
CHALLENGES & PROSPECTS: EXPERIENCES OF THE MINORITY WOMEN OF WEST BENGAL

Dr. Karabi Mitra

Associate Professor, Dept. of History,
B.K.Girls' College (Affiliated To Calcutta University) Howrah, West Bengal, India

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Abstract:-West Bengal faces various problems due to it's Geographical location. Though there are many positive factors like bounty of agricultural production, availability of water, minerals, natural resources yet man-made problems namely environmental pollution, migration, cross-border anti-social activities are some of the challenges confronting the state. Historically the state inherits the brunt of Partition which still now affects some sectors. Assurance of a healthy livelihood to millions of people presents a constant challenge since Independence. Influx of the refugees, violence, deterioration of law and order, impending poverty and lack of food are some of the serious problems which were managed with great difficulty. At present many sectors are settled yet the development of the rural women especially the minority women living beyond poverty- line presents an area of discussion. The objective of the study is to focus on the challenges faced by the minority women and the prospects of their better livelihood. Historical Methodology is applied while field surveys were of great help. Several Reports, Newspapers, Secondary writings are explored in order to have a clear picture.

Keywords: Empowerment, Literacy, Marriage, Minority Women, Skill-Development.

Introduction: Women empowerment is a key issue in modern society and how to ensure development of the deprived milieu is a challenge in front of the Government. West Bengal faces various problems due to it's Geographical location. Though there are many positive factors like bounty of agricultural production, availability of water, minerals, natural resources yet man-made problems namely environmental pollution, migration, cross-border anti-social activities are some of the challenges confronting the state. Historically the state inherits the brunt of Partition which still now affects some sectors. Assurance of a healthy livelihood to millions of people presents a constant challenge since Independence. Influx of the refugees, violence, deterioration of law and order, impending poverty and lack of food are some of the serious problems which were managed with great difficulty. At present many sectors are settled yet the development of the rural women especially the minority women living beyond poverty- line presents an area of discussion. The objective of the study is to focus on the challenges faced by the minority women and the prospects of their better livelihood. Historical Methodology is applied while field surveys were of great help. Several Reports, Newspapers, Secondary writings are explored in order to have a clear picture.

It goes without say that, poverty, illiteracy and malnutrition are the faces of everyday challenge faced by the rural poor. Women are the worst sufferers of these crises. Therefore it is also noticed that, if women are developed as well as empowered the crises can nearly be minimized. The definition of the term 'empowerment' is debated. It may be described as 'expansion of individual's choices and actions, primarily in relation to others' or can be an 'end'

in a development intervention, in that the purpose of a programme may be the empowerment of a particular group of people who would otherwise remain disempowered...such activities are seen as important in that empowered people are able to participate in development programmes, assert their rights and be in a better position to demand services from government and other service providers(Kilby 33,2011).

Several data have been procured from the Census(2001) and (2011) and other Primary Reports collected around 2013 regarding the socio-economic status of minority women. Mainly women belonging to the Muslim community are addressed to because among the Minority communities in India they are the largest and most underdeveloped community. Some significant facts come out from the data on several very important aspects – out of the total **population** of West Bengal of 91.3 Million(2011)the number of Muslims is 25 Million. They are the largest Minority community .**Sex Ratio** is 950/1000 however the Religion wise Census presents as 951/1000.The **child sex ratio** is 955/1000 and compared to adult sex ratio seems to be better. As for **language** 97%Muslims in West Bengal speak in Bengali while 3% speak either in Hindi or Urdu. As for **working condition** 45% women are working as either agricultural labour or daily labourer.38.3% Muslim householders live in rural side and earn Rs.2500 or less per month which is one-half of the cut-off level of income for the population below the poverty level although 41.5% Muslim household have own land.23.5% own crop land besides the homestead land.

As for the special data on **underage marriage** of women it goes with the local practice and demand for at least one daughter is a notable fact. Rural girls are usually married at least at the age of 18.5 while urban girls are married at 20.9 years of age. Therefore the age of marriage is increasing. They participate in **decision making** and 74% participate in everyday purchase. In Murshidabad and Maldah districts more than 45% are Biri worker or daily workers. 77% work with menial jobs. Their **literacy rate** is 69.5%.The gender wise break up shows that, male literate are 72.5% and female 64.8% while Primary Survey 2nd phase 2013 presents male 71.8% and female 67.0%. In the district of Howrah the female literacy rate is 77.6% against the male literacy rate of 76.2%. It is clear that neither religious superstitions stand in the way of womens' education nor conservatism in the families debar them from attending schools. The rapid progress of womens' education is an impact of successful implementation of Sarva Siksha Abhijan. The observers point to a interesting fact that,t here is a ' recent surge of determination within the community to educate its girls' and perhaps 'the Muslims in West Bengal are showing the way to treat the men and women equally...' However Muslim womens' participation in higher education and in the skilled workforce is disproportionately small.(Living Reality of Muslims in West Bengal,2016)

The measures adopted by the National and State governments can be summed up as follows. Maulana Azad Education Foundation has arranged for a network of educational institutions of different level namely,167 high quality Central schools in all rural areas of minority dominant and concentrated districts ,44 Central schools in all of minority dominant and concentrated cities ,Central School Organization under the MAEF to operationalize and administrate these schools and 5 National Institutes for Science & Technology, Health & Allied Sciences, Architecture ,Planning & Design, Climate change & Disaster Management, Renewable Energy & Food security under the MAEF.(MAEF Report,2017) Minority Women Empowerment Programme—This scheme is launched by MA&ME Deptt. Govt. of West Bengal for providing soft loan to Minority women for any income generating activity or business such as small

business, cottage industry, Handicrafts etc. at the rate of 3% interest. Subsidy @50% of loan amount, subject to a maximum of Rs.15000 is given to a beneficiary.

Along with the Government surveys over a period of two years presented the changed scenario created in the remote parts of the state by the NGOs and innumerable SHGs. A summary of their activities will prove that, they have touched upon the sensitive parts of the social body and making a continuous effort to eradicate the ailments. The challenges faced by the poor women are multiheaded. Three major problems being – life skill management, health and trafficking are focused in the present context. Practical implementation of theories and projects are emphasised rather than theoretical propositions. Three remote areas of West Bengal located in the Districts of Howrah, Birbhum and South 24 Paraganas have been selected for study. The selected areas are primarily extremely poverty- stricken and remote by nature.

Some non-conventional projects for women empowerment are adopted by the NGOs under discussion. Rampurhat Railpar Rural & Urban Health Training Society(1991) addresses the need for Health Education for the adolescent girls. They train up them coming from Birbhum, Murshidabad and Jharkhand in Community Medical Service CMC)(Course duration 18 Months),Essential Drug Training & Primary Level Village Nurse Midwife Certificate course(VNM)(Course duration 450 Hours). The Organization is run by Indian Rural Medical Association. Other centers for training are located in Suri, Bolpur and Sagardighi. Started with 23 students the project received warm acceptance from the rural milieu who are in dire need of medical service .The number of trainees has reached around 650 in number. The minimum qualification for enrolment is eighth standard level and no barrier of subjects exists there. Amidst a tremendous space constraint the classes are held in 02 shifts. The students coming from distant villages get some refreshment and in case of transport dislocation they are provided with shelter and food too. As for the course component they learn 04 Theory papers consisting of Anatomy & Physiology, Gynecology & Obstetrics, Nursing and some common diseases with their management. The Practical paper consists of First Aid, Use of some essential instruments, Sterilization, Sample collection for Laboratory Test etc. The CMC consists of 04 Theory papers consisting of Anatomy & Physiology, Pathology & Pharmacy, Health Care system. First Aid, Sterilization, Pollution, Food, Taking care of patients, Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary diseases other common diseases, Gynecology & Obstetrics with practical classes consisting of Nursing, Drugs, some common medical problems etc. The Institute is run by some Allopath and Homeopath practitioners. They organize rural awareness camps with the help of their students and collect filled up questionnaires from the villagers. The answer sheets reflect a practical picture of the status of health and hygiene in remote areas. After completion of the course some of the students have been appointed in Hospitals and Nursing Homes. Despite being a privately funded one ,the Project is fast growing and becoming popular among the rural milieu. The inmates are studying with great enthusiasm and their beaming faces are the proof of their confidence, dedication and being empowered with health education for the self and serving the community as well.

The Nari o Sishu Kalyan Samity (NOSKK) (1979),located at a remote locality of the District of Howrah has earned reputation for their non-conventional Projects for empowerment of women. They implemented Nai Roshni --- the Scheme for Leadership Development of Minority Women supported by the Ministry of Minority Affairs . The objective of the Project is to ‘empower, to strengthen and to instill confidence among Indian women by gaining knowledge, tools and techniques for interacting with the Government system, Bank system

and other institutions and social topics like Health, Education and Rights . The aim is to instill leadership qualities among the women belonging to the Minority communities so that they can protect themselves and other women and become role-models to them. In order to increase solidarity and unity 25% of non-minority women were also allowed to participate in the Training programme. Duration of the course is 06 days and 06 hours per day. The modules included Leadership of Women, Educational Programmes, Health & Hygiene, Swachch Bharat, Financial Literacy, Life Skills, Legal Rights of Women, Digital Literacy and Advocacy for Social and Behavioral change.

Other Projects of the organization namely, Awareness workshop for Bhubaneswar students(25th May,2019), Awareness Programme Child Protection & Early marriage (28th June,2019) aroused great enthusiasm. The first involved some trainee German Volunteers who organized an interface among old sponsored students and the new students. Target of the second programme was the practice of early marriage. More than 100 adolescent girls and boys and their parents participated in the programme. NOSKK runs year long Adolescent Friendly Service in various forms like running a sanitary napkin production unit, a course on communicative English course on skill development etc.

Trafficking is a serious problem faced mainly by the poor adolescent girls . The beginning of the Piyali Learning Center (PLC) ,located in South 24 Paraganas was an answer to the problem .The beginning of the organization goes back to 2003 when the founder lady noted the sale of a girl by her father for Rs.40.The trauma felt by her led to the creation of educational Project taking only 25 children in a shed. At present PLC has become a prime educational institution for girls. The area was a dreaded place of trafficking. Due to extreme poverty and other related problems it became a fertile recruiting ground of home-maids. Establishment of the PLC has changed the face of the locality, reduced the rate of trafficking and infused a sense of security and self confidence among the women of the area. Educated girls refuse to be married at early age. If they feel insecure at home they may stay as boarders under the SAFE Project until the completion of their studies. While at school they get food, uniform, reading materials, scope to learn extra-curricular activities, learn self-sustaining skills .In a nutshell they are nurtured to be developed as complete human beings. Their mothers also join in skill-development courses and learn reading, writing and simple Arithmetic. In this way PLC as a completely privately funded organization has earned great renown for changing the face of the area and saving girl children from the grip of traffickers as far as possible. Additionally PLC in collaboration with other welfare organizations has set up tube wells, sanitation units, planted trees and built roads. As a result the villagers also taste the goodness of an improved way of life and their wholehearted support form the back-bone of the organization.(Field Surveys)

According to the observations of the Minority committee who worked on the education of the Minorities low level, low quality and low access are three major obstacles in the way of Minoritys' education. The literacy rate is 59.1%(2001 census) and 68.53%(2011 census) against the national rate of 64.8%(2001 census) and 72.98%(2011 census) respectively. In order to coup with the problem the Government has introduced a network of educational institutions at different levels and scholarships at various level for them. In order to coup with the availability of fund on time Afzal Amanullah, the Reporter (10th May,2012) stressed on the allotment of adequate money in the budget for smooth running of the educational projects.(Report,2012)

A Newspaper Report highlighted the progress of education among the Muslims and commented 'Literacy rate among Muslims in Bengal has moved past the days of the Sachar Committee Review and risen 11.27% in the past decade. It is also marginally ahead of the national rate.

Apart from analysis of Data personal observation points to several significant facts:-Women of the minority have become aware of their potentiality and necessity of education. Therefore the number of Muslim girl students have been increasing. They are increasingly participating in regular student activities and coming out of seclusion. In the rural sector they are interested to join SHGs and work in a combined manner. The NGOs trying to infuse confidence within them. Their personality development is taken care of. It goes without say that rural women irrespective of religion or other parameters live more within the clutches of patriarchy. Now the women at least try to come out of the bondage. Their participation in decision-making has increased. The Muslim women participate in Jari work especially in Howrah. Most of them are self employed and work in household and agriculture. Due to organization of awareness camps the number of early marriage has decreased. They are more health conscious than before and take care of their own health and that of their family. The impact of the projects of the West Bengal Government namely Kanyashri, Rupasree is also creditable. In a nutshell a silver line of hope is visible in the context of empowerment of the Muslim women of West Bengal yet the myths and prejudice about them should be wiped out so that they will feel free to place themselves at par with the mainstream population.

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