

## THE STUDY OF WOMENS' EMPOWERMENT IN AN AGRICULTURAL DISTRICT OF WEST BENGAL: CASE STUDY OF BIRBHUM

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**Abstract:** The study of Social Economy highlights the working of non-profiteering voluntary organizations. The organizations primarily work with an objective to achieve social security especially of the people in distress. In a way they emphasize protection of Human Rights. In India the policy of social welfare was practiced since Independence and with the intensification of social problems the scope of activities increased. The Government opened several Departments and introduced policies with a view to look after the wellbeing of the citizens. The voluntary organizations too increased in number and scope of activities. Present paper highlights that phenomenal activities of several organizations who focused on the welfare of the rural people residing in agricultural region.

In the present paper effort will be made to delineate the process of responding to the burning need of development of the women in the rural sector of West Bengal. 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 will be used as chief source of information's. The proposal is suitable for the theme since it will provide an in-depth case study of practices of the social economy for the welfare of a local community and may provide an example of successful entrepreneurship. Added to that, the study also underscores the feasibility of the concept in similar rural areas located in the neighboring states and thereby encourage implementation of the schemes aiming at alternative development.

**Keywords:** Social economy, Poverty, Mal - nutrition, landlessness, illiteracy, backward communities, empowerment of women

**Introduction:** The study of Social Economy or 'the economy for common good' (Internet source, 2015) opens up the story of the sustainable development of the deprived people. Some of the parameters may be as follows--prioritization of the interest of the people, employment generation, capacity building, market-orientation, democratic administration with close tie with the beneficiaries, caring attitude for human and natural resources and so on. The working of selected non-profiteering voluntary organizations may be contextualized at this point.

Birbhum, the 'Red soiled' District is located in the central-western part of West Bengal. It shares the border with the states of Jharkhand, Bihar and the Districts of Murshidabad and Bardhaman. Comprised of a total area of 4,545 square kilometers it is included within the Geographical periphery of *RadhBang* which denotes a region with stony and rugged landscape (Chattopadhyay, 2007, p.1). The undulating landscape of the region is mostly covered with forest. In monsoon the East-ward flowing rivers cause flood. The weather is extreme. The lifestyle of the common people is very tough. More than 92% people live in villages numbering 2455 and deprived of the amenities of modern livelihood.

Agriculture and forest resources are the main means of livelihood. Around 75% of the people practice agriculture and rice is the main product. Stone crushing, rice and oilseed milling, cotton and silk harvesting and weaving, pottery and metal products

making, lac harvesting, are other occupations. The colorful projection of their traditional life style is reflected in Kanthas, the ornaments prepared of forest products, batik, leather works, silk and jute items, terracotta items, solapith and wood carvings, traditional food items, the musical Jhumur, Baul performances and dances.

It goes without saying that, women share the lion's part of these activities however their contributions were unrecognized. Now as a result of intensive activities of the Government and NGOs they have made technological progress, achieved better social status and control over their families. Present paper will explore how the phenomenal activities of several voluntary organizations led to the empowerment of the rural women of the District of Birbhum.

The Methodology is primarily Historical by nature. In order to procure information along with field studies Reports of the NGOs, Government Reports, Secondary writings were consulted.

Rabindranath Tagore founded Shantiniketan in this region blessed with the bounties of nature. He was concerned with the well-being of the indigenous people and arranged for their overall development. The 'Sriniketan' was established (1922) with an elaborate programme of village reconstruction and community development.

'Amar Kutir' was another contemporary institution which followed the Tagorean model of village reconstruction. Sushen Mukhopadhyay, a reputed political activist founded the organization (around

1921) in the forest of Ballabhpur. (Gupta, 1971) High quality of textile printing, Kantha embroidery, crafted leather products created a unique identity of the institution. The pioneering successful venture of income generation, elevation of the standard of life style in the locality placed 'Amar Kutir' on an exclusive plain.

However the intrinsic problems of the region could not be wiped out by the effort of these institutions only. (Ali, *Modern Review*, 1934) As a result Birbhum was included among the most backward Districts of West Bengal and ranked 14 among the 17 (now it is 19 because of bifurcation of West Dinajpur and Medinipur). The presence of a significant number of disadvantaged people belonging to the SC, ST, (nearly 50%) Muslim communities (37.6%) makes it important to focus on various forms of inter-group disparities'. (DHDR, 2004)

As per the Census Report total population of the District is 35,02,387 (2011) and the main components reflecting their literacy and livelihood are as follows:-  
Male --- 17,91,017 (2011) Rate of the increase of female population **956/1000**

Female --- 17,11,370 (2011)

**Rural Literacy rate – Male -76.01%, Female- 64.14%**

**Tribal population is nearly 8.15 million. Literacy**

**rate – Male 46.20%, Female 25.7. % Total literacy**

**rate 70.7%/State literacy rate 76.3%**

**Livelihood :- Cultivators Agricultural laborers**

Male : 20.41%

Male: 44.80%

Female: 5.65%

Female: 49.75%

**Workers in household industries Other workers**

Male : 2.33%

Male: 32.46%

Female: 13.60%

Female: 31.00%

Experts analyses the status of women's work participation from different angles. While more participation in work as well as added economic value may lead to their better life expectancy at childhood, lesser bias against the girl child in the family, better health and better say in the family on the other hand they have to bear dual pressure of household activities and outside job and restriction on education. This in effect 'widens the gender gap' (DHDR, 7.2, 2008). Besides, the backward communities suffer from poverty, landlessness, malnutrition and illiteracy. It is an accepted fact that, the women of the disadvantaged communities are placed in 'more' crisis situations and face more challenges than men.

The Bolpur branch of the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) (s. 1990) under the guidance of Smt. Reba Roy trained traditional crafts like tailoring, embroidering, food processing to the women. The products of the Women's Handicraft Center (1994) (Mukhopadhyay, 1422 B.S., pp. 37-41)

earned international recognition. The organization was very popular among the village women with limited means. Camps for awareness of health, education, adult literacy, encouragement of saving, training of the members of the Panchayat were regularly organized. Though the projects were meant for the women yet the male members cooperated with the female members and enjoyed a better life style.

The Elmhirst Institute of Community Studies (EICS) (f. 1983) was a tribute to Rabindranath Tagore and Leonard Elmhirst. Their ideas of rural development and community welfare guided Sri Nabakumar Mukherjee, the founder of the Institute to undertake projects with a view to work for the villagers in "the simplest possible way" (Report, 2014-5, p. 2). In view of the meagre condition of health and nutrition in the District the Institute focused on women's reproductive and child health care, integrated nutrition and health care, integrated child development, campaigning on safe motherhood, providing with shelter to the women in distress, family counseling for reconciliation, health care of the sex workers and so on. They participated in the ICDS Project of the Government of India and organized Anganwadi workers training programs since 1984. Accordingly 353 AW Centers are running in Nalhati—a village dominated by SC, ST and Muslim communities. The number of beneficiaries are 25949 children (0-6 yrs) and 5908 pregnant and lactating mothers who are provided with nutritious food. They collaborated with the ASHA Training programme under National Health Mission. Sankalpa is their programme for the commercial sex workers whereby measures are adopted to create awareness, prevent AIDS /STD/HIV transfusion among migrant laborers in some areas of the District, diagnosis and treatment. Other successful Projects include Kshanika, a short stay home for women, where they are provided with safe shelter, medical care and economic, social and psychological rehabilitation. Dorothy Elmhirst Training & Rehabilitation center for women in need (f. 2009) provides for vocational training to women with an aim to make them self-dependent.

In agricultural societies women shoulder huge responsibilities in the production of crops though their shares remain unnoticed. The Lok Kalyan Parishad (LKP) (f. 1977) focused on this aspect and tried to build up a solid foundation for the female agriculturists. They implemented Mahila Kishan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP), a sub component of NRLM. Their objective was to empower women 'through creation of sustainable livelihood opportunities based on community - managed effective sustainable agricultural practices and thereby successfully

address the Food and Nutrition issues at the household level on the basis of Decentralized Natural Resource Management and raising the income level through enhancement of production and productivity'(Report,p.16).In Birbhum they work in two blocks namely,Ilambazar and Labpur ,134 villages and the number of beneficiary women farmers are 20000.They have arranged for their technical training,develop leadership quality and capacity to handle the funds for purchase of input materials .They are encouraged to flourish kitchen gardens,school nutrition gardens .Group based grain bank is established in order to face high market price of theseed.Besides,crop diversification,integrated farming,soil moisture conservation,soil health improvement,fruit and vegetable nursery,mushroom cultivation , common property resource management are also developed.They also participate in need based bottom up planning for livelihood development. LKP also promotes measures for maternal and child health,train up women voters for the greater participation in livelihood plans and community development programs. In order to cope with the challenge of mal -nutrition BolpurManabjain (BMJ)(f.1998)focused on the production of pulses at 51 villages.They aim to 'improve food security,upgrade the nutritional status,'(Report,2014-5)and women are trained up in production and conservation of seed.Post-harvest technologies are also taught to them.Besides they are encouraged to undertake kitchen gardening,mushroom cultivation while among non-agricultural projects handicraft,embroidering,food item making are included.Legal aid service are regularly provided to them so that,they become aware of human rights.Nutrition programs for the

pregnant and lactating mothers and children within 3years of age are arranged with an aim 'to improve the health and nutritional status of the children and their mothers'.Besides their Sanitization project,training on gender empowerment to the men have resulted in improvement of family life and health condition.

Field tour in some villages of the District provided a first- hand experience on the subject. Meetings with several SHG s made it clear that,the women belonging to the backward communities are striving hard to come out of their problems.They made organized effort to prevent domestic violence,coup with alcohol addiction, social stigma for coming out of their home ,talking with the Bank officials and other male outsiders. They manage time from their working hours in the household for meetings in the Panchayat and SHGs.Though most of them were married early and could not learn yet they are no more prepared to compromise with conservatism and prepared to develop their daughters as per their ambition. In face of gender specific social torture they were prepared to take medical treatment and psychological counseling . They spend their earnings for the education of children,lend to husband for the purchase of some necessary item. Though the skill development projects show a gendered approach and concentrate on development of 'womanly'qualities yet increasingly the NGOs are undertaking gender-neutral skill development projects and help to create self-confidence ,liberty from gender bias and entrepreneurship among women. After all the smiling faces convince the visitor of the bright future of the challenging movement for women's' empowerment.

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