

Paper title: Sundarini: The Mosaic of Pristine Beauty and Prosperous Womenhood

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Abstract

The exquisite and matchless beauty of the largest mangrove forest delta in West Bengal defies all description. It is the gift of Nature as it is bathed in its uniqueness and pristinity. This forest delta is one which is a reserve store for biodiversity. Declared as one of the finalist in the New Seven Wonders of Nature it has reserved its place as a World Heritage site way back in 1997. The Sundarbans is of universal importance for globally endangered species including the Royal Bengal Tiger, Ganges and Irawadi dolphins, estuarine crocodiles and the critically endangered endemic river terrapin (Batagur baska). It is the only mangrove habitat in the world for *Panthera tigris tigris* species. The livelihood opportunities are limited in this region. It is now felt that proper opportunities through empowerment can change the livelihood eco system of the region. The way the women in self empowerment projects is working a step forward with men has become the corner stone of discussion for this paper. Taking the huge potentiality of the women folk into consideration the Government of West Bengal have started a women empowerment project known as **Sundarini** in Sunderban with the active involvement of the women folks considering their growth economically and independently. The Sundarini Scheme will give the local products of the

region like cow milk, ghee, chicken and duck eggs, honey, and the rare dudhsar variety of rice and moong dal a stepping stone to enter competitive markets.¹ The paper throws some light on the work culture of this pristine delta which is so very different from the rest of the world. The information had been collected through standard questionnaire and interview of the milk union members, beneficiaries and Government officials.

1. Introduction

Women empowerment is an all comprehensive approach that addresses socio-economic, cultural, economic, and psychological development of womanhood. In practice, there exists biasness in favour of men and against women in connection with human rights, growth opportunities, as beneficiaries of social policies and stakeholders of social institutions. In particular, it means full participation in decision making process in all walks of life sharing of opportunities with men in finding equitable solutions to issues in the family and society.² P. Iswara Bhatt quoted the concept of gender justice as an aspect of social justice, which means ‘elimination of institutionalized domination and oppression’.³ Professor Bhatt categorically analyzed feminism and its different aspects in different shades of thinking – liberal, radical and cultural. He explained concepts of liberal feminism as discussed in different scholarly analysis. He quoted H.L.A. Hart’s concept of minimum content of natural law that signifies accommodating sympathetic response to human vulnerability.⁴ Ronald Dworkin’s approach highlights elements of justice, fairness and morality.⁵ Rawls gave the concept of justice works through conferring maximum

¹ Sunderban Scheme to Empower Women of Sunderbans,, Strategy Report, The World Bank , No. 88061 – IN, Washington DC, USA (2014) retrieved from <http://aitcofficial.org/aitc/sundarini-scheme-to-empower-women-of-the-sundarbans/> last accessed on 20/10/2018 at 10:10 AM.

² A. D. Mishra , “Challenges of 21st Century”, in Anil Dutta Mishra, Editor, Challenges of 21st Century, Mittal Publications, (2009) pp. 254, 257.

³ I. R. Young, “Justice and Politics of Difference”, Lloyd’s Introduction to Jurisprudence, Penguin Publications, (1990), p. 15.

⁴ H.L.A. Hart, “The Concept of Law”, OUP, Oxford (1961).

⁵ Ronald Dworkin, “Taking Rights Seriously”, Duckworth, London (1977).

benefits to the vulnerable section of the society.⁶ Radical feminists focus on domination of men over women and assert for anti-subordination approach to overcome maleness of law and applications of law in society.⁷ As per MacKinnon women's poverty is due to lack of opportunities, violence against women and powerlessness in weaker sex.⁸ The paper will address issues and problems of women in Sunderban, the pristine delta in West Bengal which is so very different from the rest of the world. The theme of the paper is Non-Farm Based Livelihood Option and the subtheme addresses Gender Issues.

1.1. Constitutional Provisions

After independence, several laws have been formed following the Articles 14⁹, 15(1)¹⁰, 15(2)¹¹, 39¹² in Indian Constitution to uplift the economically backward society, especially the females, enabling them realize their individual value and authority in all spheres of life.

1.2. Review of Literature

Review of earlier studies on various published articles and reports are analyzed to understand the research topic in depth, comparing the finding

⁶ J. Rawls, "A Theory of Justice", OUP, Oxford, (1972).

⁷ P. I. Bhatt, "Law and Social Transformation in India", Eastern Book Company, Lucknow, p. 518 (1ST ed. 2009).

⁸ C. Mackinnon, "Towards Feminist Theory of Theory of State", Harvard UP, (1989).

⁹ Art.14: The State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India.

¹⁰Art. 15 : Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.— (1) The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them.

¹¹(2) No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them, be subject to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to— (a)access to shops, public restaurants, hotels and places of public entertainment; or (b)the use of wells, tanks, bathing ghats, roads and places of public resort maintained wholly or partly out of State funds or dedicated to the use of the general public.

¹²Art. 39. : Certain principles of policy to be followed by the State.—The State shall, in particular, direct its policy towards securing— (a)that the citizens, men and women equally, have the right to an adequate means of livelihood; (b) that the ownership and control of the material resources of the community are so distributed as best to sub serve the common good; (c)that the operation of the economic system does not result in the concentration of wealth and means of production to the common detriment; (d)that there is equal pay for equal work for both men and women; (e)that the health and strength of workers, men and women, and the tender age of children are not abused and that citizens are not forced by economic necessity to enter avocations unsuited to their age or strength.

of the present researches with the result of the earlier studies, to reach logical conclusion.

In the magazine “**YOJONA**” (2003)¹³, the editorial team, ‘Empowering Women’, cited the stages of women’s value over the ages. They expressed concern regarding the fact that although our constitution and other legislative acts have promoted gender equality, the status of women continues to be low. The empowerment of women concentrates on women gaining control and power over their lives and it involves raising awareness, building confidence, expansion of choices, increased access to and control resources.

S. C. Joshi, in “**Micro-Credit Not Charity**” (2002)¹⁴ said that micro credit programme extends small loans to poor people for self-employment projects that generate income. Poor women usually run their own individual economic activities very efficiently because of the survival pressure on them. However in the absence of public support in economic sphere, it is very difficult for them to improve their economic situation individually all alone.

Tonmoyee Banerjee in “**Economic Impact of Self Help Groups in South 24 Parganas District of West Bengal**” (2008)¹⁵ made an effort to estimate the impact of Self-Help Groups created under SGSY programme and has been observed that income generation through group activities has improved the average income of group members, but the inequality of distribution of income is high among group members than that of the non-group members. Further there has been a significant decline in the medical expenditure and school drop-out rate in the families of group members than that of non-group members.

¹³ Yojana, 2003, Kurukshestra, (May 2004).

¹⁴ S.C. Joshi, “Micro – Credit not charity”, Social Welfare, vol. 48, no. 11 (2002).

¹⁵ Tanmoyee Banerjee, “Economic Impact of Self Help Groups in Parganas District of West Bengal”, Journal of Rural Development, vol. 28, no.4 (2009).

2. Ecological Problems in Sunderban Delta

With reference to the question of sustainability¹⁶, extreme natural events due to the instability of weather and unsustainable human activities are destroying the biodiversity of the Sundarbans and putting its unique ecosystem under threat. This menace has continued to expand over time. The region prone to innumerable threats, including the high probability of rising sea levels, salt intrusions on inland areas, extreme natural events, increasing human population and unsustainable anthropogenic activities for livelihoods and economic growth. The forest provides necessary conditions for sustainable livelihoods for millions of people in the vicinity of the site and acts as a shelter belt to protect the people from storms, cyclones, tidal surges, sea water seepage and intrusion. The area provides livelihood to large numbers of people mostly the simple folks of small villages surrounding the property, working variously as wood-cutters, fisherman, honey gatherers, leaves and grass gatherers. Natural calamities,¹⁷ primarily cyclones, have posed potential threats. Besides the saline water intrusion and siltation has also caused some serious damage to the eco-structure. Over exploitation of both timber resources and fauna, illegal hunting and trapping, and agricultural encroachment also pose menace to the integrity of the region. Storms, cyclones and tidal surges are some of the common characteristic of this area, and this has aided in climatic change of this region.

2.1. Problems of Women in Sunderban Delta

The deltaic region comprises of the most vulnerable and impoverished part of the population in India nearing to over 4.4 million. It is estimated that the half of the population lives below the poverty line and is also observed that the blocks closest to the vast mangrove forest records the highest incidence of poverty. 80% of the households in these blocks are engaged in

¹⁶ The ability to be maintained at a certain level.

¹⁷ An event causing great devastation or damage.

fish culture and agriculture. They face numerous health challenges. The Sundarbans comprises over 4.4 million of the most poverty-stricken and assailable people in India. Many of them are attributed to lack of adequate facilities of sanitation and water supply and poor rural life style.¹⁸ High maternal mortality and malnutrition with acute case of anemia are the problems of female population in this region. The climate change is a noted predominant crisis and the fisherman and the farmers both are adversely affected by it.¹⁹ The problem of poverty is endemic and the growing population puts enormous pressure on the fragile natural system. Another noted problem that persists in this region is high rate of migration inflows. Besides this the vulnerable women population is often subjected to sex trade as studies reveal. Many women migrants, not employed as domestic workers, end up working in the sex trade. With employment possibility inadequate, young girls (10 to 15 years old) from poor families are often dispatched to far-flung areas to earn income and many often wind up in the sex industry.²⁰ Child labor is also prevalent; a study conducted by the Kolkata-based NGO Jayaprakash Institute of Social Change in 2010 found that 20 percent of households reported were female child migrant laborers. Poverty in the Sundarbans is gravely retarding the development potential of inhabitants and keeping millions from leaving an extraordinarily hazardous setting.²¹

The socio economic strategy of development of this deltaic region requires a major thrust or big push to move it away from poverty and India's gradual extensive urbanization process points to the same direction. Statistics reveal that growth rate of urbanization in India will be 50% by 2030. However in Sunderban urbanization process is more or less dependent on state sponsorships. In this area the centrally sponsored schemes are targeted towards development of poorest of the poor sections

¹⁸ "The Sunderbans: Outstanding Human Values", UNESCO Report (2007), retrieved from <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/798> last accessed on 19/10/2018 at 9:30 PM.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ "Sunderban Mangroves: Challenges to Survival", Science Reporter (2013).

of the society. Some of the selected programs and policies of this region those ensure livelihood are agriculture, aquaculture, forestry and tourism and this helps to reduce poverty to a greater extent. Development of marine fisheries and extensive mass tourism programmes with production of rice, wheat, pulses, oilseeds and oil palm maize are some of the areas of women engagement. If poverty can be reduced then some of the critical problems of this region can be solved.

3. Dairy Farming in West Bengal

A brief review of the dairy farming in India reveals that in terms of value of output, milk is the single largest agricultural commodity in the country. It has been a proved fact that the National Dairy Development Board has left no stones unturned in transforming dairy farming as an instrument for the rural development in India. Statistics of the present day reveals that more than 1.66 crore milk producers affiliated to about 1.86 lakh cooperative societies/producer institutions are the bona-fide beneficiaries from the dairy cooperative movement in the country. The State of West Bengal has always been active participant to the schemes that is implemented by the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB).

Data of the present day reveals that 14 functional milk unions in the country collectively procure about 188 thousand Kg of milk per day from 258000 milk producers covering over 4000 dairy cooperative societies. It is to be noted that West Bengal's milk production grew at about 2.7 % compared to nation's 4.9 % in last 10 years. Statistics on March 2018 revealed that West Bengal's cooperative infrastructure includes 164 BMCs, 12 chilling centres and 11 dairy plants. Under NDDB's National Dairy Plan I (NDP I), ten End Implementing Agencies (EIAs) are implementing 26 sub projects with the total grant assistance of Rs. 43.25 Crore in West Bengal. The names of EIAs are Bhagirathi Milk Union, Paschim Banga Go-Sampad Bikash Sanstha, Icchamati Milk Union, Kishan Milk Union,

Kangsaboti Milk Union, Howrah Milk Union, Midnapore Milk Union, Sundarban Milk Union, Kullick Milk Union and Manbhumi Milk Union.

3.1. Dairy Development in Sunderban Area and targeting the poorest of the poor women population

Since its inception in 1997, the Sunderban Cooperative Milk & Livestock Producers' Union Ltd. operates seasonally for four to six months in a year due to stringent geographical conditions. It cannot be denied that there is deficiency in dairy infrastructure and this has compelled the milk union members to give a break in their operations in 2014. However this was only a small break. The Union's operation restarted in the November of 2015 under the full monitoring and guidance and technical support coordination of National Dairy Development Board (NDDB). Sunderban Cooperative Milk & Livestock Producers' Union Ltd started its revival plan to go forward overcoming all its difficulties.²² The mission of women empowerment was undertaken by the union which was primarily targeted to small and marginal women farmers originally involved in rearing of livestock and engagement in dairy activities besides participating actively in agricultural farming in the Sunderban.²³ Procurement of all necessary agricultural products of farmers such as milk, indigenous duck and hen eggs, indigenous rice, pulses, forest honey were initiated at Dairy Cooperative Societies (DCSs). The area of this vast Ganga delta is highly indented and scattered being dissected by innumerable river tributaries. As because there are innumerable islands and the land area is subdivided the collection of milk from various spots is a real challenge. The Union led stress on the availability of quality and hygienic food to the consumers.

At Present, Sunderban Milk Union, is operating under the banner of Sundarini (South 24 Paraganas district of West Bengal) and has a total of

²² The Man and the Biosphere Programme is an intergovernmental scientific program aimed at improving the relationships between people and the environment. For more information, see <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/environment/ecological-sciences/man-and-biosphere-programme/>.

²³ *Ibid.*

70 Women DCS covering 3500 women farmers with peak milk procurement of over 4000 Kg per day from 7 blocks.²⁴ This collection from scattered location has become a real challenge. Specific importance is given to testing at the Dairy Cooperative Society level and the presence of a farmer is properly acknowledged.

The Milk Union started extensive campaign for awareness and skill development of farmers on organic and sustainable livestock farming. It has also initiated the process for organic certification of all Sundarini products. 100% green fodder, the products comprises of Azolla based milk and egg production without the use of any chemical pesticide or manure. Farmers are advised to make use of ethno-veterinary medicine and set up herbal garden for recycling and regeneration purpose. The Union stressed on procurement of 100% milk cans/milk pails for farmers and marketing of cow ghee, honey in glass bottles only. Thus packaging is given utmost importance.

The trends show an upward trajectory and 2017-2018 data shows that Sundarini has marketed 7 tonnes of forest honey and has a target of 15 tonnes by next year.²⁵ Collection of forest honey requires extreme precision and skill on the part of the honey collectors. The forest is beset with wild animals and life is often at stake for these people who go to collect them. Organic mangrove forest honey of the delta is collected in cooperative mode

4. Conclusions

For many scholars gender inequality originates from domination and oppression of weaker sex. The rights and relations are not favored in institutions and this creates negative effect on participation. Marginalization and powerlessness are the two fundamental causes of backwardness of weaker sex. But the time arises where voice should be

²⁴ "Sundarini Scheme to Empower Women of Sunderbans", Bartaman, (August 12, 2017) retrieved from <http://aitcofficial.org/aitc/sundarini-scheme-to-empower-women-of-the-sundarbans/> last accessed on 20/10/2018 at 10:10 AM.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

raised against curses. Justice can be restored by cultural change and participation. Marginalization creates negative impact in all spheres of life. It obstructs enjoyment of rights and shades restructuring of systems and human development. Powerlessness is generated from dominant group's enjoyment of life standards and primordial instinct of domination over weaker sex. The sexually dormant group finds little space for expression and enjoyment of decision making in institutions.

Empowerment is creating a confidence to a group which does not possess it. It uplifts the position of women from mere housewife to decision maker, from under privileged to internationally acknowledge. Good economic opportunities enable her autonomy; political participation brings ability to lead and organize; adequate social opportunities create possibilities of decision making and gender justice. 'Sundarini' initiative is a perfect measure to accelerate *de facto* equality between men and women. It creates opportunities of life, opportunities for gainful employment by creating equality in value and social security. The concept of dairy cooperative fully run and managed by poor and marginalized women ensures participation and development without discrimination. This move was primarily undertaken to arrest the current trend of exploitation by the middleman and mark a full stop to distress selling. Sunderban Milk Union provides a space, especially to the economically backward people of 24 Parganas (South), West Bengal, wherein the marginalized women with common objectives come together in order to solve their common issues through self-help or mutual-help. The union members create a platform whereon the members perform regular meetings and transactional activities and give themselves the opportunity to give voice to their socio-economic problems and needs. Sundarini Milk Union Co-operative turns out to be a significant tool that has enhanced the quality of status of women in rural West Bengal as participants and decision makers in organic and sustainable livestock farming to succeed in the democratic, social economic and cultural spheres of life. It conceived as a holistic programme of gainful employment and covers all the aspects of Co-operative livestock farming, decision making

in capacity building, and selection of key activities, planning of activity clusters, technology and marketing support. This will enliven the work of the women folks and the union now successfully operates as the first organic livestock and milk union fully managed by women members in the country.

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