

iv. Food & Agro processing – a value addition and better commercial proposition

We witness simultaneous occurrences of drought and flood in different parts of Assam. Bumper crops are often followed by crop failure. *In such a scenario, processed food will be a great boon.* Of course, traditional methods of processing are of great significance because they provide and preserve the required quantity of nutritious food in a wide diversity of flavour, aroma and texture which enrich the human diet at costs generally within the economic means of the consumers.

Highly perishable primary foods, like fruits and vegetables should be processed, atleast to an intermediate stage, at the village level where the raw materials are grown. For several reasons, such an approach was effective in the early stages of development of USA in the thirties. Continued training, pilot production and preservation at low cost, developing appropriate products, processes will be required to bring success.

The food processing industry can be categorized under three broad groups:

- The first and member-wise largest group is craft based low technology sector. It shows almost complete unawareness of the modern bio-technology even in relation to their day to day activities.
- The second group, while not actively engaged in modern food bio-technology, takes keen interest in developments and would welcome opportunities to use modern development in the area.
- The third is a small group of high-tech companies which already operate successful R & D team for the processed food industry.

Assam is still in the first group.

Looking at the agricultural processing a little more closely, agricultural crops are processed mainly for removal of inedible components and increasing the storage life of final product thereby increasing both employment and Income Generating Activities [IGAs]. All consumers today have a considerable portion of their

Lactic fermentation for preservation of vegetables

Fermentation is one of the oldest and most economical methods for preservation of food. Of these fermented foods, lactic fermented mixed vegetables has great promise in Assam. Fermented cabbage or **sauerkraut** is eaten in the USA, Canada, Germany and other European countries. Originally, **sauerkraut** was a home industry. But, now 90% of it is packaged commercially in cans or glass jars. *Almost 85% of cabbage in Germany is processed to sauerkraut.*

nutritional needs met through fermented foods and beverages. Consumers are also continually interacting with the food they eat and the food they feel they should eat. Future consumers look for convenience, long shelf life, variety and nicety to eat as desirable eating characteristics. About 80% of food consumed in the developed countries is processed by food industry and 40% of this is consumed outside the home.

This trend is likely to continue in the current century, and going to create immense opportunities for food companies to produce fermented and processed foods and ship them worldwide. Assam is the fourth largest producer of cabbage in the country, with a production

of 4.72 lakh mt in 1999-2000. Processes such as lactic fermentation will offer tremendous scope for increasing the value of the vegetable crops entailing higher financial return to the farmers. ***Can Assam join the race?***

Again in diversifying from the food crops and also in the context of agro processing, the importance and need for development of plantation and horticulture crops [including bamboo] cannot be ignored in Assam.