

## EMPOWERMENT OF THE RURAL WOMEN IN WEST BENGAL: CASE STUDY OF THE DISTRICT OF HOWRAH

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**Abstract:** The development of women is closely related to the concept of 'empowerment' which denotes a process whereby they are invested with power and status in a particular situation. The path of empowering women was never easy because patriarchal norms tied their free movement and suppressed their personality. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment assured that, one-third seat of the Panchayat and Municipality were to be reserved for the women. In West Bengal they secured remarkable number of seats in the Panchayat. However their problems did not wither away with political empowerment. They continue to face challenges at home and outside and every time have to prove their efficiency. The Government adopted a number of Projects and the Voluntary organizations spread a hand of cooperation towards them.

Present paper will highlight the GO-NGO partnership towards the development of the condition of women with special reference to the District of Howrah.

Historical methodology will be followed. The documents provided by the governmental offices and the NGOs will be used as chief source of informations.

The brief survey points to the fact that, the women beneficiaries attached to the organizations mentioned above are definitely empowered yet they could not reach majority of the women in need of help.

**Keywords:** Empowerment of women, Non-governmental organizations, skill-development, sustainable development

**Introduction:** The implication of the word 'empowerment' especially in the context of the women is complex and volatile by nature. While during the past getting access to the schools was a challenge for the women in the modern days they are facing media is playing a strange role in the process. The advertisements, the tele-serials mostly project a family life nurturing the feudal ideologies and superstitions.

In the present paper the empowerment of the rural women of the district of Howrah, West Bengal will be the focus of discussion. A glimpse at the history of the state presents a story of the pains of partition (1947), grave sufferings of the rootless milieu and subsequent strain on the economy and society of the newly born state of West Bengal. It is known to all that, whenever in a calamitous situation the children and the women are the worst sufferers. Bengal was divided (1947) and the new state West Bengal was born with towering problems of famine, refugees from East Bengal, food crisis and other related problems.

Regular reports of the episodes of sexual and other harassments of the women present a problematic context and raises an obvious question whether the women are really 'empowered' in post-colonial India. Definitely they are better educated and are on the receiving end of the multiple developmental projects yet compared to the towering necessity of the day the projects are inadequate. Taken every person as a social unit the awareness of women's empowerment is to be injected into the conscience of everybody irrespective of class, caste

and gender. If this difficult end can be achieved then one may think of the success of the projects.

The concept of the empowerment of women is very complex. In a simple way the concept may be explained as the woman's independent activity towards achieving some end. In the present paper attempt will be made to delineate the process of empowerment of the women in the rural sector of the district of Howrah. The role played by selective NGOs and the government in the field will be cited as the case study. The documents provided by the governmental offices and the NGOs are used as chief source of informations.

The development of women is closely related to the concept of 'empowerment'. It denotes a process whereby a person or a group of people are invested with power and status in a particular situation or in other way denial of access to resources and decision making may be termed as 'disempowerment'.

The path of empowering women was never easy because patriarchal norms tied their free movement and suppressed their personality. A look at the historical development of the concept in India show how Pandita Ramabai Saraswati arranged for the academic and vocational education of the women. In Bengal Rabindranath Tagore played the pioneering role by way of formulating a complete educational plan comprising of academic studies and vocational training for men and women students of Viswa Bharati, his dreamchild. Mahatma Gandhi emphasised on the self-sufficiency of women and introduced Charkha as its symbol. In post-independence India the cause of the women was emphasised and Projects

were implemented with an objective to empower them.

The tradition of the formation of voluntary organizations dated back to early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Patrick Kilby explored the genesis and activities of Indian NGOs in his pioneering study . He pointed at the link between ' Gandhian development paradigm built around village development, which offered a way of reaching the marginalized rural poor who were in a desperate situation at the time, having suffered decades of neglect by the colonial state'. The organizations formulated village development plans and focussed on the rural poor especially the women. They collaborated with the Government in respect of developmental projects and received funding.

The United Nations declared 1975 as the International Womens' Year and upto 1985 as the decade of women. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment assured that, one-third seat of the Panchayat and Municipality were to be reserved for the women. In West Bengal they secured remarkable number of seats in the Panchayat. However their problems did not wither away with political empowerment. They continue to face challenges at home and outside and every time have to prove their efficiency. The Government adopted a number of Projects and the Voluntary organizations spread a hand of cooperation towards them. Significantly the difference lies in the fact that, while in the past women were perceived as persons in need of 'welfare doles' today they are regarded as ' active agents participating in and guiding their own development . The popular trend of modern days is the GO-NGO partnership since both aim to eradicate

poverty and empower the women. Several rural NGOs working for the minority and backward sections in the District of Howrah were visited in course of the research and the paper is the product of that study.

Howrah, the smallest District of West Bengal covers an area of 575 Sq. Miles. It has 14 Development Blocks and 2 Municipal Townships, namely, Howrah and Bally. Located by the western bank of the Ganga the District is fairly fertile . The soil is watered by the Rupnarayan, the Damodar and the Saraswati. The main stream of the Saraswati is extinct at present yet huge water bodies throughout the District naturally irrigate the land. The name of the District probably originated from the marshy character of the land which was known as 'habor'. Several ports were established during the seventeenth century C.E. however the locality developed into the site of traditional heritage with the advent of educated milieu from different parts of Bengal.

With the advent of the English East India Company both of the cities of Kolkata and Howrah developed as centers of trade and commerce. During the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the establishment of the Railway Station, the Howrah Bridge and industries changed the face of the District. Traditional agricultural economy was altered in favour of industrial economy and development of cosmopolitan culture. However industrial and related developments focussed on the city and rural life gradually went into oblivion. The district faces several problems --- environmental pollution, backwardness of the minority and other communities, under-development and related issues etc.

A view of the demographic data of the District point to the marginalized social status of women population:-

**Table:** Demographical features of the District as per the census of 2001 & 2011

|                              | 2001      | 2011                             |
|------------------------------|-----------|----------------------------------|
| Total population             | 4,273,099 | 4,850,029                        |
| Male                         | 2,241,898 | 2,500,819                        |
| Female                       | 2,031,201 | 2,349,210                        |
| Average literacy             | 77.01%    | 83.31%                           |
| Male                         | 83.22%    | 86.95%                           |
| Female                       | 70.11%    | 79.43%                           |
| Total child population (0-6) | 513,218   | 522,802                          |
| Male                         | 262,391   | 266,472                          |
| Female                       | 250,827   | 256,330                          |
| 2011 Census Report           |           |                                  |
| Total rural population       | 1,775,885 | Total urban population 3,074,144 |
| Male                         | 909,519   | 1,591,300                        |
| Female                       | 866,366   | 1,482,844                        |
| Literates                    | 1,256,266 | 2,348,940                        |
| Male                         | 682,352   | 1,260,472                        |
| Female                       | 573,942   | 1,088,468                        |
| Average literacy             | 79.98%    | 85.21%                           |
| Male                         | 84.75%    | 88.19%                           |
| Female                       | 74.96%    | 82.01%                           |

For the present study two NGOs namely, Nari o sishu kalyan samiti and Akshoynagar Pallisri Sangha are selected on the basis of their dedicated service especially to the women belonging to the Scheduled caste, Scheduled tribe and Minority sections. Besides the organizations implement government Projects and one NGO has earned international recognition for its activities.

The Nari o Sishu Kalyan Kendra (NOSKK)(1979), was the brainchild of Md. Mainuddin, a reputed social activist of Khaskhamar, a remote village of Bauria, in the district of Howrah. It was a registered social welfare organization and aimed to ameliorate the backwardness, poverty of the destitute milieu. It is known that, the Dalits, Muslims and tribals are the worst sufferers of the society while their women are the most vulnerable milieu. A group of young and enthusiastic women organized the poor and marginalized women to cope with natural calamities like flood and social backwardness. The NGO serves the Districts of Howrah, Uttar Dinajpore, Dakshin Dinajpur and Murshidabad.

The aim of the organization was to make solid contribution towards the beginning of a self-reliant society on the basis of 'humane values like cooperation, participation, justice, respect and love where people will participate in a decentralized political process, where the economy will be based on localized production and consumption, the environment will be free from pollution and exploitation, the people will survive with their own indigenous socio-cultural identity'.

Their objectives are as follows:-

- To develop human potentiality and critical awareness of the vulnerable groups of people and motivate them towards their empowerment.
- To enhance the knowledge and skills of the reference group so that they can plan and act accordingly towards their sustainable development through participatory process.
- To create awareness among the fairer sex regarding health, education, environment and economic action and also to make them capable of carrying their development journey.
- Formation of Self-Help Groups for income generation among the vulnerable sections through micro-credit.

The target group of the organization are the poor, marginalized women and children. Betterment of their lifestyle is the sole aim of the activities. They are internationally acclaimed due to their service and work in collaboration with UNICEF, Oxfam (U.K.). The Poorest Area Civil Society Programme (PACS) includes the Muslim women and has created awareness about their rights and access to their entitlements. Along with other voluntary social welfare organizations in other parts of India the

NOSKK is a partner to the Rehnuma Project of the Planning Commission, Government of India. The Project is supported by National Foundation of India and Center for Social Justice. The centers aim to identify several types of entitlement violations faced by the minorities including Rights of women at various level with the help of Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act, 1937.

They have formed Swadhikar, a district level forum with the objective to focus on generating awareness among the women belonging to the minority and the backward classes regarding the discriminations faced by them. They have successfully implemented UNICEF-supported routine Immunization programme for the pregnant mothers and awareness of sanitary habits including breast-feeding. Interestingly they have successfully mobilized the religious personnel in spreading awareness among the Muslim milieu. They have formed a Women In Need federation (WIN) with 20 groups comprising of 310 members. They have taken up several Projects aiming at empowerment of the women. The village is reputed for Zari work and the organization tried to develop the craft further. They introduced Projects including Skill Upgradation Training Programme funded by the Ministry of Textiles, Govt. of India whereby women were trained in Zari embroidery. The number of participants is on the increase. Other skill development courses in the same field include the Design Development Programme (DDP) sponsored by Development Commissioner (Handicrafts) New Delhi, Advance Level Skill Development course on Machine embroidery sponsored by Director of Directorate of Vocational Education & Training also benefitted the women. The projects of empowerment of women remain incomplete without the arrangements for proper care of the children whose mothers work outside home. NOSKK run creche centers with the funding of Ministry of Women & Child Development. Around 50 children are benefitted in the scheme.

Self Help Groups have become an integral part of the development of women. NOSKK works in this field with 510 SHGs comprising of 8034 members. They have organized programmes on livelihood. Swabalamban is a popular programme of the West Bengal Women Development. NOSKK has successfully implemented the Project and arranged for training programmes of 6 months' duration for 300 women. (vide NOSKK Report) They were trained in Zari and Patch work craft. Besides the special awareness projects for the adolescent girls regarding provision of sanitary napkins and maintenance of reproductive health were arranged for with private sponsorship from Sweden.

NOSKK has successfully started a sanitary napkin production unit after completion of Micro Small Medium Enterprise training of the West Bengal Government in collaboration with Freedom Group(2009). They also preach awareness for breaking away the social taboo and superstitions on menstrual cycle. Arrangement for computer training, spread of awareness against early marriage, breaking away the social taboos against women, introduction of Spoken English course, personality development programmes (in collaboration with Ann Foundation) are a blessing to the women residing in a remote corner of the district. One remarkable achievement of NOSKK is the preparation and publication of a research work entitled *Changing Status of Muslim Women in Panchayati Raj in West Bengal* (2008). The study presented an updated feature of the Muslim society with special emphasis on the women.

Akshoynagar Pallisri Sangha (1989) (APS), an wellknown voluntary organization is located in Bally Jagacha area. It was founded by Dr. Swapan Sinha, Dr. Basudev Giri and other social activists. The organization was 'established with the ideology to ensure social development and justice in the backward areas of the State. Their target groups were the Scheduled castes, Scheduled tribes, OBC and the downtrodden milieu living below poverty line. Amelioration of the suffering of the women and children was their objective and they decided to present them a better lifestyle and provide equal opportunities for their overall socio-economic development.

The organization was accredited by the Khadi & Village Industries Commission. Besides, the Departments of Food Processing Industries, Govt. of West Bengal, Ministry of Textiles, Govt. of India, DRDC, Howrah Zilla Parishad, Nirmal Bharat Abhijan, Howrah Zilla Parishad, District Panchayat & Rural Development Office, District Industries Centres, Howrah. They serve 6 Community Development Blocks of the District of Howrah. Their activities revolve around 'leadership building', 'capacity building' and 'skill upgradation of women' by way of training them up in activities ranging from formation of SHG Groups to solving drinking water and sanitation problems, running of food processing units, marketing outlets etc. Conversation with the members reveal the phases of struggle they had to suffer and improved lifestyle of the present days. They have successfully implemented the Swachh Bharat Yojana and drive against Arsenic contamination of water.

The objectives of APS are as follows:-

- 'To promote health and hygiene system through development of usage of sanitation and safe drinking water

- To develop leadership qualities, self-confidence, technical skills and decision-making power among the activists with special emphasis on women
- Livelihood development of rural people especially women and youth through SHG
- To promote educational system both formal and non-formal way
- To develop health status of poor and destitute community people through awareness generation and intervention programmes
- To aware and motivate the people on management of natural calamities
- To promote environmental regeneration and ecological development
- To take action for the empowerment and sustainable livelihood development of the people of target groups
- To create micro-level organizations of poor and destitute women through formation of cluster development and federation
- To provide technical and professional expertise'

APS follow a methodology of situational analysis, field survey and field level direct intervention.

The strategy of APS is to organize seminars, meetings, interactive sessions, workshops, awareness generation programmes. Occasional training camps are organized for the women. Experts are invited to impart trainings to the members on different skills. Regular monitoring of the SHGs are done in collaboration with the Government representatives. APS also conduct studies on contemporary socio-economic problems and try to find ways-out. The members also protest against juvenile marriage, addiction and cases of domestic violence. In view of the Nirmal Bharat Swachh Bharat Project the organization promote sanitation equipments and conduct awareness programmes.

The skill development programme includes Beautician course, Batik and Tie & Die making, Ornamental candle making, Bag making while entrepreneurial development programme includes training on food processing and preservation. Healthy food is supplied catering to the orders of Hospitals, Social gatherings etc.

The brief survey points to the fact that, the women beneficiaries attached to the organizations mentioned above are definitely empowered in their respective lives. Simultaneously their families experience better lifestyle, modernization of view points and an improved value system. They exert a positive influence on their neighbourhood and in this manner a social network of well-being may be expected to be created. The women face multiple challenges including unwanted child

birth, poverty, lack of health, illiteracy, lack of skill, proneness to violence and overall patriarchal control in their families.

The Government has undertaken suitable projects for women like Swabalamban, STEP, Anandadhara however, compared to the huge women population of the District much remains to be done. Patriarchal control, conservatism, haphazard distribution of the BPL population, alternative occupations in the houses, lack of time especially among the labouring milieu

are some of the constraints faced by the organizers. Development of consumerism and allure of easy money by means of unsocial sources of income sometimes prevent the people from participating in the community development activities. A better turn of events may be expected with the participation of the dedicated younger generation with a strong determination to improve their social environment.

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