

A STUDY ON THE OPERATIONS OF WOMEN SELF HELP GROUPS AND FRAMING OF MARKETING AND POSITIONING STRATEGIES FOR THEIR ETHNIC PRODUCTS & SERVICES - WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SIVASAGAR DISTRICT, ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

Women Self Help Groups are impending in a big way where the spirit of their entrepreneurial capabilities can be transparently witnessed. This research attempted to lay down certain management expertise to the pool of occupations by the women self help groups by creating a space of opportunities to them so that there is a steady growth in the economy. Based on the concept of bi-directional study and purposive sampling design; fifty (50) Women SHGs engaged in preparation of ethnic food items and ten (10) organizations has been considered by the researcher. The study area has been confined to the Sivasagar District of Assam. The study emphasized on the nature of the SHGs operations and highlighted the characteristics of the ethnic food items that can be incorporated in a ready to eat ethnic lunch basket. Competitiveness of the ethnic food items of the SHGs in the competitive market has also been put forward by the researcher through an effective cost feasibility analysis. Suitable

marketing, positioning & branding strategies of the ethnic food items and the selection of an effective distribution channel for the SHGs has also been proposed by the researcher. From the study, it was inferred that the women members of the SHGs can enter into the competitive market with a boom and with effective promotional & positioning strategies, the ethnic food items of Assam do possess the capacity of giving stiff competition to the commercial food items and can create a niche in the market and thus, can also attain a national presence.

INTRODUCTION

An approach intended towards the economic development of a nation gets a positive vibe with the participation of the significant division of workforce, i.e., the women populace. The entrepreneurial spirit and its initiatives as laid by the women population act as a pointer towards the development of any nation. Thus, framing of entrepreneurial policies for the women by the concerned Government becomes

an essence for the societal growth. “The long-term objectives of development programmes for women should be to raise their economic and social status in order to bring them into the mainstream of national life and development. For this, due recognition must be accorded to the role and contribution of women in the various social, economic, political, and cultural fields.” Women Self Help Groups are thus coming in a big way where the spirit of their entrepreneurial capabilities can be transparently witnessed. In the words of Nimisha, M. & Arumugam, D. (2019), “SHGs have proven to be a great platform to exhibit their passion and enthusiasm to start their business ventures rather than seeking employment opportunities”. Previous literatures as put down by Vijaya, G. & Masthani, S. (2014), Suthamathi, D. (2018) and Das, S., Mitra, A. & Ali, H. (2015), studied Self Help Group as an instrument for the growth & expansion of women entrepreneurship.

“Self Help Groups (SHG) are village based initiatives, where members regularly save up in order to start lending once the group collected enough money. Often from a homogenous economic and social background, they have the common goal to pool their resources in order to fund common or individual projects, ensuring financial stability and repayment”.

The fundamental objective of self help group is to provide financial assistance to its members. The notion of any SHG is to provide financial security and accredit to its members by encouraging entrepreneurial spirit, providing trainings, conducting meetings and providing mutual help among the members of the group. These groups along with the support from various government and non government

entities, gets involved in numerous socio-economic activities and enterprises and puts effort to effectively manage their operational activities and sustenance in the society. Sharma, K. C. (2001), highlighted the exclusive role of SHG, i.e., women empowerment and has put forward the significant changes in the living standard of SHG members, in terms of increase in income levels, assets, savings, borrowing capacity and income generating activities.

With the mentioned impression under consideration, formation and functioning of various SHGs in North eastern part of India is also apparent. “The total number of SHGs in Assam was 292071 as on 31-03-2015” . These SHGs strengthen the source of revenue of low income holders, empowering their social status and livelihood. Sen, M. (2000), emphasized on Self-help groups and micro finance as an alternative to socio-economic option for the poorer section. A very strong instrument for economic development; the SHGs creates financial habits and unleash entrepreneurial ability. This sector is mostly dominated by women and many financial and Govt. organizations take up plans and initiative to empower them in the best possible way.

ORIGIN OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

In Assam, the women members from the SHGs are occupied with various activities like; preparation of ethnic food items, designing of ethnic handloom products, designing of handicrafts, dairy farming, etc. These groups get micro credit and other financial assistance from organizations like National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development

(NABARD) and related financial institutions for earning a livelihood by putting their ideas, experience and labour, for producing a finished saleable product in order to lead a better economic status in the society. In addition, government is regularly working on schemes related to women accredit, which is a process that evolves from one's within. In the words of Konwar, M. (2015), "The term empowerment is consisting of power within, power to, power with and power over. Power within indicates to articulate one's self and aspirations. Power to refers to develop one's own skills and ability to make success their self and aspirations. Power with which refers to people's coherent collective aspirations to unify them and to connect with other persons or organisations. Power over indicates gaining capability to make changes and capacity over resources. Thus in feminist discourse empowerment is to be traced through the terms power over, power to, power with and power within." Thus, it is noticeable that the spirit of empowerment is in the air; but when it comes to reality, the women members of SHGs faces difficulties in establishing an eminent business in the market. Even though these women members of SHGs produce a saleable product, they don't get the desired market and thus they are deprived of their deserved financial benefit. They fall short off in establishing the competitiveness of their product in the market, highlighting the product characteristics, framing effective marketing strategies, positioning & branding their product in the right targeted market within the right time frame, product packaging, pricing strategies and selecting an effective distribution channel.

INTERDISCIPLINARY RELEVANCE

The word 'interdisciplinary' signifies, unifying two or more disciplines in order to provide a collective solution to the problem under study. Through this research, the researcher attempted to unify two disciplines, i.e., economics and management, and provide a collective solution on social well being and accredit the rural women involved in various natures of self help groups. If the women population, specifically rural, is being empowered, the standard of living of the society is likely to show an optimistic rise, which in turn is expected to reflect in the entire economy. It is because, like the rural male population, the women mass also holds the capability to demonstrate their skills, earn a living, and hold a respectable position in the society. After all in the modern times, male and female population is treated equally by the society and it's expected that the female populace possess equal skills, knowledge, zeal and aspirations to counter the male population. The only thing that is deficient and is creating a hindrance to these female masses is the lack of; proper training, proper management and proper exposure to the competitive market. Thus, this research attempted to lay down certain management expertise to the pool of occupations by the women self help groups and creating a space for opportunities to them so that the economy gets uplifted on a gradual basis.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

In line to the previous literatures, this research attempted to provide the women members of SHGs in establishing their product competitiveness, characteristics, right marketing

strategies while positioning their product, packaging and pricing, so that they get their desired benefit and recognition in the cutthroat market and attain an acceptable position in the national as well as international level.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

1. To emphasize on the nature of the SHGs operations and to highlight the characteristics of the ethnic food items that can be incorporated in a ready to eat ethnic lunch basket.
2. To identify competitiveness of the ethnic food items of the SHGs in the competitive market.
3. To design effective marketing, positioning & branding strategies of the ethnic food items of the SHGs and in selecting an effective distribution channel.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the essential packaging requirements and features for ethnic food items in the market?
2. What are the indicators for accrediting the women SHGs?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design & Sampling plan

For the study; among the nine (9) Development Blocks of Sivasagar district, Assam, Gaurisagar block has been selected through purposive/judgemental sampling. Purposive/Judgemental sampling has been selected because only women dominated SHGs were considered by the researcher. It has been observed that in Gaurisagar block of Sivasagar district, Assam, a total of 161 no.s of SHGs are functional. These SHGs are involved in various activities like; preparation of ethnic food items, designing

of ethnic handloom products, designing of handicrafts, farming, etc. For the study, the SHGs who are involved in preparation of ready to eat ethnic food items have been purposefully considered.

The researcher opted for a bi-directional study, where on one hand the SHGs were considered and on the other hand the organizations/institutions/firms who may be the prospective consumers were taken as the second set of respondents. A sample size of fifty (50) SHGs has been considered as the first set of respondents and the sample size for the second set of respondents, i.e., the organizations/institutions/firms, was ten (10) in numbers, with a minimum of twenty (20) employees. The selection of the second set of respondents were based on a judgement that only those organizations were selected who would likely be interested with the catering/lunch service comprising of ready to eat ethnic products prepared by the women members of the SHGs of Gaurisagar block of Sivasagar district, Assam.

The researcher conducted a feasibility study on the competitiveness and the demand of the ready to eat ethnic food items in Sivasagar district, Assam and the significance of packaging and visibility in the market, from the consumers' lens. Through the bi-directional study, the researcher tried to bridge the gap between demand and supply of ethnic food items in the market.

Sivasagar district, Assam has been considered because as per the researcher's venturing into the topic, studies (specifically bi-directional studies) relating to SHG, their operations, marketing & positioning of ethnic food items, is very limited till date.

The researcher conducted interview sessions with the Jeevika Sakhi under whose umbrella; the SHGs operate and also with the members of the SHGs, in order to identify the operational duties, rules and ideas as implemented and executed by them for their smooth functioning. Later, interview sessions were also conducted with the selected organizations in order to identify their need towards type of items, quantity, variety, etc. in the lunch platter either as per their regular order or on special occasions. For both the set of respondents, two different schedules has been designed and put forward for primary data collection. The time period of the study was from January 2020 to October 2021.

The schedule for the first set of respondents i.e. SHGs covered aspects like; period of their existence, details on their existing bank/ financial loan if any, preparation of ethnic food items and its variety that they are equipped with, existing channels of distribution, exposure to participate in local displays/ exhibitions, their existing market, attributes of each item (existing/proposed) from the lunch basket, their learning behavior, quantity and ability of production per day, time for preparation per day, adherence to hygiene/ taste & health benefits in preparing the ethnic items, cost feasibility, willingness to accept experimentation for product improvements and acceptance of innovation in the entire process. Additionally, the cost feasibility aspect was inclusive of costs like; procurement of raw materials, processing & preparation, labour, marketing, packaging and any other related costs. Through the interview sessions and the schedule, the researcher attempted to identify

their strengths, zeal towards their work, challenges and risks associated with their work and the capability to accept change and adapt in the competitive market.

An another schedule/proforma has been designed for the second set of respondents, i.e. the organizations, firms, etc. whose employees were interested with the catering/lunch service comprising of ready to eat ethnic food items prepared by the women members of the SHGs.

The responses collected through the scheduled interview sessions from the second set of respondents acted as a linkage in order to identify the demand for ethnic food in terms of; type, quality, variety, taste, authenticity, price, packaging, timing, etc. The study was qualitative in nature and thus descriptive interpretations have been put forward.

Thus, a feasibility study on the competitiveness and the demand of the ready to eat ethnic food items in Sivasagar district was covered through the current study and the significance of packaging and visibility of the indigenous products in the market, from the consumers' lens were highlighted. And through the bi-directional study, the researcher aimed to bridge the gap between demand and supply of ethnic food items in the market.

FINDINGS, INTERPRETATIONS & OBSERVATIONS

Nature of the SHGs operations and the characteristics of the ethnic food items that can be incorporated in a ready to eat ethnic lunch basket:

From the study, it has been observed that the SHGs were operational in preparation of ethnic food items within an overall time frame of eight (8) years. The women members of the SHGs mentioned that they have inherited the concept of ethnicity right from their birth and were very particular in maintaining its heritage in the best possible way. They were taught to cook right from their childhood by the senior members of the family and these cooking skills turned out to be hobby at times for them. Therefore, they were equipped with the skills needed for preparation of the ethnic items, in particular, and made

themselves prepared to turn their hobbies into income generating source, once they joined their respective SHGs.

The ethnic food of Assam comprises of a wide variety of vegetarian and non-vegetarian items and the women members of these SHGs were well equipped in preparation of the same as they either witnessed or involved themselves in cooking these items on a daily basis in their homes right from their childhood. The assortment of ethnic items, in which these SHGs were equipped in preparing a ready to eat lunch basket has been outlined as follows:

Exhibit 1: List of ethnic items to be included in a ready to eat lunch basket.

Sl. No.	Ethnic Assamese Names of Main Course items	Main Ingredient & its nature	Supplementary Ingredient (inclusive of salt)
1.	Boiled/Steamed Rice	Joha Rice (aromatic)/ Chokuwa Rice(semi waxy)/ Red Bao Roce (deep & floating)	
2.	Bamboo Cooked Rice	Bora Rice (Sticky or waxy)	Bamboo Tubes
3.	Plain Masoor Dali	Pink Lentils	Oil & Spices like turmeric
4.	Mati Mahor Dali	Split Black Gram/Urad Dal	Oil & Spices like turmeric
5.	Vegetable Boil	Seasonal Vegetables	Ethnic spices/Fiddlehead ferns/cherry tomatoes
6.	Mix vegetable with Aaroi Saul pitha guri	Seasonal Vegetables/ Sun dried rice powder	Ethnic spices
7.	Pork with Bamboo shoot	Pork/Bamboo Shoot	Oil & Spices like garlic, ginger, turmeric/ onions/tomatoes
8.	Pork with Lai xaak	Pork/ Mustard green(a green leafy vegetable)	Oil & Spices like garlic, ginger, turmeric, onions
9.	Smoked pork	Pork	Ethnic spices
10.	Fish with Paleng xaak	Local Fish/Spinach	Oil & Spices like garlic, ginger, turmeric/onions/cherry tomato
11.	Fish with Horiyoh xaak	Local Fish/Mustard Plant	Oil & Spices like garlic, ginger, turmeric/onions/cherry tomato

12.	Fish with Ou tenga	Local Fish/ Elephant apple	Oil & Spices like garlic, ginger, turmeric/onions/cherry tomato
13.	Fish with Kosu	Local Fish/Taro or colacasia	Oil & Spices like garlic, ginger, turmeric/onions/cherry tomato
14.	Chicken with Koldil	Chicken/Banana Flower	Oil & Spices like garlic, ginger, turmeric/onions
15.	Chicken with Kosu	Chicken/Taro or colacasia	Oil & Spices like garlic, ginger, turmeric/onions/cherry tomato
16.	Chicken Curry	Chicken/Potato	Oil & Spices like garlic, ginger, turmeric/onions/cherry tomato
17.	Duck with Kumura	Duck/Ash gourd	Oil & Spices like garlic, ginger, turmeric/onions/cherry tomato
18.	Kosu guti pitika	Mashed root colacasia	Chillies
19.	Dry Fish pitika with khar	Mashed dry fish/Khar (an alkaline extract from the ashes of burned dried bana peels)	Ethnic spices/Chillies
20.	Kharoli	Fermented mashed mustard	Ethnic spices/Chillies
21.	Paani tenga	Fermented mustard chutney	Ethnic spices/Chillies

Source: Self generated from primary data collection from the SHGs

Above is the list of various ethnic vegetarian and non-vegetarian main course items of Assam which can be launched as a ready to eat lunch platter in the competitive market and from the above list; selective items can be included as per the customers' order & preferences in the lunch basket and it may change from person to person. With a selective and customized order, the pricing strategy of the lunch platter will definitely get affected and the same has been outlined in the cost feasibility analysis in the second objective of the study.

The qualitative responses from the women SHGs apparently pointed out that the demand for ethnic main course food items are occasional or seasonal in nature. During peak festive seasons, cultural forums, literature fests, etc.; the demand for these items can be witnessed in a wider form, than in normal days. Whenever the demand arises in these occasions, the SHGs prepare themselves to meet the demand, but only with some specific and handful channels of distribution. Thus it can be interpreted that,

the supply chain or the channels of distribution for these ethnic items are very limited, resulting in restricted availability in the commercial market. At times, the SHGs get opportunity to display the food items in some local displays/exhibitions and these points of sales assist them as a source of their minimal incomes. Additionally as a new challenge, the current pandemic scenario is acting as an upcoming barrier in their incomes as local displays/exhibitions can hardly be witnessed due to the

restrictions as laid by the Govt. from time to time.

The zeal to learn and the positive attitude to achieve something have been the main motivators of the women members of the selected SHGs. Even though these women were from the rural background, the researcher found it interesting to highlight that the mind set of these women populace has been very forward oriented. The immediate family members of these women are sufficiently encouraging and supportive towards their work which added more enthusiasm among them to work collaboratively and with cooperative effort.

The Women SHGs of the study area optimistically showed willingness to accept experimentation for product improvements and acceptance of innovation in the entire process. They were particular in detailing out their overall production for a day and it turned out to be around sixty (60) lunch plates on an average by an SHG comprising of at least a minimum of three (3) active women members. Adherence to hygiene/ taste & health benefits in preparing the ethnic items has been a very crucial issue among the SHGs and they clearly mentioned their extra effort to adhere the same. While preparation of the food items; their kitchen were cleaned on a daily basis, the utensils were washed, hair fully tied, hands fully sanitized and the attitude was such that they were preparing the food for their own consumption. These people are simple in nature, and therefore they entirely dedicate themselves in giving a final output, without the understanding of the complexities of the outer world. These members mentioned

that, at times, they have even served food to the customers with kahor bason (bell metal utensils such as dishes/plates/bowls, etc.) from their own homes, which is actually a heritage/tradition of Assam. In Assam, serving food in Bell metal utensils can be termed as a culture, tradition and heritage to show respect to the person whom the food is being served. Even if the bell metal utensils can be reused after proper washing, but from the commercial point of view; serving food in bell metal utensils is an expensive affair as these utensils comes under high pricing segment in the market. Therefore, it can be clearly interpreted that the women members of the SHGs put their heart and soul in their work but, they are way behind commercialization of their products.

Finally it can be inferred that, if these women members of the SHGs are being properly guided, they can enter into the competitive market with a boom and through this study the researcher attempted to assist the SHGs in promoting the ethnic food items of Assam and in opening the gateway for the Assamese ethnic items to the national market.

Competitiveness of the ethnic food items of the SHGs in the competitive market

In the course of the study and while collecting the primary data, the researcher witnessed the limited exposure of the ethnic food items in the competitive market. In spite of giving the cost and expenditure details in preparing a ready to eat lunch basket, the women members of the SHGs aspired a cost feasibility analysis from the researcher which they presumed to act as a guiding map for them to launch their product in the competitive market. Therefore, the researcher has primarily collected the cost

details in procuring the raw materials from the real market and has put forward a cost feasibility analysis in order to identify the competitiveness of the ethnic food items of the SHGs in the competitive market.

With the mentioned intention, the cost feasibility analysis has been undertaken covering various aspects of costs like; procurement of raw materials, processing & preparation, labour, marketing, packaging and any other related costs. The detailed cost feasibility analysis has been undertaken under the following heads:

1. Cost of procurement of raw materials from the Local market
2. Processing & preparation cost per day for preparation of sixty (60) lunch baskets/plates
3. Labor cost
4. Packaging cost
5. Miscellaneous expenses per day for preparation of sixty (60) lunch baskets/plates

Therefore, the total cost per lunch basket/plate for an SHG will be an accumulation of all the five (5) types of cost as mentioned above.

Exhibit 2: Cost of procuring raw materials for ready to eat ethnic lunch baskets/plates from Sivasagar market.

Sl. No.	Name of the raw product	Cost of the raw product in the local market (inclusive of all the vegetarian and non-vegetarian items) (in Rs)	Cost of the raw product in the local market (Only Veg) (in Rs)	Cost of the raw product in the local market with Pork (Non-Veg) (in Rs)	Cost of the raw product in the local market with Local Fish (Non-Veg) (in Rs)	Cost of the raw product in the local market with Chicken (Non-Veg) (in Rs)	Cost of the raw product in the local market with Duck (Non-Veg) (in Rs)
1.	Rice	40 per kg	40 per kg	40 per kg	40 per kg	40 per kg	40 per kg
2.	Dal	35 per 250 gm	35 per 250 gm	35 per 250 gm	35 per 250 gm	35 per 250 gm	35 per 250 gm
3.	Mix vegetables with green leafy vegetables	150 per 750 gm	150 per 750 gm	150 per 750 gm	150 per 750 gm	150 per 750 gm	150 per 750 gm
4.	Salad	180 per 750 gm	180 per 750 gm	180 per 750 gm	180 per 750 gm	180 per 750 gm	180 per 750 gm
5.	Chutney	50 per 100 gm	50 per 100 gm	50 per 100 gm	50 per 100 gm	50 per 100 gm	50 per 100 gm
6.	Mustard Oil	240 per ltr	240 per ltr	240 per ltr	240 per ltr	240 per ltr	240 per ltr
7.	Bamboo Shoot	50 per 250 gm	50 per 250 gm	50 per 250 gm	50 per 250 gm	50 per 250 gm	50 per 250 gm
8.	Pork	350 per kg	N/A	350 per kg	N/A	N/A	N/A

9.	Local Fish	400 per kg		N/A	400 per kg		
10.	Chicken	180 per 750 gm			N/A	180 per 750 gm	
11.	Duck	650 per kg				N/A	650 per kg
	Total procurement of raw material cost for serving Twelve (12) ready to eat ethnic lunch baskets/ plates	2325	745	1095	1145	925	1395
	Total procurement of raw material cost for serving One (1) ready to eat ethnic lunch baskets/ plates						
	-----(I)	194 (rounded)	62 (rounded)	91 (rounded)	95 (rounded)	77 (rounded)	116 (rounded)

Source: Self generated through primary data collection from the local market during the year 2020 till 2021. However, the market price of the products may vary from time to time

The above exhibit depicts the average cost of procurement of raw materials from the local market and the selected quantity for each item will be sufficient enough for preparation of twelve (12) lunch baskets for the customers.

From the above exhibit, it can be interpreted that the SHGs total cost for serving twelve (12) vegetarian lunch baskets will be Rs. 745/- and likewise, the cost per serving comes out to be Rs. 62/- in case of vegetarian meal. In case of non-vegetarian lunch basket, as per the preference of the customers, either pork can be added or fish or chicken or duck, keeping all the veggies intact with the lunch basket. With the inclusion of each non-vegetarian item, there is a change in the total cost. If pork is added, the cost per serving has been identified as Rs. 91/-. Likewise, if local fish is added, the cost will be Rs. 95/- and with the addition of chicken, the cost per serving will be Rs. 77 and duck being the most expensive in the market, with the addition of the same, the cost for the SHGs per lunch plate will be Rs. 116/-.

Exhibit 3: Processing & preparation cost per day for preparation of sixty (60) lunch baskets/ plates.

Type of Cost	Average Cost (in Rs) for preparation of sixty (60) lunch baskets/plates per day by 3 active members	Cost (in Rs) for preparation of twelve (12) lunch baskets/plates	Cost (in Rs) for preparation of one (1) lunch basket/plate
Processing & preparation cost per day (cost inclusive of cylinder/line gas/contingency)	200	40 (rounded)	3 (rounded) ---- (II)

Source: Self generated through primary data collection from the local market during the year 2020 till 2021. However, the market price of the products may vary from time to time

Exhibit 4: Labor cost per day.

Type of Cost	Average Cost (in Rs) for preparation of total sixty (60) lunch baskets/plates per day by 3 active members (@ Rs. 400 for 3 active women members)	Cost (in Rs) for preparation of one (1) lunch basket/plate
Labor cost per day	1200	20-----(III)

Source: Self generated through primary data collection from the local market during the year 2020 till 2021. However, the market price of labor may vary from time to time

Exhibit 5: Packaging Cost for preparation of one (1) lunch basket/plate.

Type os Cost	Cost (in Rs) per piece
Packaging Cost for Plastic Disposable Thali 2mm with 5 compartments	6----- (IV)

Source: Self generated through primary data collection from the local market during the year 2020 till 2021. However, the market price of the products may vary from time to time

Exhibit 6: Miscellaneous expenses.

Type of Cost	Average Cost (in Rs) for preparation of sixty (60) lunch baskets/plates per day	Cost (in Rs) for preparation of twelve (12) lunch baskets/plates	Cost (in Rs) for preparation of one (1) lunch baskets/plate
Miscellaneous expenses per day (cost inclusive of logistics/ transportation, etc.)	200	40 (rounded)	3 (rounded)----- (V)

Source: Self generated through primary data collection from the local market during the year 2020 till 2021. However, the market price of the products may vary from time to time

From the above exhibits, the total cost in preparation of one (1) ready to eat lunch basket/plate can be determined and likewise, the monthly profit of an SHG through the selling of ready to eat lunch basket/plate can be determined which has been highlighted below:

Exhibit 7: Overall Cost and Profit Margin of an SHG through the selling of ready to eat lunch basket/plate in the commercial market.

Type of Costs	Amount (in Rs)				
	Vegetarian Basket	Non-Vegetarian Basket			
		Pork	Fish	Chicken	Duck
Procurement of raw material cost for serving One (1) ready to eat ethnic lunch baskets/ plates---- (I)	62	91	95	77	116
Processing & preparation cost of one (1) lunch basket/plate---- (II)	3	3	3	3	3
Labor cost for preparation of one (1) lunch basket/plate---- (III)	20	20	20	20	20
Packaging cost for preparation of one (1) lunch basket/plate----- (IV)	6	6	6	6	6
Miscellaneous expenses for preparation of one (1) lunch baskets/plate---- (V)	3	3	3	3	3
SHGs Total Cost in preparation for one (1) ready to eat lunch basket/plate ---- (I + II + III + IV + V) = A	94	123	127	109	148
SHGs tentative Selling price for one (1) ready to eat lunch basket/plate ----- B	110	140	145	125	170
SHGs Profit for one (1) ready to eat lunch basket/plate ---- (B - A) = C	16	17	18	16	22
SHGs Daily Profit for sixty (60) ready to eat lunch basket/plate ---- C * 60 plates = D	960	1020	1080	960	1320
SHGs Monthly Profit for sixty (60) ready to eat lunch basket/plate per day---- D * 30 days = E	28,800	30,600	32400	28800	39600

Source: Self generated through primary data collection from the local market during the year 2020 till 2021. However, the market price/profit ` may vary from time to time

From the above exhibit, it can be clearly interpreted that, the total cost for the SHGs in the preparation of one (1) ready to eat vegetarian lunch basket/plate is Rs. 94/- and in case of non-vegetarian meal, it ranges from Rs. 109/- to Rs 148/- depending on the type of the meat or fish. The researcher has suggested an average selling price of Rs. 110 /- for vegetarian meal and Rs 125/- to 170/- per plate for non-vegetarian meal after keeping the rates of vegetarian and non-vegetarian meals from local restaurants/fast foods/food joints, etc. from the study area. With the advised selling price, it can be

observed that the SHGs can earn a profit margin of Rs. 16/- to Rs. 22/- per plate depending on the preference of the customers. If the monthly profit is being calculated, it is crystal clear that the profit margin that the SHGs will earn is on a positive side and the earning per member of an SHG, comprising of three (3) active members will be a handsome amount, i.e. each member shall earn a monthly income ranging from Rs. 9600/- to Rs. 13,200/-.

Therefore from the cost feasibility analysis, it can be inferred that the ethnic food items of the SHGs are very competitive in the market and these food items can also give a cut-throat competition to the other branded or commercial food items from the local restaurants/fast foods/food joints, etc. of the study area. If the SHGs get a proper and definite direction in commercializing their ethnic items, they can also earn good revenues from their efforts and investments. On a final note, it can be deduced that along with competitiveness; commercialization of a product also poses an equal importance. Thus, the researcher attempted to design effective marketing, positioning & branding strategies of the ethnic food items in order to popularize these ethnic products in the market and it has been detailed in the third objective of the study.

Designing effective marketing, positioning & branding strategies of the ethnic food items of the SHGs and in selecting an effective distribution channel:

In order to design effective marketing, positioning & branding strategies of the ethnic food items of the SHGs and in selecting an effective distribution channel; the researcher has interviewed the employees of few organizations,

firms, etc. who were likely interested with the catering/lunch service comprising of ready to eat ethnic food items. These organizations or the firms included for the study were; Office of Deputy Registrar of Cooperative Societies, District Information Centre, Office of the Deputy Commissioner, Private & PSU Banks, Financial Institutions and few Private firms.

In order to generate demand for ethnic food in the study area, the researcher has collected responses from the employees of these organizations covering aspects such as; type, quality, variety, taste, authenticity, price, packaging and timing. From the qualitative responses, it was apparent that there exists demand, for ethnic cuisines among the customers of the study area. The respondents showed interest towards the wide assortment of items in the ready to eat lunch baskets and they were inclined towards the unique and authentic taste of Assamese cuisine. The respondents mentioned that they usually compromise on the quality and taste of the food, when it is ordered from a local restaurant or a food joint. As these restaurants are too commercial with ample walk-in orders or office/home delivery orders, they compromise on the quality as they are focused on getting more and more orders and thus delivering them in no time. When taste is considered, the respondents clearly mentioned that they experience similar taste every time they order from these restaurants. However, the respondents were satisfied with the hygienic and safe packaging of the food items, whenever they order it from the restaurants.

The respondents mentioned that the concept of consuming ethnic food items in a ready to eat lunch basket is quite a new and appealing

concept and they opted for catering services from these SHGs at times as an alternative to the commercial lunch items available in the market. They also showed interest in ordering the lunch baskets from the SHGs on certain occasions like; meetings, trainings, workshops, etc. as organized by their respective organizations from time to time. However, they were very particular about the packaging, timing and price of the ethnic items by the SHGs. As the lunch baskets were meant for consumption, the respondents wanted a clean & safe packaging, preferably disposable packaging due to the pandemic scenario. Every organization had a specific timing for lunch, due to which delivering the lunch baskets on time were an additional need for these prospective customers. And lastly, they expected a competitive pricing for the lunch baskets compared to the platters ordered from the restaurants or food joints.

It has been apparent that demand from ethnic food items existed among this set of customers and selection of this channel of distribution for their lunch baskets will definitely prove to be an effective decision by the SHGs.

In line to the responses from the second set of respondents, the researcher has put forward certain marketing, positioning & branding strategies of the ethnic food items of the SHGs which may bridge the gap between the demand and supply of ethnic food items in the commercial market of the study area.

In this internet era where everyone possesses a Smartphone and a net connectivity, the women members of the SHG can opt for promoting their ready to eat lunch baskets in the online platform with almost negligible financial investment. They can take the pictures of the

lunch baskets or come up with live videos in the social networking platform like; Facebook and attract the viewers' attention and tempt them for purchasing these food items. For using online platform, they can even name their product which may be used as their brand name in the future, when they start getting orders in acceptable numbers. In addition to online marketing, a mobile van or a point of sale in a centre place of the market will also give the ethnic products of SHGs; Visibility in the eyes of the customers. The women members of the SHGs should keep them well informed about any upcoming trainings, workshops, displays, exhibitions, etc., so that they don't miss out any chance for promoting the authentic and ethnic cuisine of Assam in the commercial platform.

ADDRESSING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

From the study, it is clear that packaging of a consumable product does have an impact in the final purchasing decision of a customer, especially when the product is ordered either for home/office delivery. The essential packaging requirements and features for ethnic food items can be outlined as; spill proof, fully covered, hygienic, easy to handle and convenient for carrying. The SHGs should therefore, focus on their packaging and should opt for Plastic Disposable Thali with size of 2mm and at least a minimum of 5 compartments where the items such as; rice, dal, one mix veg, one non-veg item and chutney/salad can fit into. The compartments of the Thali should be such that it fills the hunger of the customers' as it would be for lunch. This Plastic Disposable Thali's can be procured from the wholesaler of the study area

or from online mode, i.e. indiamart.com, where normally such products are sold at a wholesale rate. The packaging should be within the price of Rs. 6/- per plate, as the mentioned price has been put forward by the researcher after a compatible cost feasibility analysis.

Additionally, financial organizations like NABARD, Apex Bank, Bandhan Bank, etc. provides enough scope to the SHGs and similar organizations to boost their business. Thus with the financial assistance from these institutions, the SHGs can work for better positioning of their products and create a niche in the commercial market.

The study clearly signifies that the indicators for accrediting the women SHGs will be the quality of the ethnic food, taste, feasible price per plate (vegetarian/non-vegetarian), variety of items, delivery on time, the limit of customization & inclusion of innovation as per the need of the customers and finally, the teamwork of the women members of SHGs.

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CONCLUSION

This research signified the potentiality of the ethnic food items of Assam in the competitive market as compared to the already existing commercial establishments in the study area. Ethnic food and its significance stand strong in the cutthroat competition. When it comes to preparation and delivery of ethnic products, SHGs do continuously carry the legacy of Assamese culture; it also poses a promising and prospective future in the said field. The women members of the SHGs inspire the society to work with fervor, adapt to changes, enter the commercial market with dedication; keeping the ethnicity, culture, customs & traditions intact and safe in their promising hands. The operations of the women members through the SHGs are perfect paradigm of teamwork, leadership, motivation and aspirations to dream big and to work on bringing those dreams, into reality.

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