
DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN IN NORTH BENGAL: ROLE OF THE NGOs

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Abstract: Development of women presents a challenging field of activities. In North Bengal several remote areas face many adversities. The women have to run their houses amidst severe hardship. It is known that, wherever and whenever in crisis they are the worst sufferers. Government has introduced a number of development-oriented projects and officials too serve the people.

In view of huge number of women living in remote areas are in need of education, good health condition, earning to run their livelihood the activities of several NGOs are remarkably praiseworthy.

In the present paper a study on the activities of several NGOs working in the remote corners of Northern West Bengal is presented. Historical methodology is applied for the study and field studies were undertaken for corroborating the data available in the papers and documents provided by the respective NGOs. Government documents and secondary materials are consulted for providing a complete picture.

The findings point to the fact that, still now many areas are to be touched upon. The developments are not uniform which is quite natural in a jungle infested hilly region. Women are still under the clutches of superstition and illiteracy. Poverty is the major stumbling block and stretches a hunting ground for the human trafficking especially for women and children. The field trips opened the scenario of women empowerment, their increasing confidence and positive attitude towards better living. They are sending their children especially the girl children to the nearby schools where they get mid- day meal. The women are very busy with their household duties and earning activities. The NGOs have trained up them to find out feasible and economical ways of earning. There is a visible improvement in matters of health awareness, preparation of healthy food, cleanliness of houses and surroundings and so on.

Historical studies cannot predict the future however by way of a comparative study with the past condition of the areas under discussion an optimistic point of view may lead to a bright future of the women. Their determination to improve their daily life, educate their girl children despite social as well as familial hindrances, strong action against addiction and other united activities points to their emergence as an empowered milieu.

Keywords: Non-Governmental Organizations, Empowerment of Women, Capacity Building, Development of Leadership Quality, Awareness Programmes, Sustainable Development.

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In view of huge number of women living in remote areas are in need of education, good health condition, earning to run their livelihood the activities of several NGOs are remarkably praiseworthy. In the present paper a study on the activities of several NGOs working in the remote corners of Northern West Bengal is presented.

Methodology: Historical methodology is applied for the study and field studies were undertaken for corroborating the data available in the papers and documents provided by the respective NGOs. Government documents and secondary materials are consulted for providing a complete picture.

Findings: Three major and two medium sized NGOs, working in different Geographical settings have been selected as case studies. A brief introduction of the region may not be out of context.

The district of North Dinajpore was formed on 1st April, 1992 out of the large district of West Dinajpore. Located on the Indo-Bangladesh border the district faces the challenge of trafficking of girl children. Demographical features point to the decreased sex-ratio of 939 and maximum child population of 16.1% being the largest in the State. Agriculture is the main source of livelihood and immense poverty, illiteracy, backwardness lead the people to accept the life of migrant labourer with an uncertain future. Poor parents of mostly the girl children fell prey to the traffickers.

The district of Jalpaiguri is the part of the geographical region known as Duars. It is the gateway to the hills of Darjeeling, Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan. Naturally it is located in a strategic region which is very important for commercial transport, tourism, illegal migration, exchange of narcotics and human trafficking.

Darjeeling is the northernmost part of the Districts under discussion. It is the part of the Great Himalayas which is at the height of 300 to 12000 feet and in the southernmost portion lie the Tarai region stretching along the base of the hills. Economically the district is affluent yet the women face the danger of human trafficking. Census 2011 highlights the following data:

North Dinajpore --- Population 91,276,15 (Male 46,809,027, Female 44,467,088 Sex ratio 950), Literacy - Male 81.69%, Female 70.54%

Jalpaiguri --- Population - 1,073,411 (Male 537,088, Female 536,323, Sex ratio 999), Literacy Rate 90.64%—Male 46,050 Female 43,627

Darjeeling --- Population - 1,846,823 (Male 937,259 Female 909,564, Sex ratio 970), Literacy 79.56%--- Male 85.61% Female 73.33%

Rural Aid (f.1987) is an NGO focussing on the tea-garden workers. They organize conventional programmes meant for educational, health as well as social awareness. They organize capacity building programmes and promote the development of leadership among the women residing at remote corners of North Bengal. The focus is on the protection of the rights of the female unorganized labour of the Tea gardens. It is often observed that, the adolescent girls of the Gardens and forest bustees face violence in everyday life. Trafficking is also at increase. Rural Aid protected the Rights of the girl child, community responsibility for prevention of violence against them, prevention of child marriage and dowry violence, trafficking. Anti-trafficking committees were formed at local level and Government officials also participated in the same projects. The result was positive and through collective action violence was curbed to some extent. The women were encouraged to involve in income-generating programmes. An image of the woman in a better position has been developed which in effect encouraged others and helped to develop leadership qualities. The NGO has been successful in effecting a better environment in the Kalchini Block by way of lowering violence against women and girl children.

Our next study was done at the District of North Dinajpore. Shripur Mahila o Khadi (f.mid 1990's)(SMOKUS) was formed by a group of enterprising young women of Uttar Dinajpore. The organization focuses on the rural women's health, protection of their rights and also empowers them with a good livelihood. The areas of their operation were three Blocks of Uttar Dinajpore, Matigara Gram Panchayat of Darjeeling district and Jalpaiguri district. Women belonging to the ST/SC, Minority and Backward categories are chief beneficiaries while rural children, adolescent girls and boys, migrated persons are also benefitted by their actions. They helped the women to fill up the application for jobs under MGNREGA scheme. Assertion of their rights, empowering them to challenge domestic violence, uncontrolled intoxication, human trafficking were notable achievements of the organization. Conventional awareness programmes of health, capacity building, sensitization programmes in order to make the rural milieu aware of the role of the government officials working at village level, provision for income generation programme loan to the SHGs, arrangement for safe migration help card are some notable activities of the SMOKUS.

Our next focus was on a NGO working in the forest areas of North Bengal. Uttar Banga Terai Mahila Samity (f.2000)(UBTMS) was formed under the umbrella organization of CDHI with a view to develop the women of Jalpaiguri, Coochbihar and Darjeeling. Formation of SHGs, imparting of vocational

training and extension of a hand of cooperation to them were primary objectives of the NGO. At present the organization runs with the membership of more than 8500 members, 625 SHGs. They have encouraged the women to participate in Government Projects and Training Workshops. The women have formed Mahila Milan Sabha in different centers and their progressive ventures encourage the women who are not within the orbit of the UBTMS. Spread of social education, increase of income-generating programmes, vocational training programmes, health awareness camps are some of the successful instruments of the NGO in the difficult job of eradication of backwardness in the remote corners of North Bengal.

A visit to the hills of Darjeeling opened up another dimension of women empowerment. Though early marriage is common among them yet the women enjoy social respect in the Hilly region. In case of domestic violence they may decide to break off the marriage. The eloped, unwed girls are taken back in their own families. Trafficked girls are rehabilitated easily. However the tough lifestyle, poor health and education stand in the way of development. The Darjeeling branch of All India Womens' Conference (AIWC)(f.around 1946) , Hayden Hall have done commendable performance in developing performance in developing the life style of the local milieu. The AIWC chief Smt. Gunakeshari Pradhan has earned great popularity due to her team work during disasters. They are successful in running Tailoring course, Beautician Training course, Food staff preparation course, opening up of outlets for selling the finished products, after-school tuition for BPL students, Health Awareness camps and other projects in accordance with the instruction of the Central office.

The Social Service Organization in the Hayden Hall organize numerous activities namely, after-school tuition for the BPL children, vocational training like carpet knitting ,woollen ball-making, dress-making, handicrafts making and so on. Most of the female workers were victims of domestic violence and have tasted a new self-sufficient life after joining the organization. On an average they get Rs.1200 per week plus tea, lunch and medical facilities. The organization is fairly popular among the needy persons for their dedicated service, awareness camps for the women and so on.

Some social activists have added a new dimension to the concept of women empowerment by way of initiating Home-Stays. Home-Stays were a traditional culture of tourist accommodation in the region however some better features have been added. Now mostly the women run the supplies, arrange for Eco-tourism. In this context cultivation of Mushroom, Strawberry, flowers are encouraged. Special training courses for running Home-Stays are arranged for. It has become a popular movement because of it's all-inclusive beneficial character. Several organizations have focussed on the development of the young girls. Their education, health awareness as well as development of leadership qualities among them to spread the training they have imbibed is an effective way of disseminating womens' movement.

The findings point to the fact that, still now many areas are to be touched upon. The developments are not uniform which is quite natural in a jungle infested hilly region. Women are still under the clutches of superstition and illiteracy. Poverty is the major stumbling block and stretches a hunting ground for the human trafficking especially for women and children. The field trips opened the scenario of women empowerment, their increasing confidence and positive attitude towards better living. They are sending their children especially the girl children to the nearby schools where they get mid-day meal. The women are very busy with their household duties and earning activities. The NGOs have trained up them to find out feasible and economical ways of earning. There is a visible improvement in matters of health awareness, preparation of healthy food, cleanliness of houses and surroundings and conservation of environment.

Conclusion: Undoubtedly the scope of the studies was limited due to monetary and time constraints yet several features of the activities of the NGOs may be summarized as follows:

The process of sustainable development is on the progress

The women have become self-confident of their capacity to work independently out of their house

They have become aware of their Rights and duties

They have learnt the value of united action and developed community feeling

They are earning independently as per their capacity and this has enhanced their domestic as well as social honour

They are taking better care of their families because awareness of the necessity of good health and education

Capable women get chance to lead others and sometimes raise voice against social injustice

Women have proved their excellence as agricultural farmers, weavers, garment makers, practice animal-husbandry and so on

Rural money lenders and witch craft have been reduced

Women are gradually becoming decision-makers in family as well as social issues

The social stigma on girl children has been reduced to some extent

Historical studies cannot predict the future however by way of a comparative study with the past condition of the areas under discussion an optimistic point of view may lead to a bright future of the women. Their determination to improve their daily life, educate their girl children despite social as well as familial hindrances, strong action against addiction and other united activities points to their emergence as an empowered milieu. They have successfully proved their worth as responsible citizens of the country.

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