

Economic Empowerment Of Women: A Brief Overview In Context Of Rural Assam

Kritanjali Saikia, M.Phil

Ph.D. Fellow

Centre for Russian and Central Asian Studies, SIS

Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

Introduction

Women are an intrinsic part of every society and the status of women in the society is directly related with social and cultural traditions, stages of economic development achieved, educational levels and political attainments for women in society (Chakbarty, 2012) Moreover either matriarchal or patriarchal society women play a decisive role. In countries like India where society and life of the people are carried by traditional and spiritual foundations in family a mother sacrifice her life for the future of the children.

Gender sensitivity is one of the most undeniable features of the decade. As Women comprise half the world's population. They consider equal partner in the development process and their role in development cannot therefore be unattended. They are two perspectives that emerged in the contemporary discourse of gender equality: women's development and women's empowerment. With Easter Boserup's (1970) pioneering work, "Women's Role in Economic Development" the women's development perspective have rise (Mandal, 2006). But the development strategies are not only unsuccessful but also it is working against the interest of womankind. Consequently, the decade of 90s has witnessed the rise of women's empowerment perspective which got prominence at Beijing Conference (Curatolo, 2020).

Definition

Empowerment as a concept was introduced at the International Women's Conference at Nairobi in 1985 where 'empowerment' defined as a redistribution of social, power and control of resource in favour of women (Marloes A. Huis, 2017). Discussions on women's right are at the forefront of many formal information worldwide campaigns as women empowerment is a global issue. It has become one of the most widely used developmental terms. Empowerment is a 'multi-faceted', 'multi-dimensional' and 'multi layered' concept. Development of individuality is the basic concern of empowerment process ¹ "Empowerment should mean that women gain the ability to challenge and combat their oppression". But in reality and practice it has come to signify improving their material circumstances.

If development initiatives consider the economic empowerment of women, their needs, knowledge, and potential than only and the global development sector's aim to 'end poverty', 'protect the planet', and 'ensure prosperity' for all will only be achieved. Sustainable Development Goal 5 has committed "to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls," through education, finance, advocacy, and other initiatives which contribute to

¹ Anuradha S. (2009).*Role of Education in Women's Empowerment*. The Assam Tribune , guwahati.

“women’s empowerment” all over the world.² Women’s empowerment has five components: women’s sense of self-worth; their right to have and to determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally (Rosalba, 2019). Hence education, training, awareness rising, building self-confidence and actions to transform the structures and institutions is must necessary. And all these could be achieved through economic empowerment of women which is a golden key to erase all sufferings of women in rural areas. Economic empowerment of women is an important tool for empowering women and girls to claim their rights.

Assam is one of the eight states of North East India. In terms of population it is the largest state in the Region and second in geographical area after Arunachal Pradesh. Though the state has abundant natural resources and rich in culture the state is lagging behind the rest of the country (Saikia, 2020). For overall development the socioeconomic set up of the state is not suitable (Purusottam Nayak, 2009). Assam is a multiethnic state with heterogeneous cultural backgrounds, it has been experiencing insurgency and ethnic conflicts for the last three decades as a result its economy and the social fabric is under threat³. Most importantly women are worst victims in the process. On the other hand because of tribal indigenous culture the state is free from some of the social evils like dowry, sati pratha, female feticide and infanticide. But as per gender gap studies different forms of gender discrimination do exist. There is a general perception that women of Assam are as disadvantageous as the women in rest of the country. According to Assam Human Development Report (2014), the state lagged behind Manipur, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland.⁴ If we analyse the economic empowerment of women in rural areas of Assam we find that women has been actively participating in small scale economic activities. We can categories it as follows.

Agriculture

In rural areas of many districts like Nalbari, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Jorhat and Shivsagar women actively participate in agricultural work. Despite the burden of household works they help their male partners in paddy fields. But because of lack of direct market access it is not sufficient for their economic independence. Additional work opportunities can be created through modifications in the farming system, production techniques and cropping pattern. Allied agricultural activities particularly livestock farming and animal husbandry is very common as a small business among women in rural Assam. Therefore it has very good scope

² Department of Economic and Social Affairs Sustainable Development, the 17 Goals, United Nations accessed at <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

³ Assam Nayak, Purusottam and Mahanta, Bidisha.(2009).*Women Empowerment in Assam* North Eastern Hill University.

⁴ Assam human development report 2014, NITI aayog accessed at <https://www.niti.gov.in/niti/human-development/assam-human-development>

for enhancing productive work opportunities in rural areas if these are developed on scientific and commercial basis. Through better training, financial assistance, provision of marketing facilities, rural women can be encouraged to take up these activities. Moreover, rural females can take up preparation of various types of rice products on commercial basis with a linkage to nearby urban centres for marketing.

Handloom and weaving

Weaving in Assam is linked to folk life. Gandhiji, during his famous tour to promote khadi and swadeshi, was so mesmerised that he remarked: "Assamese women weave fairy tales in their clothes". Assam's silk fabrics have earned large recognition from all over the world. The state is home to several types of silks, the most precious one is muga, the golden silk exclusive to this state. Apart from Muga, there is paat, and eri. Eri used in the manufacture of warm clothes. Muga is the finest of India's wild silks with a naturally rich golden colour. It is produced only in Assam. The traditional handloom silks are more valuable in world markets than factory-made silks. Today, India exports a wide variety of silks to Western Europe and the United States, mostly as exclusive furnishing fabrics. Hence, handloom culture in rural areas has been playing an active role directly in women empowerment of rural areas in Assam.

Food processing industries

Pickles are one of the most commonly enjoyed home delicacies in India. Many rural women make pickle and jelly for household. There are examples of homemade snack and condiment business also. Such as Prakriti, started by Deepali Bhattacharyi.⁵ On the other hand in most of the rural areas food processing industries are virtually non-existent. Development of food preservation, processing, earning units can be taken up on the basis of locally available fruits in the region. Jelly, fruit juice, pickles have good demand in urban areas and generally the greater portion of this demand is met from supplies of outside Assam. So, with better initiatives in rural areas food processing industries can certainly play an important role in empowering women.

Tailoring, embroidery, knitting

In most of the households in Assam women are engaged in tailoring, embroidery and knitting. Some of them are for business purposes and some for household only. If there is provision of training centres to train rural females in tailoring embroidery, knitting works started in rural areas it can be successful in empowering them economically. As customer taste has been changing demand for such services is increasing in rural areas. Either individually or collectively females can take initiative to open such units in rural areas

Conclusion

Earlier scholarly attention was not focused enough on subjects related to empowerment of women. In the multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-racial and multi-religious state like Assam

⁵ Borthakur Pritisha.(2020). *How Assam's Prakriti is spicing up the pickle market in Northeast,Eastmojo*, guwahati.

women face one or other kinds of problem in their day to day life. Only the dimension differs from society to society or place to place. Even in the 21st century women are beaten, considered witches and tortured socially, therefore women's economic empowerment is must necessary to overcome such social evils. Thus the question of woman's economic empowerment is a world question that needs more attention. Hence the issue of women's economic empowerment through participation in various economic and developmental activities has become absolutely necessary.

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