

INCLUSION OF RURAL WOMEN IN THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS: A STUDY OF RURAL WOMEN AND THEIR LIVELIHOODS WITH REFERENCE TO MADHYA KHANGIA GAON PANCHAYAT, JORHAT DEVELOPMENT BLOCK

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Abstract

Women in India have experienced quite a lot of struggles for being treated equally as par men and to have a platform to raise their voice against this unequal treatment. In comparison to the early ages, Indian society has become much liberal in case of equality of women. Now that the issue of equality has been raised and brought in to the mainstream, the concept of empowerment of women has gained lot of attention in the academic and social platform. When we talk about empowerment, economic empowerment is a vital issue in the process. When a woman is economically independent, not only that empowers the woman but it empowers the whole family as well. Thus the topic of women and employment is given much importance in the discussion of women's equality and empowerment. In comparison to the rural women, the accessibility to information and opportunities is much easier for urban women. Therefore the bottom-up approach to empowerment is a vital aspect in the general process. Empowering women from the grass root level will strengthen the foundation of the economy and contribute to the overall development of the country.

Thus, this paper is an attempt to understand the aspect of women and employment in the rural areas. It also focuses on what kind of livelihood activities are these women engaged in and how are these activities helping them to be economically independent. This study is entirely based on empirical data collected from the Madhya Khangia Gaon Panchayat under Jorhat Development Block of Jorhat district through personal interviews. The secondary data is collected from relevant articles published in journals, books, newspapers, magazines, census reports, and government reports.

Keywords: Gender inequality, empowerment, bottom-up approach, rural livelihoods, rural women, economic development.

I Introduction:

The women in the world constitute almost half of the total world population. They have as much contribution as that of men for the all round development of the society. But despite their indispensable contribution towards societal development, the womenfolk of the world have been marginalized and dominated throughout the ages in the name of patriarchy. However, with the first wave of feminism starting in the later part of the nineteenth century a concerted effort was made by some of the early feminist thinkers who paved the way for the discussion of equality and empowerment of women in the whole world. Since then, feminist activists have been trying their best worldwide to make gender equality and women empowerment a universal social problem to be uprooted from the social system. Although there is a long way to go for the women community to be 'actually' empowered, the status of women has changed to a great extent till the present time. When it comes to Indian society, the history of women is not linear, nor does it have an organized structured. It is mostly an integral, though mostly invisible part of a saga civilization which is interwoven with those of culture, society, the state, and above all, with the lives of the people of Indian society. (Desai & Thakkar, 2001) The Indian women were assigned with the duties as good daughters, good wives, and good mothers, well defined in the patriarchal structure of the society. But in the nineteenth century, the worldwide wave of feminism also touched upon the Indian society and the issue of women's question came to the forefront. Since then, feminist movements in India have come forward as a revolutionary struggle for equality and empowerment of women. Now Indian society has become much liberal in the case of women and their freedom. Feminist struggles have given Indian women the access to education, to the workforce and the decision making process in the political arena. Though there is still a long way to go to achieve the goal of freedom in this struggle, the feminist movement in India has done very well in giving women a better place in the society than the past decades. With access to education and the workforce, Indian women are excelling in every field at par men in particular and as individuals in general. From just a skilled homemaker, Indian women today have acquired the skills and capabilities to participate in the workforce and contribute to the economy of the country. But what is most important in this struggle for

equality is the equal representation of women from all spheres of the society. The process of empowerment has touched upon a lot of urban and suburban women. But empowerment should be a bottom-up approach starting from the grass root level itself (Tiwari, 2014). Nobody can dream of an equal society if the foundation is not strong enough, it will not suffice the ultimate goal. Rural women are key agents for achieving the transformational economic, environmental and social changes required for sustainable development. But limited access to opportunities and exposure, to services like credit, health care and education; have been some of the important reasons why they are still lagging behind their fellow women in the urban areas. Therefore empowering the rural women is of utmost importance in this regard, to make them stand for their own and be an active part of the larger human community.

II Objectives:

The major objectives of the proposed study are as follows:

1. To understand the concept of women and development in the Indian society.
2. To study the engagement of rural women of the proposed field in the process of livelihood.
3. To study the scope of empowerment of these rural women through their engagement in various livelihoods.

III Review of Literature:

The World Social Forum has defined the 'right to livelihood' concept in its 2009 report. As it has defined, right to livelihood is being defined in terms of right to food and issues related to food security, access to and ownership and control over natural resources; and also in terms of issues related to market, adequate education, skills and access to credit.

According to Thi Lahn (2009), every human being has the right to engage in a livelihood irrespective of gender differentiation. It is the basic of human existence.

Tiwari (2014) talks about bottom-up development of women on the basis of a study conducted on some selected self-help groups. The groups are formed by the poorest and socially excluded women. The researcher stated that the drivers of change are these women themselves.

As stated by Masika and Joeke (1996), equality of opportunity and treatment of women in employment sector is a critical issue. In their work, they have highlighted the inequalities faced by women in their access to and participation in economic structures and policies. While access to economic activity is the main concern in this issue, importance should also be equally given to identify what kind of economic activities enhance women's position the most.

Agarwal (1994), while talking about women empowerment stated that the single most important economic factor that affects the situation of women is the gender gap in command over property. This factor contributes to the as a whole development of women; their economic well being, social status and also their political representation in society.

Bernstein et al. (1992), while talking about how livelihoods are structured on the basis of caste, class, gender, religion, ethnicity and cultural identity; pointed out that some social relations inevitably govern the livelihood structure in society. The questions of who owns what, who does what, who gets what and what do they do with it are some vital questions in the livelihood analysis. Issues of gender and other dimensions are very much necessary in analyzing the livelihood structure of our society.

Kanungo (2013) has stated in her work about the issue of exclusion of women in the important aspects of the society. Based on the study of women in mining work, she is analyzing how women are being excluded in achieving the economic advantages and the way forward.

De souza (1975) in his work discussed about the condition of empowerment of rural women. He stated that in spite of decades of planning for economic development, the structure of employment opportunities for rural women has remained quite unchanged. Most of the female workforce is engaged in agricultural work but very less attention has been paid to improve the social situation of these women.

IV Field:

For the proposed study, the Madhya Khangia Gaon Panchayat under Jorhat Development Block in the district of Jorhat has been selected as the field of data collection. The Jorhat district is one of the developing districts of Assam. Alongside the urban development rates, the rate of rural development is also improving in the district. While talking about women empowerment in the rural areas, the engagement of rural women in various livelihoods in the district has shown improvement in the present time. As observed during the pilot study, the Madhya Khangia Gaon Panchayat under the Jorhat Development Block, has shown quite impressive rates in the increasing engagement of women in various rural livelihoods. Keeping in mind this increasing involvement of rural women in livelihood in the region, the stated field has been selected for the study.

V Methodology:

The proposed study has been framed under the exploratory research design as it aims to explore the conditions of livelihood of the rural women in the proposed field of the study with reference to the women in development approach. Moreover, the study is based on empirical data collected from the proposed field of the study. Both qualitative and quantitative data have been collected in order to justify the objectives of the study. These data have been collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data has been collected from respondents selected from the proposed field on the basis of personal interviews. The relevant secondary sources include data from relevant articles published in journals, books, newspapers, magazines, census reports, and government reports.

For data collection, 119 women have been selected as respondents from the proposed field. These respondents have been interviewed personally to collect the necessary information regarding the study.

VI Significance of the Study:

The proposed study is very much significant in the society we live in. Our society is predominantly patriarchal in nature. From the feminist movements of the early eighteenth century till the present time, women have experienced a lot of struggle in the patriarchal society. Though there is a long way to go to actually achieve equality, the womenfolk has reached to a point where the issue of equality is in the mainstream discussion. Empowerment of women from the grassroot level here plays a very significant role. Empowering the rural women in the economic sector and giving them opportunities to engage in livelihoods is a significant issue both in academic discussion and in government policies. Thus the proposed study therefore signifies the importance of livelihood generation on the part of the rural womenfolk to move a step forward to being economically empowered and thereby to attain an equal social status.

VII Analysis**i. Women and Development**

The Beijing Declaration (1995) stated that women empowerment is one of the key strategies for development of a nation. Full participation of women on the basis of equality in all aspects of society, their participation in the decision making process and access to power are fundamental in the process of acquiring all round development and peace in a nation. Keeping this in mind, it is utmost important in this present era to ensure the equal and full participation of women from all social spheres in the economy. With the access to education and opportunities, also with the increasing awareness of people towards gender equality; we can see quite an improved picture of women empowerment in the urban and suburban areas. Whereas in rural areas, the rate is still pretty much low in comparison to urban and suburban areas. The participation of women in employment generation activities is lesser in comparison to that of men engaged in employment. Social researchers stated that even though India has become the world's fifth largest economy, Indian women's workforce participation rate sharply declined. In urban India, the rate is stagnant and in rural India a very low and declining rate could be witnessed.¹ Therefore, to ensure all round development of the nation, providing an environment of equal treatment and opportunities to women is a vital issue in this discussion. Even though the economy is experiencing a moderate growth in the developing countries, a larger segment of the total population is still living below poverty line. Thus to tackle the issue of poverty in developing countries, the policy of social inclusion should be given greater importance in an economy. Women constitute almost half of the total population in a country and when the half of the population is not given equal opportunity to participate in economic activities, the well being of the country will surely suffer.

In the later part of the eighteenth century, one of the most celebrated works by Esther Boserup talked about the issue of women and development. This work highlighted the different effects of development on men and women. She stated that productivity was often equated with cash generation and most of the contribution of women was ignored in this process. But it was evidenced that this model did not eradicate poverty as such since it lacked the proper distribution of benefits to the various segments of population. Boserup's work highlighted the 'women in development' approach implying the exclusion of women from development and their invisibility in the sector in general. The women in development approach grew out of Boserup's work sought to look into the increasing women's income and productivity. Since then, with some additions and criticisms on the issue, the topic of inclusion of women in development process got a platform in the academic discussion. In India also, the government has given some importance to the issue of inclusion of women in the development process.

ii. Women in the Grass root Level in India

Even after seventy years of independence, women are still one of the most powerless and marginalized sections of Indian society. This is also the case in most of India's rural areas. Though most of the children of the rural areas have started going school, those women who are married and not educated enough to stand for their own,

¹<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/company/corporate-trends/how-indias-workforce-participation-rate-of-women-has-sharply-declined-over-the-years/articleshow/74531505.cms>

are always the victims of this gender biasness and hence lag far behind their counterpart. They remain in their households doing their daily chores in spite of their skills at various works such as weaving, food processing, farming, animal husbandry and such other activities. Rural women still remain at a disadvantaged position in Indian society. Statistics show that whereas 86.1 per cent females are engaged in agriculture, the figure of males is 74 per cent. But there are hardly any special programs for enhancing women's agricultural skills. While 7.1 per cent rural females are engaged in manufacturing, the percentage for rural males is 7 that is less than that of females. But most of the training programs have hardly any female participation. While rural males have opportunities in construction, trade, transport, storage, and services, these are mostly denied to rural females. Obviously, opportunities must be created to enable them to acquire the skills necessary for entering these newly emerging occupations.

To change this discrimination, as a preliminary step, the rural women's mindset of 'dependency' must be changed so that they become conscious of their abilities to change themselves, their families, and their community. Their empowerment would lie in becoming creative, self-dependent, individuals. In this context, there should be initiatives by the government and any other organization to provide these women with new insights on their ability to stand on their own so as to find ways of learning new skills and approaches to become effective partners in the development process, to become the 'subjects' of transformation through arousal of self-esteem.

While talking about rural women, the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon (2015) stated that rural women are the backbone of sustainable development. They look after the food security of their families and the community. The rural women play a bundle of roles in their lives; they work in the farm for livelihood, engage in businesses and marketing, and also lead the other members of their community. Inclusion of these women in the development process by constructing resilient social protection system, labour markets, inclusive governance institutions, and civil society organizations will ensure the development of a sustainable economy. This will create an equal society by ensuring development for all irrespective of gender differences.

iii. Rural Women and their Livelihoods

Assam is one of the major states of North East India. Though it is rich in natural resources and cultural heritage, the state is still lagging behind than the rest of the country. The socioeconomic condition of the state has not been conducive to overall development. Though the entire Region including Assam is free from some of the major social evils prevailing in the country such as dowry, female foeticide and infanticide because of the prevalence of tribal and indigenous culture, other forms of gender discrimination do exist as reported in various gender gap studies. In certain respects the position of women in Assam is still weaker than that in other states of the country.

Since most of the areas in Assam, in particular and India, in general are rural in nature, therefore the process of empowering the women has to start from the rural area itself. Because if the foundation is not strong and empowered enough, we cannot expect to have a gender equal society. In achieving this gender equality in these areas, first thing to be concerned with is the status of education of these women. Reports show that the literacy rate of women in Assam is not equal at per men but there have been some changes to this situation at the present stage. It is seen that women from rural areas are now pursuing higher education and holding prestigious posts in government offices and private organizations. During the last two decades, there has been a significant rise in their involvement in the field of education. For instance, recently in the civil service examinations also we have seen that the top positions are occupied by women and women from Assam are also excelling in these platforms. So, this is obviously creating a positive impact among the new generation of women in the remotest areas as well.

Another important factor in the empowerment process is the employment status of the rural women. The rate of rural women participating in the workforce is less in comparison to the urban women. Most of them are housewives and have to depend on their husbands for their living expenses. Most of the rural women do not have access to a source of livelihood generation due to the lack of skills and of guidance as well. However, with certain initiatives taken by the government and other non-government organizations, this scenario is in gradual transformation.

In the proposed field of the study, it was observed that most of the women engaged in livelihood generation are taken care by the Assam State Rural Livelihoods Mission (ASRLM). The mission has taken into account the rural women who are willing to participate in livelihood generation and given them the platform to enhance their abilities. Under the mission, self-help groups are formed with ten to twenty women. After the formation of these groups, they are provided with proper trainings to carry out livelihood activities. The field of the study that is the Madhya Khangia Gaon Panchayat has total 2,208 numbers of women. Among these women, 795 women are engaged in various livelihood activities under the ASRLM. From this it is found that around 36% women of this region are participating in the workforce. Though the participation rate is not satisfactory, the respondents stated that this region has much better participation rate in comparison to other regions. The livelihood activities performed in this region include animal husbandry, farming of cash crops, handicrafts and weaving. From the total number of women engaged in these livelihood activities, 280 women are engaged in animal husbandry like

piggery, backyard poultry, goat rearing and dairy farming. 300 women are engaged in agricultural activities such as paddy cultivation along with vegetable farming. 215 women are engaged in handicrafts and weaving activities. It was also informed that among these 215 women, 30 women are engaged in clay handicrafts business.²The weaving business is also quite good in the region.

The respondents have stated that engaging in these livelihood activities provided by ASRLM has given them a great exposure in the market economy. Through the mission, they get good marketing price for their products. The products are sold in the weekly markets nearby the area. Most of these women belong from economically deprived sections of society. The exposure to the market economy has given them a way to earn their livelihood and maintain a better living standard. The earnings not only help them to look after their families but it has uplifted their social status as well. The mission has provided them with loans at a very minimal interest rate which help them to start as an entrepreneur and develop their own businesses. Talking about future prospects of their work, the respondents stated that at present they are being provided with trainings on how to enhance their productivity with the use of advanced scientific technologies. They are being trained on how to decide on the value of their products in accordance with the market demands. Besides the self-help groups, these women are also members of the village organizations formed under ASRLM which gives them a platform to discuss various issues and raise their voices.

iv. **Women in Development and the Government**

Since the inception of the concept of women empowerment, several efforts are being made by the government to increase the role and improve the condition of the rural underprivileged women. The initiatives like micro credit programs and formation of women Self Help Groups (SHGs) in the rural areas indicate the government's effort for economic emancipation of these women. These self help groups prove to be a successful path not only as a financial assistance but also as a platform for the rural underprivileged women to empower themselves psychologically, socially and economically. In 1999, the Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojna was initiated by the government of India covering all aspects of self employment like organizing the rural poor women into self help groups, capacity building training, and financial support through microcredit and marketing opportunities. This program has now been modified and renamed as National Rural Livelihood Mission in 2011 under which the Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission to monitor all the self help groups functions and management in Assam. The main purpose of this scheme is the empowerment of rural women through capacity building of the self help group members, by giving them trainings and monitoring their activities. Various projects are going on under this scheme like weaving, dairy farming, bamboo crafts, mushroom cultivation, incense stick making, piggery, poultry, etc. These women self help groups have been playing a significant role in transforming the socio-economic scenario of the rural women in Assam.

In the recent times, microfinance has been emerging as a powerful instrument for empowering women particularly, the rural women. Apart from the informal sector of finance, the formal and semi formal sectors like commercial banks, NGOs etc. are taking much interest in providing microfinance to women considering it to be a profitable commercial activity. Women are also participating in the microfinance movement by availing the microfinance services being provided by the various financial channels.

Moreover, the government of Assam has reached out to the rural areas to help these women by providing them free trainings for entrepreneurship development. This has contributed to the development of entrepreneurial works like handloom, tailoring, beauty parlour, readymade garments marketing, food processing, etc. The Bandhan Bank, very popular in rural areas of Assam is also operating in the field of women empowerment by providing the rural women with loans. The women take loans from the bank and invest in small scale businesses which very much encourage their entrepreneurial qualities.

Moreover, there are several non-government organizations working in rural areas to empower the women out there in these areas. Various awareness programs have been conducted in rural areas by these organizations to make the rural women understand their rights as a human being and thereby to strengthen their hold in society.

VIII Major Findings of the Study

➤ One of the most important findings of the study is the understanding of the state of women and employment in Indian society. The study highlighted the journey of women from the later part of the eighteenth century till the present time in establishing their stand in the development process. Inclusion of women in the development process has gained a lot of attention in our society which necessitated the importance of empowering the rural women in the employment sector.

➤ It was found in the study that rural Indian women are still in a disadvantageous position in comparison to the urban and suburban women. The accessibility to opportunities and resources is still a problematic area when it comes to economic development of rural women. A large number of women are still not joining the workforce or are dropping off the workforce.

² ASRLM, Block Mission Management Unit, Jorhat Development Block.

- Women’s workforce participation in rural India shows a declining rate, whereas in urban India it is low and stagnant. This is primarily due to the shrinking of the agriculture sector. There is a declining rate in the number of self-employed women in farms, while no alternative jobs in the manufacturing sector are available for them.
- With the initiation of the Assam State Rural Livelihoods Mission, the rural women have got an exposure to the livelihood generation activities. The mission has given them a platform where they can learn new skills and also enhance their skills through proper trainings provided by authorized persons. These trainings and guidance have been very fruitful for these women as they have got access to the economic sector and also uplifted their status in the social sphere.
- The Assam State Rural Livelihoods Mission brings together the rural women in the forms of self-help groups. These groups are formed with ten women to avail facilities provided by the mission. They are provided with credits to carry out livelihood activities.
- One of the most important findings of this study is that through these livelihood activities, these rural women are getting exposure to the economy and the outer world. Their skills and knowledge are well utilized in this field from which they are also getting economic independence from their counterparts. Not only have these women become financially independent, but also they are empowered enough to take part in the decision making process of their households.
- In spite of their progress in the economic sphere, participation of women in the workforce is still very low in the proposed field. Though a lot of women are coming out of their houses to participate in livelihood generation activities, there is still a long way to go to achieve maximum participation.

IX Conclusion

A society can be called a progressive one where there is no discrimination between male and female as they are equally important to our society as are men. Since our country is dominantly rural in character, it is important that the empowerment process starts from the grass-root level itself. This process of empowerment will not only make them self reliant but help them establish themselves as an individual in society. When our rural women become empowered psychologically and socially, then only the next generation will be raised with no sense of discrimination and oppression. The violation that our women are facing in the society till now, will only end if our women become empowered enough to take stand for their own and speak up. And this will happen only through education and economic upliftment of the underprivileged section of women. And lastly but not the least, the upliftment of our rural women will also contribute to the economic development of the rural society and the whole of the nation as well.

Thus road map for women empowerment is there but still there are miles to go on this path of empowerment. It can only be hoped that in coming years ahead women empowerment will prove its worth. Women are an integral part of a society. They play an important role in determining the destiny of a nation. It has been rightly said by Swami Vivekananda, “The Best thermometer to the progress of nation is its treatment of women”. Therefore, due recognition to them in the society and their greater involvement in socio-economic and political affairs becomes all the more important. Ensuring active participation of women in the decision making process and income generation activities can make greater significance towards women empowerment. This will make them stand on their own and to develop entrepreneurship qualities.

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