



Education and women empowerment in India with special reference to Cooch Behar District of West Bengal

Pralay Kumar Bishnu

Research Scholar, Department of Education, CMJ University, Jorabat, Meghalaya

Abstract: *Education of women is realized to be the most essential part for the development of the society. Empowerment of women has been recognised as the central issue in determining the status of women. The paper focuses on women empowerment in India in general and particularly with respect to Cooch Behar district of west Bengal. Women education particularly in the Cooch Behar district has been impressive to a great extent. Due to which it is found there is lot of women empowerment in terms of economy and productivity. Women from this district have contributed a lot in the progress and development of West Bengal in social, cultural and economic sectors and this was possible through different schemes and policies implemented by the Government of West Bengal.*

Key words: *Education, Empowerment of women, Cooch Behar.*

Introduction:

Women education is an important input of the production function, i.e., 'Human Development Improvement Function' which explains the effectiveness of expenditure directed to human development. Women education has important bearings on child health and their survival. Education of women is realized to be the most essential part for the development of the society. There are certain factors resulting in slow progress of women's education such as general indifference to education of girls, social resistance arising out of fear and misconceptions that might alienate girls from traditions and social values and lead to maladjustment, conflicts and non-conformism, early marriage and social inhibitions against girls pursuing education after marriage, prevalence of child labour among girls belonging to weaker sections and the hard domestic chores which some of the unmarried girls-even in the middle-class families are required to perform and the prevailing notion that the sole occupation of women is to bear children, looks after her husband and children, and thus be restricted to domestic work.

Empowerment of women has been recognised as the central issue in determining the status of women. Hooda & Hooda (2017) emphasized following ways to Empower Women

1. Changes in women's mobility and social interaction
2. Changes in women's labour patterns
3. Changes in women's access to control over resources

4. Changes in women's control over decision making
5. Through providing education
6. By self-employment and self-help groups
7. Providing minimum needs like nutrition, health facility, sanitation, housing etc.
8. Other than this, society should change the mentality towards women.
9. Encouraging women to develop in their field they are good at and make a career.

Women Empowerment in Indian context

A look at the trend of literacy rates in India reveals that there exists a Male-Female gap in literacy rate presented in Table 1. The existing literacy gap has to be minimized between male and female and in doing so there is a need for means of tackling it.

Table 1: Literacy Rates in India -1951 to 2011 (Figures in per cent)

Census Year	Persons	Males	Females	Male-Female gap in literacy rate
1951	18.33	27.16	8.86	18.30
1961	28.30	40.40	15.35	25.05
1971	34.45	45.96	21.97	23.99
1981	43.57	56.38	26.76	26.62
1991	52.21	64.13	39.29	24.84
2001	65.58	75.85	54.16	21.69
2011	74.04	82.14	65.46	16.68

Source: Census of India 2011

The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. India has also ratified various international conventions and human rights instruments committing to secure equal rights of women. Key among them is the ratification of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1993. The Government of India declared 2001 as the Year of Women's Empowerment (Swashakti). The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women was passed in 2001. A number of Vocational Education Programmes have been designed by various open universities to enhance the knowledge and skills of students for their immediate employment. The Twelfth Five Year Plan has specially laid its emphasis on skill education. Women of India in majority of the cases are suppressed under custom and law. They avail very little freedom in life and opportunity to grow. Our societal process is such that both men and women of our society fail to realise that women are the companions of men, having equal mental capabilities. In many occasions girls are treated as liability and unwanted resource.

Goals constitute the Population & Women's Empowerment Policy (2001) of the Government of India.

- To maintain current declining trends in fertility so as to achieve a stable population size at least by the middle of the 21st Century.

- To ensure safe motherhood and reduce reproductive health system related morbidity and mortality.
- To achieve gender equality in the truest sense; although Assam is one of the states with a perceived improved situation for women in society, this is not enough.
- To promote responsible adolescent and youth behaviour.
- To provide adequate health care and welfare services for the elderly and differently abled.
- To promote the economic benefits of migration and urbanisation while controlling their adverse social and health effects.
- To increase public awareness of population and reproductive health issues.

Projects Undertaken for Empowerment of Women in India

- Schemes of National Scheduled Tribes Finance and Development Corporation
- Integrated Child Development Scheme
- National Rural Health Mission
- Janani Suraksha Yojana
- Integrated Child Protection Scheme
- Swadhar—A scheme for Women in Difficult Circumstances
- Ujjawala—A Scheme for Prevention of Trafficking and Rescue, Rehabilitation and Reintegration
- Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY)
- Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana (IGMSY)—A Conditional Maternity Benefit Scheme
- Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (RGSEAG)—Sabla
- Swayam Siddha
- Scheme for Working Women Hostel
- STEP (Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women)
- Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana
- Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY)
- Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)

The National Mission for Empowerment of Women (NMEW) has been named Mission *Poorna Shakti*, implying a vision for holistic empowerment of women. The National Resource Centre for Women has been set up which functions as a national convergence centre for all schemes and programmes for women. It acts as a central repository of knowledge, information, research and data on all gender related issues and is the main body servicing the National and State Mission Authority.

In most of the rural villages in India, from the first day of their birth, the rural girl children do not get as much care and commitment from the parents and from the society as the boys would. In some societies baby girls are breast fed only for a shorter period than the boys. By denying adequate feeding and nourishment knowingly or unknowingly the mothers are discriminating the girl children. Of course, there is legal guarantee for female education in India but in practice only thirty-eight per cent girls attend the primary schools. This is mainly because of the negative opinion of the parents and the society as follows.

Empowerment includes higher literacy level and education for women, better health care for women and children equal ownership of productive resources, their rights and responsibilities, improved standards of living while acquiring empowerment include, economic empowerment social empowerment and gender justice that is to eliminate all types of discrimination against women and the girl child. So, empowerment is a state of building capacities (that is power) so as to understand individual's rights and to perform his/her responsibilities in an effective manner.

In this context Tapen (1998) opines that education provides formulation about health and nutrition, reproductive and sexual rights, family planning, seclusion, gender equality, environmental awareness, religious objectives, political consciousness, economic opportunities, women rights and legal provision and consumption patterns etc. which differently empower women in a complete sense. Education is the fundamental right of all the citizens of India including women. Therefore, educationalists emphasise on the importance of restructuring educational policies and curriculum with the purpose of empowering women.

Further, Digumarti Bhaskara Rao & Digumarti Pushpalatha Rao (2004) highlighted the importance of women education, the availability of various schemes for women empowerment after independence in the Departments of Health Affairs, Family welfare and Childcare. It also underlines the various preventive and protective measures for the women to protect them from domestic violence. The book emphasises the need for helping the Muslim women to come out of their traditional negative mind set and argues that education is the best means to put an end to all forms of negative mentality among Muslim women. The book also underlines the need for multi facet approach to address women illiteracy. The need for the present time is cooperation at all levels from regional to national and international.

Sharma (2005) discusses the view of Gandhi on women empowerment and importance of various training programs for women empowerment based on the status of women. It's a narrative on the status of women education in India.

Rao and Rao (2010), provide worldwide statistics on the status of women and highlight the poor plight of the uneducated women in different parts of the world. The study emphasizes that providing quality and life-based education is the best way to empower women to face the challenges and get hold of the opportunities. Empowering them through education alone will put an end to all forms of discrimination, domestic violence and disparity in the society. Citing the UN's commitment for women empowerment, the researchers highlight that the best way to achieve peace and overall development is through empowerment of women through proper education.

Nayak & Mahanta (2009) analyze the status of women empowerment in India based on various indicators like women's household decision making power, financial autonomy, freedom of movement, political participation, acceptance of unequal gender role, exposure to media, access to education, experience of domestic violence etc. The data for the study was collected and collated from various primary and secondary sources. The study reveals that women of India are relatively disempowered and they enjoy somewhat lower status than that of men in spite of many efforts undertaken by government. Gender gap exists regarding access to education and employment. Household decision making power and freedom of movement of women vary considerably with their age, education and employment status. It is found that acceptance of unequal gender norms by women are still prevailing in the society. More than half of the women believe wife beating to be justified for one reason or the other. Fewer women have final say on how to spend their earnings. Control over cash earnings increases with age, education and with place of residence. Women's exposure to media is also less relative to men. Rural women are more prone to domestic violence than that of urban women. A large gender gap exists in political participation too.

Suguna (2001) highlights the multi-dimensional role of the educated employed women in all walks of life. The author explains how empowered women are becoming self-assertive, self-disciplined, decisive,

innovative, group-oriented players, and desire to improve their living conditions and also how they are trying to use the best available technologies and comforts in their families according to their income.

Education and Women Empowerment in context to Cooch Behar District

There is wide range of educational gaps between rural and urban population in different sub-divisions of Cooch Behar district (Sharma, 2014). in the district of Cooch Behar represents 1826 primary schools, 101 middle schools, 94 High Schools, 159 Higher Secondary Schools, 43 Professional and technical schools and 14 Colleges and only one University as found in the Census report, 2011. The female literacy (68.2%) and rural literacy (72.84) status of the district of Cooch Behar is below the national average (74.04).

Schemes relate to education and to the economic rehabilitation of women, those schemes are:

- Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) Schemes.
- Sukanya samridhi yojna.
- Balika samridhi Yojna.
- Mukhyamantri Rajshri Yojna.
- Mukhysmsntri Kanya Suraksha Yojna.
- Mukhyamantri Laadli Yojna.
- Mazi Kanya Bhagyashree Schemes.
- Nanda Devi Kanya Yojna.

Some of the central government-sponsored schemes, especially targeted towards women, which are implemented by the government of West Bengal, are:

- Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (RGSEAG) – Sabla
- Swabalamban Programme for SC, ST Women.
- Support to Training and Employment Program for Women (STEP).
- Swayamsidha Programme.
- KanyashreePrakalpa(West Bengal Govt.).

West, Bengal is implementing various schemes, programs, social welfare schemes, Health and Nutrition, scholarship for women empowerment, girl child, pregnant women, mothers, Women Health.

Choudhury, Subhashis & Sarkar, Dulon (2012) states that during the pre-independent period, as per HDI ranking Cooch Behar district ranked 11th out of 18 districts of West Bengal. The causes of backwardness of the district lie behind deplorable condition of women due to excessive gender bias in the all stages of society. The present paper tries to find out educational status, work participation, level of gender inequality of the district and to suggest some relevant strategies implication for reducing this gender gap to promote the deprived womenfolk of the district in this context. In another study by Chakraborty, Nandini (2014) revealed that complex heterogeneous relationship has been detected for the state of West Bengal where many underdeveloped districts (interms of women wellbeing index and per capita NDDP) performed at par with their developed counterpart. Therefore, it is very necessary to investigate why, despite their economic and social exclusion in less developed regions, the girls' are induced to continue education.

Indicators of Cooch Behar district depicts the female literacy rate to be 69.08% and after 18 years of age 54.2% of the girls get married as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Selected Indicators of Cooch Behar District

District	Per Capita Net District Domestic Product	Female literacy (%)	Girls married after 18 (%)	Married women reported less than 3 rd order birth (%)	Sex Ratio
Cooch Behar	26897.15	69.08	54.2	78.3	942

Source: RCH and Family Welfare Programme, Health on the March, 2010-11, Department of Health and Family Welfare, Government of West Bengal.

Statistical Abstract 2009, BAE&S, GoWB.

Cooch Behar district is among the bottom six in terms of Women Well-being Index (WWI) recorded lower dropout with 14th rank as in 2011. Enrolment in secondary education for girls happens to be 74.71%. The policy implementation of Govt. of West Bengal in terms of the “Kanyasri” project is highly successful to reduce drop out of females from the schools. There is a variation of disparities in terms of the number of students with that of institutions across the Cooch Behar district. The institution pupil ratio is impressive at the primary and middle school level but in the higher secondary level, the condition of institution pupil ratio is not desirable. The promulgation of the West Bengal Panchayat Act there has been lot of improvement specifically with regard to women and child development.

Conclusion:

Women education particularly in the Cooch Behar district has been impressive to a great extent. Due to which it is found there is lot of women empowerment in terms of economy and productivity. Women from this district have contributed a lot in the progress and development of West Bengal in social, cultural and economic sectors and this was possible due to the initiative of West Bengal Government.

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