

Empowerment of Women *in* North-East India



Bhola Nath Ghosh

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Women Governance in Tripura (2008)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Bhola Nath Ghosh is M.A. (Sociology) and Ph.D. in Social Sciences. He was also awarded a certificate from the University of East Anglia, Norwich, United Kingdom for participating in the course, entitled, "Course on Monitoring, Evaluation and Project Analysis". Currently an Assistant Professor in Sociology, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata. He presented several papers in national and international conferences which were held in India and abroad (United Kingdom, Bangladesh, Hungary and Sweden). Member of the Editorial Board of a Journal, namely, *South Eastern Anthropologist*, published from Ranchi and Jharkhand. He published several articles in national and international reputed journals. He authored and edited ten scholarly books and contributed several articles to various reputed Journals in the country and abroad. His areas of interest are Gender Issues, Panchayati Raj and Rural Development and social problem. He taught Sociology in Indian Statistical Institute for the last fifteen years and visiting faculty in West Bengal State University, Rabindra Bharati University and Jadavpur University.

In recent past, a number of studies have come up with the deliberations on different issues related to gender bias, status and empowerment of women in various fields. But there has not been any attempt to provide a single measure of empowerment, relate level of empowerment with the indicators. The current volume besides providing a regional analysis of deprivation of women on various counts and an idea of empowerment on available criteria; provided a measure of empowerment by an index constructed on the basis of a number of attributes indicating the status and empowerment of women in the family and society as well in north east.

It also includes case studies on poverty, gender based development and gender empowerment measures. The book also provides analysis, impact of factors on the level of empowerment, characteristics of empowerment in north east region, status of women in terms of socio-economic, political and educational achievement and also highlighted the scope of progress in terms of empowerment.

Empowerment of Women in North-East India

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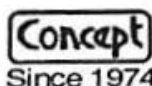
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Foreword

India has pledged itself to gender equality through several articles of the Constitution. In fulfilment of this constitutional mandate, several steps have also been taken since independence to empower women. But nearly sixty years after women's rights were enshrined in the democratic fabric of India, we are yet to fully honour our constitutional commitments. Indian women in general, do not have equal rights as men in either political, social or economic spheres: they are discriminated against in education and in jobs; they are not equally represented in public institutions; they do not enjoy equal pay for equal work; and violence against women in both public and the private spheres is increasing. In this context the author's endeavour to capture the pace and perception as well as the process of empowerment of women in two North-Eastern States, Meghalaya and Tripura, deserves commendation. Selection of North-Eastern States, far away from mainland Kolkata, for conducting this study reflects author's keen interest to know and to make know the isolated and so called lesser States of our country.

The book is the outcome of tenacious academic exercise of the author which has encompassed the areas of social, cultural, economic, political, health, religious and environmental issues relating to empowerment of women in four remotest villages of Meghalaya and Tripura which reveals a lot of facts. The approach of the book is empirical with current database. The Author's style of introducing the States as background of understanding the study is brief but very catchy.

The author has touched upon various vital issues relating to economic empowerment of women. Issues like employment opportunities for women, displacement of female labour in agriculture, off-farm agricultural employment generation, problem of unemployment among the educated middle class, significance skill formation and training, etc., have received their due focus in

the present research. Apart from this, the author has made an insightful observation of socio-cultural and also political issues like literacy and education among women, participation of women in decision making.

In relation to this, the author has presented an extremely interesting enquiry into the traditionally matrilineal Meghalayan society as to why women still remain out of decision making institutions at all levels. Comparative analysis between the women in Meghalaya and Tripura on these aspects has made the book further attractive.

The situational analysis of empowerment of women in two North-Eastern States duly supported with several tables and charts provides an in-depth analysis of the status of empowerment. The suppression of women from participation in social, political and economic life hurts the people as a whole, not just women. Women's empowerment, therefore, is crucial to the overall development of the society in large. The author's work, significantly, acts as a foundation for further planning and implementation of related projects in Meghalaya and Tripura.

This book is an important addition to the literature on women studies in this region and has great value to the academic community, social activists, women agencies, policy makers and administrators. I sincerely hope that Dr. Bholanath Ghosh's efforts will be appreciated and valued for its substance and practical significance.

Agartala
10th October, 2008

Dr. Tapati Chakravarti
Chairperson,
Tripura Commission for Women

Foreword

The book on "Empowerment of Women in North East with special reference to the two States Tripura and Meghalaya" is one of the pioneering study of the Indian Statistical Institute Calcutta conducted by Dr. Bholanath Ghosh. It deserves special compliment. The comparative field study of the two States relating to the empowerment of women has touched upon the different aspects of the social, cultural and economic life of the women. The material has highlighted the social set-up of both the patrilineal and matrilineal society.

The book will be a resourceful material for those interested in women studies.

Prof. Biloris Lyndem
Chairperson
Meghalaya State
Commission for Women

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I am thankful to the honourable members of Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) and Divisional Committee of Scientific Workers (DCSW) of the Social Sciences Division of Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata for kindly allowing me to undertake the study.

Though the idea to take up the issue of women empowerment primarily emanated from my subjective experience as a student of Sociology having a first hand knowledge in this field of work, I would like to put on record my sincere gratitude to them who encourage me to nurture it and also help me in various ways to complete me the writing. My debts of gratitude are many.

Various individuals and officials of different Government departments and other organizations in Tripura and Meghalaya were kind enough to extend their co-operation to this humble endeavour. I am grateful to all of them. I also received full co-operation from Library of North-Eastern Council, Library of I.C.S.S.R., Library of North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong and Library of Tripura University, State Library of Tripura, Library of I.S.I. for the collection of data and other information. For all of them I express my deep gratitude.

I thank to Prof. Manoranjan Pal and Prof. P. Bharati, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata and Dr. Utpal Kumar De, North-Eastern Hill University who inspire me to conduct the study and help me in different stages of the work.

I would like to thank Ms. Rebeka Khatoon, Mr. Md. Salim resident of Agartala (Tripura State) and Mr. Krow resident of Shillong (Meghalaya State) for helping me in the collection of field data.

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I take this privilege to put it on record my deep sense of indebtedness to Prof. Tapati Chakravarti, Chairperson, Tripura State Commission for Women, Tripura and Prof. Biloris Lyndem, Chairperson, Meghalaya State Commission for Women, Meghalaya, for writing a foreword to this book in spite of their pressing engagements. I am also grateful to them for their creative suggestions and comments.

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I am greatly indebted to the villagers of Beltali and Kalitila of Tripura and Ringkseh and Kyton-u-Mon of Meghalaya for their attention and kind co-operation, which enabled me to conduct this study and without whose co-operation, I would not have written a line. However, I would like to take the whole responsibility for any error remaining in my study.

Before I would conclude, I would like to record my sincere thanks to my colleagues in the Sociological Research Unit of Indian Statistical Institute for their help.

Kotkata
21st May, 2008

Bhola Nath Ghosh

Preface

Women's empowerment as a phenomenon is not something new. Discipline of social science is moving into new horizons with empowerment and development of women becoming important aspect of social science. Social, Economic and Political development can be achieved fully when the society recognizes women as one among social partners, provides equal rights, facilitates them with equal education, health and allow them to participate equally and effectively in all social functions and delivered in the decision making process. Therefore, studies on the subject related to the issues on women are gaining importance from all corners day-by-day. The main force behind women studies is the movement to assert the interest of women in the society. It does not mean the domination of women over their counterpart men; rather it is a need to restore the half of human beings in the rightful place in society.

The simple dictionary, the meaning of the word 'empowerment' is giving somebody power or authority to act. Yet it has got its own significance. It has beyond the simple meaning that prompted the present studies.

Empowerment of women is essentially a broader concept heralding a shift from unjust to just, subservient to successful, passive to active ability and entity for women. In the broader context, empowerment of women refers to questioning social, economic and political discrepancies and distortions in terms of gender. By process of empowerment, we mean activities through which the women get access to power so that their wishes are materialised. It is the complex interplay of various factors like social, economic, political, psychological, physical and attitudinal and so on. However, "empowerment" has different meaning to different actors in the development fields. The issues of women's empowerment is closely associated with women's development,

but unfortunately, there was no such constructive thinking about women's empowerment in India till Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-79) at Government level. Of course, the National Committee on the status of women was set up in 1971 before the declaration of women decade. This committee submitted their report towards equality in 1974. Also, almost each state has one women's commission to look after the problems and grievances of the women.

The year 2001 was declared as the "International Women's Empowerment Year" by the United Nations. Simultaneously, Govt. of India has also recognized the same year as the "Women's Empowerment Year".

Therefore, this book takes into consideration of the issues of empowerment of women in theoretically and empirically. It may therefore, be a good acquisition of various institutional libraries as well as individuals researchers and social workers who have been engaged in the studies and research related to the gender issues. It would also be a great help to the student, researcher, teacher in the academic and research institutions.

Bhola Nath Ghosh

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Introduction

Empowerment is a multifaceted, multi-dimensional and multilayered concept. It is the action and interaction of various factors—physical, socioeconomic, political, psychological, attitudinal and so on. Empowerment means the access of a person to that kind of power that would enable him or her to fulfil his/her wishes. In the development field, the word 'empowerment' has different meanings for different actors. However, since women are the principal gender group that this research study concerns itself with, we shall mainly touch upon the issue of empowerment in relation to women. The year 2001 was declared as the "International Women's Empowerment Year" by the United Nations. Simultaneously the Government of India also recognised the same year as the 'Year of Women's Empowerment'.

Without a doubt, the issue of women's empowerment is closely associated with the development of women, but unfortunately, there was no such constructive thinking about women's empowerment in India at the government level till the Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-79). Of course, the National Committee on the Status of Women was set up in 1971, before the declaration of the Women's Decade. This committee submitted its report "Towards Equality" in 1974. In recent years, the empowerment of women is a popular and much discussed issue, but the very term 'empowerment' is the buzzword since the 1960s.

Since 1990, the empowerment of women has become a slogan, a craze and there is reference to it in almost every literature and matter concerned with women's issues, not to mention the women's development programmes.

The original concept of empowerment as espoused by Paulo Freire did not include the gender gamut. It is only after the feminists picked up the concept that it gained wide currency. Paulo Freire expounded the notion of "conscientization" as the process by which the poor could challenge the existing structure of power and then gradually gain power and control from the powerful; in other words, the poorer and deprived sections of a given society could thus take control of their lives. Thus empowerment is believed to be an enabling process for the full and active participation of the oppressed people in the formulation, execution and evolution of decisions determining the functions and efficiencies for the society.

The empowerment of women is essentially a broader concept heralding a shift from the unjust to the just, the subservient to the successful, and from the passive to the active ability and entity for women. In the broader context, the empowerment of women refers to the questioning of the social, economic and political discrepancies and distortions, in terms of gender. As an enabling concept for women, it pertains to challenging her own subjugation and thereafter gaining control over the resources of every conceivable sphere, in the process transforming radically the structural, systematic and institutional inequalities through her own participation, priorities and perspectives. Thus it is a process where women can gain access, have space and scope to examine and extricate their lives and gender relations critically and collectively. This is a collective effort and individual endeavour is not often likely to meet with success. Moreover, the term "women's empowerment" has come to be associated with all women's struggle for social justice and equality.

The process of empowerment deals with how to increase capacity of women and what they need to become empowered. First they must be provided with and should get fulfilled certain essential needs. These basic needs could be provided through welfare services. Equal access to resources like educational opportunities, credit and property is the next step in the process of empowerment. Creating awareness among women about the existing gender discrimination, gender inequality is most important in empowering them. Then, they must recognize that their problems stem from Inherent structural and institutional discrimination.

The empowerment process in the developed country is different from that of developing nations of Third World. It is more strategical, i.e., changing patriarchal norms, gender division of labour, gaining equality and changing attitudes of society towards women in the developed countries. While in the developing nations, it is more focused on to meet the basic needs, increase in income, educating and give training in skill development to meet along with strategic gender needs. Meeting both practical needs and strategic interests are necessary to empower women. Women are the main caretakers in the families below the poverty line. Women contribute to the household income. Hence, practical needs of these women related to daily life—food, housing, income, health care and welfare benefits ought to be met. But mere meeting practical needs do not empower women unless strategic interests are fulfilled. Strategic interests are long term and almost common to all women. They are related to improving women's position that include action to increase women's knowledge and skills, give them legal protection, provide equal opportunities/participation on decision making and greater access to resources, etc. Strategic interests transform gender relations and empower women.

Empowerment also means having choices and women's ability to make choices. Women must be made to recognize the choices they have, enable them to make choices. For example, education is one of the choices, women must be made aware of the importance of education and choices in the form of education available; opportunity must be given and they will make the best use of choices.

Equal participation of women in the decision-making leads to their empowerment. It could be achieved through mobilization and organization of women through all levels. Increasing consciousness and awareness building is the important component of the process of empowerment. First women must recognize the ideology that legitimizes domination and then understand how it perpetuates their oppression. Then try to change values and attitudes, which are "anti-women" that most women have internalized since their childhood. So self-consciousness and awareness must arise in each individual women to empower themselves. But this self-consciousness and awareness does not come spontaneously, so is empowerment. Changing other women's consciousness must externally induce it. Altering self-image and

beliefs about rights and capabilities could create consciousness among other women. Awareness of gender discrimination challenging the sense of inferiority, recognizing the value of their labour and their contribution to the society and conscientisation will empower women.