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Rural Women Empowerment: A Case Study on Scheduled Caste Population of Haora District, West Bengal, India

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Abstract:

Women empowerment refers to the creation of an environment for women where they can make decisions of their own for their personal benefits as well as for the society. It refers to increasing and improving the social, economic, political and legal strength of the women. But now a day, Empowerment of women has become a universal problem. In rural areas, this problem is very much prominent. Rural women have lack of basic education, suffer from malnutrition, engage with various household activities which are not considered as economic contribution, are dominated by men, have low work participation, get inequality in working place, have to get early married etc. These various problems related to women status are found frequently among Scheduled Caste population group as this group is one of the disadvantage sections in our society. Therefore, in the present paper, the status of rural scheduled caste women of Haora district in West Bengal has been examined not only for understanding present scenario of their empowerment, but also discover some new ways to make them more prosperous and more independent.

Keywords: Scheduled caste population, rural women, empowerment

1. Introduction and Background of the Study

Women Empowerment refers to the increasing of the spiritual, social, political or economic strength of all women. It is frequently seen that the empowered in their capacities develop confidence. Rural women, as opposed to women in urban settings, face inequality at much higher rates, and in all sphere of life. Urban women enjoy relatively higher access to economic opportunity, health and education, and experience less domestic violence than that of rural women. In our caste oriented society, the situation of rural women among lower caste is more painful. Especially in scheduled caste society, women are dominated by men traditionally. Women are far behind than men in any aspect of social, economic, political and cultural factors. There are various causes behind the less participation of rural scheduled caste women in different social and economic sectors. Such as –

- Lack of basic primary education which create hindrance on social awareness of rural women. If we bifurcate the education level of rural female then as per the NSSO Jun 2010, 46.7% are not at all literate, 31.8% are literate up to primary level, 11.1% up to middle level and only 10.3% are educated up to secondary level.
- Most of the rural women suffer from malnutrition which increase maternal mortality rate, infant mortality rate etc.
- In rural areas, women are mainly engaged with different kinds of household activities. But their contribution in household work is not considered as a part of any economic contribution to family income.
- In rural area women are oppressed by men. Because of prevailing of men dominated society, women cannot express their opinion freely even if the matter is related to them.
- In spite of many govt. laws, rules and regulation in favor of gender indiscrimination and gender equality, in rural area, inequality is very much found. Here women are treated as negligible part of the society.
- In rural area, women are far away from economic opportunity. If we look the status of employment of rural women then 54.20% are self-employed, 40.30% are casual laborer and only 5.5% are regular employer in different sectors.

Concepts like India shining, socio-economic development cannot be succeeded without the participation and empowerment of rural downtrodden women, particularly the Scheduled Caste women who constitute largest number living below the poverty line. Unless the light of knowledge and education dawns on the women folk of the countryside, India cannot be raised its head and 'Shining India' concept will not be flourished. In this context, empowerment of rural scheduled caste women is very much necessary.

1.1. Study Area

The present study focuses on empowerment of rural women in scheduled caste population. For this purpose, Haora district is selected as study area. Haora district, situated in left bank of Hooghly River, is one of the prominent districts in West Bengal. The Haora district lies between 22°48' North and 22°12' North Latitudes and between 88°23' East and 87°50' East Longitudes. This district ranks

9th in term of total population out of which rural population is 36.62%. In the rural area, 22.96% are belonging under scheduled caste which is considered as one of the backward, untouchable caste. The literacy rate, educational level, health status, decision making power in family, work participation rate of rural scheduled caste women is very much painful. Therefore, it is very much rationale and logically true to choose Haora district as study area for the research work.

1.2. Objectives

The overall aim of this research paper is to find out the present status of the empowerment of rural scheduled caste women population of Haora district. But there are some specific objectives which help us to reach at the final aim of the study. These are –

1. To examine the position of rural scheduled caste women in Haora district.
2. To find out the status of social, political and economic empowerment of rural scheduled caste women in Haora district.
3. To examine the problems related to the empowerment of rural scheduled caste women in Haora district.
4. To find out the possible ways for increasing empowerment of rural scheduled caste women in Haora district.

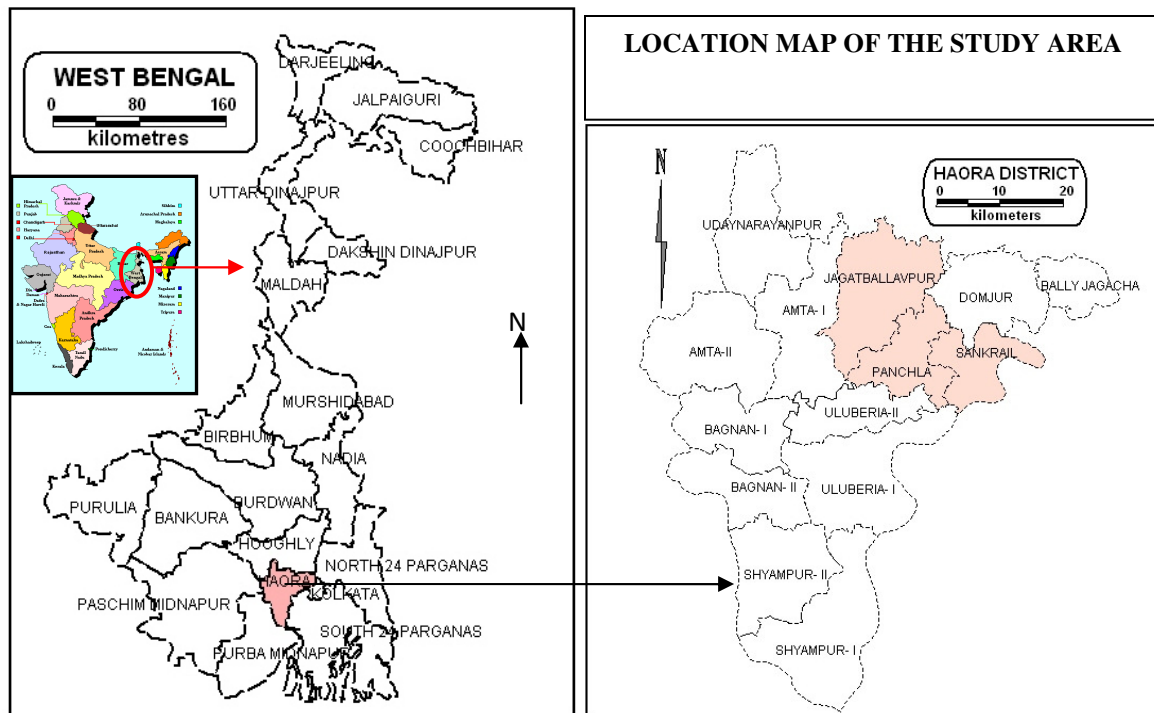


Figure 1: Source: Survey of India

2. Methodology

Taking into account of the merits of the multiple methods, in the present study various research designs have been adopted. There is close relationship between various social and economic condition for empowering women. For this, co-relational research design has been used in this paper. This research design also enables to use descriptive statistics and explanation of analysis. The design is effective in obtaining information related to people thoughts, feelings and opinions for empowering women in present day situation. The present study is not mere description of the events but to go deep into the situation very intimately. Therefore, a combination of both descriptive and survey method has also been adopted.

The present study is based on both primary and secondary sources of data. Secondary data and information has been collected from various sources and departments such as census of india, NATMO office, Haora district library, Block Development offices, Gram Panchayet offices, Haora SDO, etc. Questionnaire schedule, interview schedule, information sheet for the collection of primary data has been used. Questionnaire scheduled for rural SC women, interview scheduled for the head of those women i.e, their husbands and information sheet for various department are prepared as per requirement of the study.

The collected data about the empowerment level of rural women are being sorted and arranged through cleaning and coding and then organized for easy analysis. Qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis have been used with descriptive as well as inferential statistics and cartographic methods have also been applied to explain the result of the study.

2.1. Universe and Sample

In Haora district, out of total population 14.82% are scheduled caste. Though a little bit of development has been found in this caste but status of women under this category are less developed and less empowered. Therefore, for the fulfillment of the research, scheduled caste rural women population of Haora district has been considered as total population of the study.

For the selection of samples simple random sampling, stratified random sampling etc methods have been implied in the study area. By these methods, 360 rural Scheduled caste women population from three blocks of Haora district has been chosen for conducting primary survey.

3. Analysis of Data

A society is not formed by the male only. In the process of the development of a society man and women both play equal importance role. In this context, empowerment of women must be necessary. But in our society, in their daily life, Women face various kinds of problems which not only push them backward but also suppress their all desires and kill their all happiness. In the rural area, these problems are prevailing more than urban area and in the rural area women are very less empowered in disadvantage groups such as in scheduled caste, scheduled tribe etc groups.

In Haora district, scheduled caste (SC) population is 14.82 percent out of total population. 56.72 percent SC population are lived in the rural areas. The sex ratio of total SC population in Haora district is 959 which far better than total average population which is 939. But this sex ratio is very much varied from blocks to blocks. The literacy rate among rural scheduled caste women is very much painful. Only 54.29 percent of rural SC women are literate where SC male literates are 65.9 percent according to Census 2011. Therefore, male – female literacy gap is also high. In overall view, in most of the blocks of Haora district near about 50 percent SC females are illiterate which make them less empowered and creates hindrance on their equal participation in various socio-economic situations. Because of the low literacy, their dignity at home and at workplace is also least.

Work participation is considered as one of the important parameter to understand the level of empowerment of women. In Haora district, out of total SC rural female population, only 15.97 percent are engaged with various kinds of work. Due to lack of education, participation rate of SC rural women in govt. as well as service related jobs in not in a situation to well say. In rural areas, SC female are mainly engaged with household industries such as Jorry works, stone setting, sewing etc. 39.71 percent SC women are related with others works such as home maid, lady servant, care taker of children, sellers of vegetables in markets produced by them etc. In overall view, SC women have to engage with various kinds of jobs to meet only their family basic needs, not to fulfill their own desires and demands.

After reviewing the various socio-economic attributes related to women empowerment, it has been found that status of women is below satisfactory level. For this, level of development is varying from blocks to blocks in Haora district. Hence, index of development of rural scheduled caste women has been measured by Kendall's method. In this method, five parameters have been taken into consideration such as scheduled caste - sex ratio, female literacy, male-female literacy gap, female workers, and female main workers.

NAME OF C.D BLOCK	SEX RATIO OF SC POPULATION 2011	RANK	PERCENT OF RURAL SC FEMALE LITERATES 2011	RANK	SC RURAL MALE FEMALE LITERACY GAP 2011	RANK	PERCENT OF SC RURAL FEMALE WORKER 2011	RANK	PERCENT OF SC RURAL FEMALE MAIN WORKER 2011	RANK	TOTAL RANK
UDAYNARAYANPUR	966	5	51.17	12	39.17	7	23.34	2	49.24	8	34
AMTA-II	947	13	51.15	13	38.15	14	13.93	10	38.52	12	62
AMTA- I	957	10	54.68	7	47.68	13	13.9	11	51.66	7	48
JAGATBALLAVPUR	965	6	49.7	14	35.7	10	19.95	4	47.66	9	43
DOMJUR	1011	1	53.2	9	44.2	4	17.45	6	64.53	2	22
BALLY JAGACHA	943	14	72.18	1	71.18	2	32.86	1	80.9	1	19
SANKRAIL	980	2	62.45	2	60.45	5	15.48	8	61.14	3	20
PANCHLA	955	11	54.15	8	46.15	1	20.64	3	55.21	4	27
ULUBERIA-II	979	3	51.6	11	40.6	11	10.68	14	53.6	5	44
ULUBERIA- I	964	7	60.45	3	57.45	6	13.78	12	45.8	10	38
BAGNAN- I	952	12	57.58	5	52.58	8	13.95	9	51.99	6	40
BAGNAN- II	969	4	57.79	4	53.79	12	16.7	7	41.16	11	38
SHYAMPUR- I	962	8	55.88	6	49.88	3	11.96	13	33.84	13	43
SHYAMPUR- II	959	9	52.09	10	42.09	9	18	5	29.64	14	47

Table 1: Index of Development of Rural Scheduled Caste Female Population by Kendall's Method

Source: Census of India, 2011

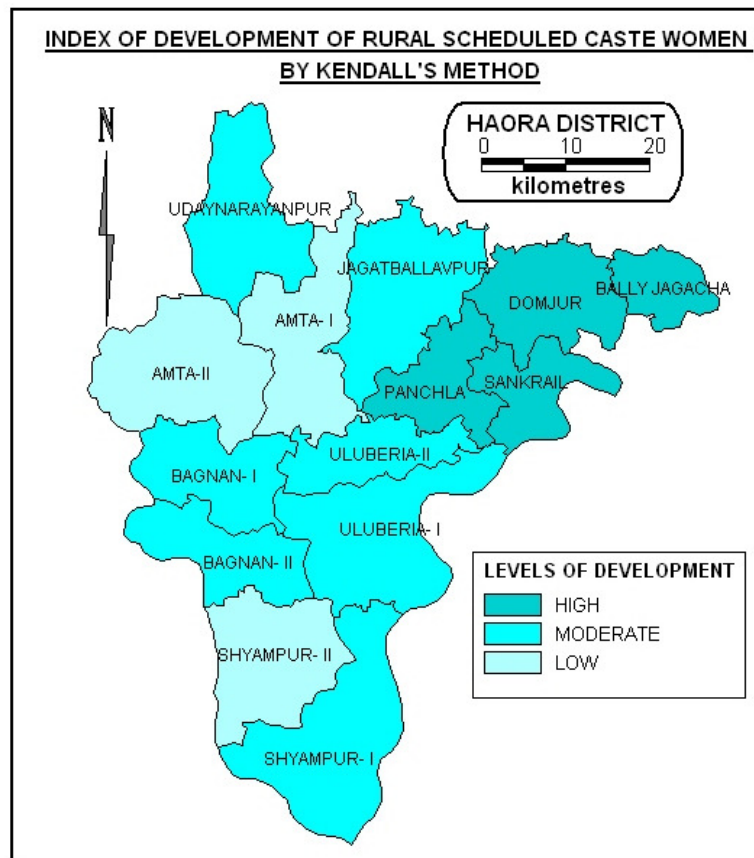


Figure 2: Source: Census of India, 2011
Source: Census of India, 2011

In the following diagram it has been clearly found that level of development of Sc women is high in Domjur, Sankrail, Bally-Jagacha and Panchla block. On the other hand, in Amta-I and II and Shyampur-II block, levels of development of women is very poor. In these blocks the socio-economic attributes related to women is below expected level. In rest of the blocks, level of development of women is moderate. In overall view, SC women in the study area are less empowered due to low literacy, less work and political participation, less dignity in work place, less decision making power in houses.

3.1. Main Findings from Primary Data Analysis

A micro level door to door survey has also been done on the scheduled caste women to know the real scenario of their status in various kinds of socio-economic situation. After minute observation and analysis of primary data it has been found that –

- In the rural area, most of the Scheduled caste (SC) girls get married before the age of 18. Near about 44 percent respondents has told that they have to do this because their guardians have no desire to encourage themselves for continuing their education and has also the superstitions that girls are not suitable economically for their families.
- Education of girls is very much influenced by their early marriage because 88 percent respondents have to leave their education for their early marriage.
- Dowry system is sharply prevailing in the rural area and 68 percent of women (respondents) are victimized by it.
- Educational level of SC women and of their husbands is very low. About 58 percent of both of them have up to eighth class standard of education and only 4-5 percent of educated up to graduate level and above. This painful scenario pushes the rural SC women to the world of compromise against their desires.
- Due to lack of health consciousness, negligence of family; child death rate, IMR, MMR etc are also high in rural areas.
- In the study area, girl child is seemed to burden in the society till now. Wonderfully, 58 percent of rural women, in spite of being a woman, prefers son than daughter.
- In the study area, SC marginal women worker are more than main worker. About 84 percent of total SC women workers age engaged with various kinds of household industries such as Jorry and embroidery works, stone setting on necklace, jewellery works etc. Only 9 percent SC women are engaged with other works such as nursing, teaching etc. some of them are Panchayat Clerk, beautician, Anganwari worker etc.
- 65 percent of the SC women workers earn 2000/- per month. This income is not sufficient for maintaining their families. As a result, quality of living in term of well education, good health condition, proper food habit, is decreasing continuously.

- In the study area SHG plays important positive role for empowering women. Through SHGs, women can now step to go outside of home boundary and also take important decisions in their houses. More than 50 percent of rural SC women involve with SHGs.
- Extreme poverty is very much prominent in most of the surveyed families. This fact pushes the rural women to join with SHGs from where they can take loan easily for maintaining their families. More than 90 percent women have told that because of easily available micro loan facilities, they have joined with various SHGs.

Particulars	Percentage of Women Respondents	Particulars	Percentage of Women Respondents
Marriage Before 18 Years Old	44	Below 2000 Rupees Monthly Income	65
Discontinuation of Education Just After Marriage	88	Full Family Support to The Work	79
Dowry at The Time of Marriage	68	Engagement with Self Help Groups (SHG)	53
Support to Dowry System	22	Taking Loan Facility From SHG	95
Educational Level Upto Eighth Class Respondents	58	Put Own Decision In Casting Of Vote	68
Educational Level Upto Graduate Level of Respondents	4	Necessity of Women Candidates In Gram Panchayat	80
Preferences to Girl Child	30	Decision Making In Buying Daily Materials	39
Work Participation Rate	70	Decision Making on Child Education	33
Household Industrial Workers	84	Decision Making For Visiting to Guest Home or to Tourist Spot	19
Others Worker	9	Decision Making In Savings Of Money	23

Table 2: Present Status of Rural Scheduled Caste Women in Haora District
Source: Field Survey, 2015

- In case of decision making in various family matters, opinion of rural SC women has little heard and least opportunity has been given to them to make decisions. But in case of own health related problem, 71 percent respondents have told that their family members give little attention to their health care. For that reason, all decisions related to their own health are being taken by themselves.
- In case of various aspects of women status such as equal dignity, equal opportunity, equal incentives in working place like a man; 50-60 percent respondents have given answer in a negative mode.

3.2. Problem and Potential Solutions related to Women Empowerment

From the above discussions, it has been found that rural SC women are being denied of their rights in the family, access to better health and education, say in family matters etc. and as a result they always feel ignored in the family. Their socio-economic potentiality has been suppressed by various problems and barriers. These barriers are lack of proper education, low educational level of the family members, early marriage, prevailing of dowry system, negative thought regarding to girl children, more priority to son than daughter, malnutrition, low consciousness regarding health, less work participation, less dignity in working place, pay unequal incentives in same work, no respect to the household work of women, unequal access to economic opportunities, less voice in societal decision making etc.

India today is on the edge of a paradigm shift in its economic growth and position in the emerging world. We should highlight the benefits of securing women's active participation in all stages of decision making, ensuring their legal and political empowerment and their inclusion in devising strong gender responsive legal frameworks. All of these can only be possible through the following points-

- Free and compulsory education must be implemented properly and equal opportunities of higher education should be provided.
- Vocational education should be introduced in all high school so that girls can learn various kind of activities by which they can socially and economically independent.
- Women economic right is definitely an important indicator for enhancement of their status. So, women labour need to be recognized. Therefore, equal economic opportunities should be provided to the women.
- The rural women need to be extended access to land, financial decision making, household budgeting, bank accounts etc.
- Most of the women rural areas work very long hour at numerous tedious tasks as well as take care of their children and homes. Therefore, we should recognize the physical hardships endured by women.
- More importance should be given to the opinion of women regarding family matters.
- Government should more active for the proper implication of the schemes related to women empowerment.

4. Conclusions

From the above discussion it is clear that in the study area, SC women are less empowered and male members control the destiny of women. In our society, it is our general perception that male child should be given more priority than female child especially in rural areas. We should not forget that when women are economically and socially empowered they become the potent force to bring change not only in their own family but in the whole society. The contribution of women and their role in the family as well as economic development and social transformation are pivotal and need to be taken into consideration. We, the male member, should understand that without empowering women in various parts of society, overall development is impossible. Women can gain power only when men start respecting the feelings of women and accept their contribution what they are devoting to the family matters.

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