, shaping the entrepreneurial landscape.

The present molasses trade demonstrates potential for growth, driven by both existing practitioners and newcomers. Traditional production techniques and sales methods persist, underlining the need for modernization and efficient marketing strategies (Stanchev, 2005). Molasses holds cultural significance,



becoming an integral component of various ceremonies and occasions. Its culinary applications span diverse communities, augmenting its demand in the market. The study aims to uncover the socio-economic dimensions of women's participation in molasses production, a facet overlooked by scholars and authorities alike. By addressing this arena earnestly, Manipur's socio-economic landscape can experience notable enhancement.

Research Design and Methods:

This study is centered in the Thoubal district of Manipur, where molasses production predominantly takes place. Despite being situated in the Manipur valley, the district's terrain is not entirely flat, covering an area of 514 square kilometers. The district accommodates a diverse array of ethnic communities, encompassing Meiteis, Meitei-pangals (Muslims), various tribes like Chiru, Gangte, Hmar, Kabui, Kom, Lamkang, Maring, Paite, Simte, Tangkhul, Vaiphei, Zou, as well as scheduled castes such as Loi and Yaithibi. Furthermore, migrants like Bengalis and Nepalis have also established their presence in specific pockets of the district, maintaining their distinct cultures and traditions (Habibullah, 2010).

Scheduled caste women are notably engaged in molasses production, with Thoubal district housing a significant Scheduled Caste population. According to the Census of 2011, Manipur's total Scheduled Caste population stands at 97,042, constituting 3.8% of the overall populace. Thoubal district registers the highest number of Scheduled Castes at 40,593, with a gender breakdown of 48,714 male and 48,328 female Scheduled Caste individuals. This district also reports the highest figures for cultivators (77,331) and agricultural laborers (33,106) (District Census, 2011).

The research adopts an empirical and exploratory approach, leveraging both primary and secondary data sources. The study encompasses 14 current molasses production units in Kakching as the universe of investigation. Secondary data was sourced from the records maintained by these production units, as well as from relevant literature, books, and journals. A comprehensive understanding was achieved through diverse methods, including unstructured questionnaires, participatory techniques, and key informant interviews. This research methodology also entailed focused group discussions and individual interviews, coupled with rigorous observations.

Participants in this research encompass various stakeholders such as molasses production unit owners, sugarcane farmers (inclusive of outgrowers), unit employees, and the neighboring communities. By employing this multifaceted research approach, the study aims to provide a comprehensive and nuanced perspective on the socio-economic dimensions of women-led molasses production in the Thoubal district of Manipur.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The existing literature on the subject of molasses and its socio-economic implications is limited, with only a few studies addressing this area of study. While some scholars have focused on the scientific and medicinal aspects of molasses, there is a lack of research specifically exploring its connection to socio-economic development. Among the few available works, Dhaneshwari (2012a) conducted a study on Women Entrepreneurs of Kakching, Manipur, who are involved in molasses production. The study highlighted the challenges and opportunities in this field, pointing out that molasses production is mainly carried out by women entrepreneurs in Kakching. These women generate regular income from their work and also provide employment to 4 to 5 individuals in each production unit. However, the study did not offer a comprehensive mechanism for improving socio-economic conditions; it primarily discussed fundamental



issues. Additionally, it highlighted that the trade of molasses is conducted informally, both domestically and internationally, indicating the need for organized practices and government support.

Molasses, a finished product derived from sugarcane through specific processes, has been the subject of limited attention in terms of its socio-economic significance. Previous works have mainly centered on its scientific properties and its use in medicinal contexts. The term "molasses" has origins in Romanic languages, such as French "la melasse," Italian "melassa," Spanish "melaza," and Portuguese "melaço," all tracing back to the Latin word "mel," meaning honey. Historically, molasses has been the end product of sugar preparation through repeated crystallization.

Scholars have also explored the history, production, and processing of molasses in various contexts. Some studies have examined its use as fodder in livestock and poultry feeds, dating back to the nineteenth century. Molasses' applications in animal feeds range from dust reduction to serving as a primary source of dietary energy. However, the chemical composition of molasses varies widely, similar to many industrial by-products.

Scientific analyses have primarily focused on the potential of molasses, particularly its conversion to bio-ethanol and its role as a feed ingredient. Some studies have explored the influence of parameters like temperature, pH, and time on bio-ethanol production from sugar molasses. Researchers have also considered the environmental impact of using molasses-based gasohol as an alternative to conventional gasoline. Additionally, molasses has been investigated as a supplement in livestock feeds, although on-farm responses have shown variability.

The existing literature emphasizes scientific aspects of molasses and its potential applications, with limited attention to its socio-economic implications. A study conducted in Myanmar discussed the emergence of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) involved in sugar processing, evolving from traditional jaggery production. These enterprises have grown into a cluster pattern in Myanmar's major market centers.

The current study aims to fill the gap by examining molasses entrepreneurs' socio-economic perspectives, particularly those belonging to scheduled castes in Manipur. This research is novel in the field and contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic implications of molasses production and entrepreneurship in India. Overall, the available literature underscores the need for further research to explore the untapped potential of molasses as a driver of socio-economic development.

TRANSFORMATION OF EXTRACTING MOLASSES

The current methods of molasses production in the state are deeply rooted in traditional practices that have been passed down through generations. This indigenous knowledge represents the accumulation of experiences, informal experimentation through trial and error, and a profound understanding of the natural environment. This knowledge is intricately linked to the mode of production, which, in turn, relies on ecological resources, biodiversity, and the micro-environment. Various types of production systems, ranging from pre-agricultural to agricultural, small-scale farming, and agro-based units, contribute to a diverse array of trade connections differentiated by the type of capital invested. These production units inherently involve a division of labor, reflecting the broader social system, as well as associated belief systems, faith, and cultural practices.

In essence, this intricate network of social, economic, political, and religious institutions collectively organizes the society. It can be likened to the embodiment of indigenous knowledge held by native or aboriginal communities, forming a cohesive system that shapes their way of life.



Analyzing the operational process of molasses production in Manipur reveals a multi-stage procedure. Molasses, known as "Chini Angangba Matum," is derived from sugarcane through a specific process. Initially, sugarcane juice is extracted using traditional methods. This juice is then boiled until it transforms into a thick, viscous substance. In the subsequent stages, this viscous substance serves as the raw material, shaped into the final product of various sizes and forms using wooden and tin frames. Notably, this production process is predominantly undertaken by women entrepreneurs in Kakching, Thoubal District. These women not only secure a consistent income through their work but also generate employment opportunities for 4 to 5 individuals per production unit. These enterprising women believe that with the Manipur Government's support, their molasses products could be exported through Indo-Myanmar border trade. The rising demand for molasses, both locally and internationally, has led to an increase in new and emerging entrepreneurs venturing into its production. This surge in entrepreneurial activity has positioned these women as leaders in the field.

The unique work culture of Kakching's women, characterized by their determination to secure their livelihoods independently of male family members, continues to thrive and exemplify their strong work ethic.

The Evolution and Challenges of Molasses Entrepreneurship

Introduction: The molasses trade, a traditional and ancestral business primarily run by women, has seen improvements in recent years. This unorganized sector has evolved, with better packaging and increased attention to hygiene. The women involved in this trade have managed to establish a regular income source, raising their living standards and gaining recognition for their vital role in society.

Challenges Faced: In its early stages, this trade encountered numerous challenges. These included limited capital, a lack of business knowledge, insufficient production equipment, unsupportive family dynamics, limited marketing experience resulting in small-scale sales, inadequate infrastructure like work sheds, and inefficient financial management leading to wastage.

Environmental Considerations: Operating in densely populated urban areas led to complaints from neighbors about smoke and odors emanating from the production units. The environmental impact of the residue generated by these units emerged as a significant concern, with potential risks of air, water, and land pollution.

Infrastructure Limitations: The small size of warehouses led to disorganized storage of necessary materials, causing congestion. Moreover, the storing of raw materials near work areas disrupted the neighborhood and added to the challenge of maintaining adequate workspace.

Unit-Specific Issues: Most women engaged in molasses production lacked formal education, hindering effective communication with traders from other regions. This communication gap posed a barrier to expanding their market reach.

Health and Well-being: The women in this trade often lacked access to nutritious food and regular medical checkups, raising concerns about their overall well-being and health.

Limited Exposure and Recognition: As the government did not formally recognize these production units, their potential for growth remained restricted. This lack of recognition hampered income generation and wider market acceptance.

Decision-Making Hurdles: Due to limited education, many of these women faced challenges in making informed decisions about product quality, pricing, marketing strategies, and expansion opportunities.



Technological Obsolescence: The production units continued to rely on traditional methods, as there was no financial support available for upgrading production technology. The absence of modernization highlighted the unorganized nature of the molasses production process.

Findings: Expanding Opportunities in Molasses Entrepreneurship

Scope for Expansion:

The sugarcane production potential is substantial, and the experience of women in the trade has grown remarkably.

Gradual production growth and expanding market size offer employment opportunities within the state through this trade.

The small-scale nature of these production units aligns well with the economic conditions of the state, allowing for establishment with minimal capital that yields consistent returns.

Participation in economic development under the "India's Look East Policy" presents a chance for women entrepreneurs in molasses production to contribute to the upliftment of North East India.

Favorable Conditions for Raw Materials: 5. Manipur's climatic conditions are conducive to sugarcane cultivation, suggesting the potential for increased raw material production.

Molasses cakes have versatile uses, including organic manure, medicinal purposes, and adhesive applications.

Beneficial Economic Environment: 7. The Sugar Industries Efficiency Act of 1988 exempts taxes on molasses export and import, creating a favorable economic backdrop for women entrepreneurs to explore international markets.

Market Expansion in Myanmar: 8. Research on the Myanmar market is essential to understand its dynamics. The superior taste of Kakching's molasses compared to Myanmar's products suggests potential for market expansion.

Effective marketing could lead to increased molasses exports from Kakching, further expanding the product's market.

Socio-Economic Development Opportunities: 10. Successful molasses entrepreneurship offers socio-economic development prospects.

Ethical and legitimate business endeavors contribute to a dignified life, improved social status, and recognition in society.

Stakeholders, including authorities and NGOs, must collaborate to support SC women molasses entrepreneurs, aligning with the Look East Policy.

Rising Demand and Sustainability: 13. Increasing demands and diverse utility of molasses products widen prospects for entrepreneurs.

Successful women entrepreneurs demonstrate the potential for sustained income, elevating their living standards and enabling support for family, relatives, and neighbors.

In conclusion, the findings highlight the extensive potential for the expansion of molasses entrepreneurship. Favorable factors such as sugarcane production, versatile uses of molasses, tax exemptions, and market possibilities in Myanmar provide a conducive environment. This sector not only offers economic growth but also contributes to socio-economic development and upliftment. Collaborative efforts are necessary to support these women entrepreneurs and harness the emerging opportunities, ultimately leading to improved living standards, recognition, and a positive impact on the society.

Concluding Observations: Women's Resilience in Molasses Entrepreneurship



Challenges and Determination: Despite facing numerous challenges, women entrepreneurs in molasses production persisted. They initially sold sugarcane to Khansari Sugar Factory with minimal profit. This experience made them realize the difficulty of initiating a new enterprise. However, their commitment remained unwavering, and they sought to establish a home-based enterprise with renewed enthusiasm.

Initiating the Enterprise: To kickstart their enterprise, these women secured loans for essentials like flying pans and sugarcane juice tubs. They produced molasses cakes and sold them at Kakching Bazar. The income generated reinforced their belief in home-based production for a consistent livelihood.

Innovation and Learning: They faced setbacks, such as borrowing items from neighbors for production, only to have them demanded back midway. This led to innovation - creating specialized buckets and wooden frames for the production process. Through trial and error, their efficiency improved, and they overcame production and marketing challenges.

Generational Knowledge Transfer: The molasses production tradition passed down through generations. Knowledge and techniques were inherited from mothers-in-law, grandmothers, and more. As demand grew from local and even international markets, new entrepreneurs joined the trade, becoming leaders in the field.

Recognition and Government Support: Despite success, molasses production lacks formal recognition and support. The absence of funding or government initiatives hampers the industry's potential growth. With appropriate support, it could benefit Manipur through employment, resource mobilization, and income generation.

Growth Potential and Future Prospects: Over the past four decades, molasses production in Kakching has steadily increased. Given this trend, government intervention could tap into its potential for further expansion, resulting in a positive impact on employment and the economy.

Towards Chain Production: The increasing production and the upward trajectory indicate the possibility of branching into related industries. The time might be right to explore chain production activities stemming from the molasses production sector.

In conclusion, the journey of women entrepreneurs in molasses production showcases their resilience and adaptability. Despite challenges, they established a viable trade that could contribute significantly to Manipur's development. With recognition, government support, and strategic expansion, the molasses industry has the potential to thrive and become a catalyst for economic growth.

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