



WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND ROLE OF WELFARE ORGANISATIONS IN THE TEA GARDENS IN ASSAM

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Abstract:

Woman earned the due respect and regards in the ancient Indian society. But in the medieval era, the status of women went down considerably which has now revamped slowly. In Assam, the status of women is high in comparison to the women of some other States of India. Women in the tea garden worker's society in Assam is far away from the reform status or trend of modern Indian women and hence could be considered a typical society which needs a special attention. There are about 850 tea gardens in Assam with estimated 25-30 lakhs population living within these tea gardens out of which approx half of this numbers are women. In situation like tea garden set-up, it is only imperative to start the motivational work at the grassroots level. There is no better way to do this job other than to organize the entire women community in a tea garden under one umbrella for a mass awareness. The women organization or "MahilaMandal" or "MahilaSamiti" had little or no role of any worth among the Tea garden women till recent times mainly due to resistance from then Tea Gardens' owners or unwillingness of the women volunteers of the outside tea garden society to work with dedication in the tea garden locality. This trend had slowly changed. Now, more and more gardens' management are encouraging the women group, most popularly called as "Mothers club" in the tea garden. There is a growing awareness and compulsion among the buying or importing country for ethical trade to get involved themselves in the social work like health and sanitation or women empowerment in the sourcing country as their corporate social responsibility (CSR). The emphasis is given in this paper to study the scope of welfare organisations to change, uplift the status of women or empowering them in their respective society in the tea garden.

Introduction:

Women play a major role in the family in most of the rural society in India. Baring some aberration, woman is still compared to Mother Nature who is the origin of every human being. In general, woman earned the due respect and regards in the ancient Indian society. In ancient India, women or more precisely the wife was considered to be "Ardhangini" which actually shows the importance or the status given to the women in the society. But in the medieval era, the status of women went down considerably. The position of women in modern India has changed dramatically. Her position in modern society is equal to that of men, socially, economically, educationally, politically and legally. In spite of that it is not very uncommon to hear crime against women in the pretext of Dowry, extra-marital issue, status



killing etc. The discrimination against women in general and towards the girl child in particular is not completely free out of mindset from the Indian people. The Government of India, considering this general biasness to the weaker sex had formulated several acts, more recent being the women reservation bill 2008 or the The Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill, which is still pending . This bill proposes to provide thirty three per cent of all seats in the Lower house of Parliament of India the *Lok Sabha* and state legislative assemblies shall be reserved for women. The Upper House or *Rajya Sabha* passed it on 9th Mar 2010. Nevertheless, the status of women has gradually changed from the past but unfortunately this change is more pronounced among the more educative or urban society rather than the remote and rural society.

Objective of the Study:

To study the need of women's empowerment and role of welfare organisations in Tea garden to change, uplift the status of women or empowering them.

Methodology:

Data for the present study were collected from two basic sources namely: primary sources where data were collected with the help of interview and personal observations. The secondary data were collected from different sources such as books, journals, newspapers etc.

Women in Assam:

In Assam, the status of women is high in comparison to the women of some other States of India. One salient feature in the Assamese society was the absence of the dowry system. Sex ratio is a very important indicator that reflects the status of women in society. It reflects whether she enjoys those rights to survival, protection and development. In 2011 the male-female ratio in Assam was 1000: 958 which was slightly better than the all India average of 1000: 943. The imbalance in the male female ratio is due to blind faith as well as the result of illiteracy which have resulted in destruction of the baby girl at prenatal stage due to sex determination test (which fortunately has been banned by the Government of India), deliberate malnutrition and neglect of the girl child which results in this imbalance. In the field of education, women in Assam are in a better position than the all-India average. As per 2011 census the literacy rate for Assam is 72.19 per cent as against 74.04 per cent for India. While male literacy is 77.85 per cent (India-82.14 per cent), female literacy stands at 66.27 (rural 63 %) per cent as against 65.46 percent in all over India. The male female gap in the literacy rate is still perceptible although it is declining over time and is much below the all-India average. Attainment of a higher literacy rate alone does not make a community educationally advanced. Completion of primary stage of education and continuation of school upto 15 years of age, etc. are taken as indicators of educational attainment. Female work participation is another indicator of women's status in the society. Assam is not the worst among major states of the Indian Union in terms of human development and gender equality but it ranks quite low. Assam has a largely rural agrarian economy, which is characterized by high rate of work participation of women. Though Female Work Participation Rates (FWPR)



is high, as it is subsistence farming, women do not benefit economically, though they share a disproportionate share of the work burden. Status of women is in Tea Garden in Assam is either same or lower within their society but certainly not better.

Women in Tea garden society – Advantage and disadvantages:

Women in Tea garden worker's society in Assam are far away from the reform status and the trend of modern Indian women and hence could be considered a typical society which needs a special attention. There are about 850 tea gardens in Assam with estimated 25-30 lakhs population living within these tea gardens out of which approx half of this numbers are women. It is impossible to think about status of women of Assam in general without considering such a huge group of people residing in the Tea garden. The role of women organisations on empowering the women status is a proven fact all over the world. The emphasis is given in this paper to study the scope of women organisations to change, uplift the status of women or empowering them in their respective society in the tea garden.

As discussed above, there are about 20-30 lakhs people working in the Tea Garden in Assam out of which 50% are women. These women are either illiterate or half literate. Empowering the women in rural area in Assam without bringing the women in the tea garden into the ambit will be a futile exercise. The socio-cultural and environmental characteristics within the tea garden workers' society are quite unique and different from the rest of the societies outside the tea garden. Most of the people in the tea garden reside in the garden in the management given dwelling or land. This group of people were brought to Assam from different parts of central India in the last century by than British planters and continued to remain in the respective garden till today engaging themselves in the different plantation activities. The very nature of the tea garden work demands huge manual labour mainly tea leaf plucking and vast majority of these work is done by the women worker both as permanent as well as seasonal temporary workers. Women group in the tea garden is considered to be equal earner with the men counterpart. Besides being a earner, women also play major role in the child rearing and other household activities like cooking etc. Men are found to be less involved in day to day family activities rather they often found alcoholic in nature which ends up in domestic violence. Though women are equal earner but their status is still unsecured within the family or in the society. Illiteracy and Alcoholism have direct bearing and acts as a barrier in the process of empowering women in the tea garden. Other social evils like superstition, child marriage, discrimination to girl child, child labour and lack of awareness for savings. Men always play dominant role in the society and voice of women finds no place when it comes for any social change or reforms.

Scope for women's organization in Tea Garden:

In situation like tea garden set-up, it is only imperative to start the motivational work at the grassroots level. There is no better way to do this job other than to organize the entire women community in a tea garden under one umbrella for a mass awareness. The work can only be done by educating these illiterate women about their right and duty. The role of an effective women organization or "*MahilaMandal*" or "*MahilaSamiti*" comes into play to streamline their common thought and aspiration to achieve a desired goal in their personal as well as social life.



In Assam first *Mahilasamiti* was established at Dibrugarh in 1915 followed by another at Nagaon in 1917. The *samitis* which were formed, between 1915 and 1920 had similar ideological content with a strong Gandhian influence. At this juncture, it is necessary to extol the dedication and ingenuity of women like *Chandraprabha Saikia*, who motivated other young women through their speeches and their fight against the evils of opium addiction, child marriage and subservience of women. These *MahilaSamitis* had little or no role of any worth among the Tea garden women mainly due to resistance from then Tea Gardens' owners or unwillingness of the women volunteers of the outside tea garden society to work with dedication in the tea garden locality.

This trend had gradually changed. Now, more and more gardens' management are encouraging the women group to form some sort of women organization among themselves which indirectly helping Tea Garden authority in terms of better health management, improved productivity and maintaining a peaceful social life in the garden. Such type of women's organization is most popularly called as "Mothers club" in the tea garden. This is based on Korean model of working women organization and was experimented successfully in the Darjeeling Tea Industry. In Assam, more and more gardens have already formed such group among the working women within the garden. This is basically an apolitical voluntary organization of the women workers. They work in group by arranging smaller weekly meeting among themselves either in the labour club or other public places and discussed a topic which is relevant to present day context. They also visit the house of non member and tried to motivate for a better and meaningful life with an objective. The general issue of discussion within such group related to the following basic issues.

- health and sanitation,
- mother and child health care,
- education,
- work participation,
- Child labour,
- child marriage,
- alcoholism
- Social taboos and superstition
- Savings for the future etc.

They often organize street play and other cultural activities to promote a particular theme like hand washing, girl child education etc. The government of Assam with the help of tea welfare board, District health authority has started many such programs in Dibrugarh and Tinsukia district. UNICEF has involved in such program with their own initiative. "*Kishori Club*" or



“Adolescent Club” of UNICEF, a organization of adolescent girls at the tea garden is such an example which have been implemented in many Tea Gardens in Dibrugarh and Tinsukia district successfully. In 2014, UNICEF signed a partnership with the Ethical Tea Partnership (ETP) to address the issue of child protection and girls’ empowerment in tea communities in three districts of Assam, India: Dibrugarh, Tinsukia and Sivasagar. The Ethical Tea Partnership (ETP) is a membership organisation working with tea companies, development organisations and governments to improve the lives of tea workers, farmers and their environment. The UNICEF-ETP programme was scaling up the child protection model and expand the focus to address a broader range of issues including health, nutrition, education, water and sanitation (WASH) and business practice change.

There is a growing awareness and compulsion among the buying or importing country for ethical trade which forced more and more MNC (multi National company) or other corporate to get involved themselves in the social work like health and sanitation or women empowerment in the sourcing country or field as obligation to their corporate social responsibility (CSR). A reputed tea exporter named Twinings has also started working in this direction in partnership with UNICEF since 2010 to improve the lives of girls and young women living on tea estates in Assam, India. This partnership aimed to improve the lives of 350,000 (approx.) of the most vulnerable women and children living in 63 tea gardens in Assam through child protection, health, nutrition and WASH interventions. Together, Twinings and UNICEF decided to focus on the following key target areas-

- 90 per cent of women living in the 63 tea-gardens communities have access to and benefit from quality health services
- 70 per cent of children aged 6-23 months eat healthier, more nutritious meals
- Adolescent girls and boys have the knowledge, skills and support to take action to protect themselves from violence, exploitation and abuse, and to make their communities safer by 2022.
- Parents and community members support adolescents in seeking information, accessing services and encouraging decision-making by playing an active role in creating a protective and supportive environment to protect adolescents from violence, exploitation and abuse, including child marriage, by 2022.

The programme under this partnership will promote a protective environment in which girls and boys are encouraged to stay in school and ensure that women and children have access to quality health services and social protection schemes.

In past, organization like “Mercy corps” in collaboration with “Tazo” Company, a renowned exporter of Tea and Coffee is working for upliftment and empowering the women in some of the Tea Garden in Assam. The name of their project is called Community Health and Advancement Initiatives (CHAI). Since its inception in Assam in January 2007, CHAI has promoted livelihood opportunities for nearly 500 families through savings and small business development in farming, livestock rearing, services, trade and commerce. CHAI aims to diversify and integrate economic opportunities on tea estates in some of the highest tea-



producing districts in Assam — including Dibrugarh. CHAI focuses on improving people's livelihoods through:

- Institutional Development Services: forming of economic development councils, self-help groups, and new market linkages
- Financial services: savings programs, credit accounts and bookkeeping services
- Livelihood promotion services: identification of income opportunities, skills training and ongoing staff support

Whilst this is a welcome scenario, effort must be also put into place for the sustainability of such social change in reality for the future. Mass participation, positive outlook may bring such change in empowering tea garden women for much better and secured life in years to come.

Conclusion:

The greatest challenge today is to improve the status of women who constitute half the population of the country. Education of women is the foremost requirement in improving the status of women in the society. The above is true for the rural women who are far away from the development that takes place in their counterpart at urban society. Tea Garden women are the typical example in Assam who always remains outside the ambit of any academic discussion or practical development programme meant for the women empowerment. One of the reasons for such status is illiteracy and societal alienation from the outside world may be due to very nature of their occupational pattern. Because lack of education implies lack of awareness about their own rights and privileges which ultimately becomes a factor in deteriorating their social status. While government actions and steps are necessary for removing these inequalities and injustices and for empowering this group of women, these can become effective only if attitudes and outlook towards women within their own society change.

There is an urgent need to create awareness among the women of Tea garden in particular, of the social evils of the society. Tea Garden women are so much cocooned by various social customs, belief and taboos, that they often cannot and do not want to bring changes in their own traditional lifestyles, so there is a need for creating socio-political consciousness among women. No amount of government help can really achieve the desired results, unless the women themselves realize the need of such a change. The urge to liberate them, to fight against the social ills, should come from within. The voluntary organizations, should take up concrete steps, if necessary in collaboration with the governmental agencies to provide more and more empowering opportunities to women.



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