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Problems for the Development of the Rural Women of Purulia District in West Bengal, India: A Social Survey

Abstract

The geographical boundaries of Purulia District is a underdeveloped area of West Bengal, India, and the rural women of this region, have constantly been facing many problems and challenges for their development.. Despite of the sincere efforts through various schemes by the State and Central Govt. to upgrade the condition, the rural female society of this territory still remains in gloomy milieu with illiteracy, poverty, health hazard, social barrier, superstitious beliefs, and many evil customs. The nature of male-dominated socio-cultural system keeps its stronghold over the women community to maintain its superiority in the form of domestic violence and social injustice. The female society of this area urgently in need of a social resurrection through which it can attain the strength to overthrow the social bondage under patriarchal hegemony. This paper tries to focus the basic inherent problems from social perspective along with some remedial measures to ensure the social status and position, to promote the development and empowerment of this underdeveloped desolate tract in West Bengal.

Keywords: Women, Society, Condition, Purulia, Development, Problem.

Introduction

At the dawn of human civilization, when human beings were unknown to fire, took shelter in the cave amongst the dense forest, and were struggling against the fierce animals for their existence, since then, the men along with women formed a group to fight with the adverse nature around them. Gradually, with the evolution of civilization, the role of women has become very significant for the development of the society. The women, who are the main architect in building the nation, unfortunately, they are under the control of patriarchal system. In Purulia district of West Bengal, the women community is facing many tribulations in day-to-day life. Illiteracy, ignorance, poverty, superstition, blind beliefs, financial insufficiencies, lack of educational consciousness etc. not only confine them within four walls, but also withhold the progress of the society. The women become the victim of different type of oppression such as social pressure, violence, physical and mental harassment. It is the high time to understand the nature of these problems in this area. In this article, I have tried to focus the inherent causes lie within these problems in social perspective and suggested some measures to overcome the depressed condition of the female class of this district.

Aims of the Study

1. To study the social status of women in the 'backward' district Purulia in West Bengal.
2. To search the reasons behind the underdeveloped condition of the women of this region.
3. To know the social customs and practices, whether it is a cause for the fate of the women.
4. To understand the changing trend of social equality in the district.
5. To analyze the rural sentiment for women at root level.
6. To enquire of the problems for the empowerment of the women.
7. To find out the major activities, done for the improvement of the social condition of women.
8. To compare the picture with the other territory of West Bengal.
9. To suggest some remedial measures to ensure the position of the women in the society.

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Asian Resonance

Hypothesis

The paper deals with the miserable and depressed condition of the women class in Purulia District of West Bengal. It focuses on the various problems, the women are facing in day-to-day life which has become a tremendous obstacle for the development of the women class as well as for the society. One hand they are under the pressure of the superiority of patriarchy, on the other, financial instability frightens them to raise any query against the system. A lot of interviews with the rural women clearly reveal the pathetic condition of them and how they are deprived of enjoying the socio-economic benefits. Though they work with hard labour from dawn to night to maintain the family, they become the victim of domestic and social violence. But, with the passage of time, gradually a slow change is taken place. The different activities for the welfare of women make consciousness among them to take jobs outside home and to ignore social bondage. The impact of globalization has reached here with all the blessings for the women to make a level with others free from all socio-economic barriers.

Finding & Result

It is assumed that the rural women community of this region has been in deep trouble to establish their position in the society. The traditional social system keeps them within the household activities in the form of either a wife or a mother or a daughter. It is very difficult to get rid of the stronghold of the patriarchal phenomenon. A divisive inequity to the women is still prevailing around the region. The application of several evil customs has made the situation worsened. While the other parts of the country, the women enjoy the rights and socio-economic benefits, here the women suffer a lot in the sense of modern socio-economic structure. But the hope within the hope that a row of light is seen in the path of awakening the women. The women are becoming conscious enough to face the challenges before them. Day by day, they are coming forward to confront the unfavourable situation. Nowadays, they are being allowed to participate in different socio-economic activities outside the house. They are doing work with the government Panchayat system. But, still they have a long way to go. For the time being, a social movement is needed from among the depressed women class to change the social structure to secure their social dignity and economic position in order to overthrow every problem related to societal environment

Methodology and Database

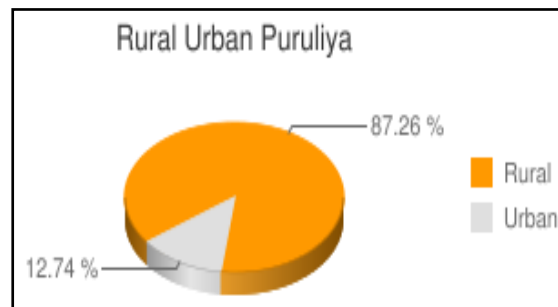
To make inclusive study, the following methodology is adopted.

1. Field trips to different villages with checklists make an important approach to have a close interaction with local women to understand the fundamental and basic issues for their present condition and sharing their views for findings the ways to overcome the problems for development.
2. The secondary sources of data are collected from journals, books and websites.
3. The method of this paper is mainly descriptive.

Location and Structure

Puruliya (Purulia) District Census 2011

Description	2011 Rural	2011 Urban
Actual population (Total)	2,556,801 (87.26%)	373,314 (12.74%)
Male	1,304,208	192,788
Female	1,252,593	180,526
Average Literacy	62.73%	76.18%
Male Literacy	76.83%	84.63%
Female Literacy	48.06%	67.15%
Literates	1,374,860	250,045
Male Literates	858,620	143,438
Female Literates	516,240	106,607



Source: <http://www.census2011.co.in/census/district/14-puruliya.html>

The location of Purulia District is to the remote westernmost part of West Bengal. The area of this territory is 6259 Sq.Km. Surrounded by hills and jungles; this arid region mainly depends on the primitive system of agricultural economy whereas the socio-cultural structure of the inhabitants varies with each other on the basis of caste-identity concept, though due to influence of social interaction and assimilation of the life and culture, the basic course of life is tuned with a same rhythm.

Problems for Development

In the rural area of Purulia, the women have always been the backbone of the entire society irrespective of caste or tribes. Since dawn till night they are busy in work either in outside field or in household activities in order to welfare of the family. But, poverty always remains with them. The adverse effect of poverty does not let the women enjoy the fruits of social development. The major portion is fully depended on the primitive system of agriculture; some are engaged in day-labour. The lack of irrigation, inability to purchase fertilizer, seeds, want of modern instruments, traditional system, uncertain weather, hamper the production. Thus they are not able to earn their livelihood sufficiently. This affects largely on the overall social development.

Mainly due to financial insufficiency, the rural poor families remain indifferent to the development of the educational consciousness among them. Thus the literacy rate is significantly below the standard level. The above table shows that in rural, the average literacy rate here is 62.73%. The male literacy rate is 76.83% whereas the female literacy rate is only 48.06%. This indicates how the rural women are deprived of receiving education. 'Sarba Siksha Abhiyan' a special drive program, launched to

Asian Resonance

spreading education, can not do much in bringing the poor students into the school campus. The dropout rate is rather high in the interior villages. Female education in the remote areas is merely a dream. Most of the women are reluctant to education. Thus, the compulsory elementary educational system is still out of reach. This adverse attitude is related with the thoughts of the rural mentality.

Most of the school-going children are deputed to look after the younger children or to do the household works in the family while parents are engaged in the outside working field. Though many of the girls receive the elementary school level education but the opportunity of the higher education remains closed for the rural girls. There is a trend that a daughter, since her childhood, must be equipped with the household activities for her in-laws house. The necessity of education for a daughter in her life is not considered. So with only a minimum literacy level, the girl has to leave the school. In the same way, the in-law house does not let her continue with the studies.

Child marriage is the outcome of this thought in the society, which prevails proudly and is deeply rooted with all its evil affects. The urgent 'holy' duty of the parents is to get their daughter married as early. The minimum age (18) for marriage as per Govt. rule is not applicable here. So, the groundwork for wedding started as she attains 12 or 13 years of age and most of the girls get her married before 15. If it is not possible due to some reasons, it becomes a heavy burden and a cause for anxiety for the parents. This has become a custom. Through this custom, they try to get rid of a 'problem' without thinking the future of the daughter. In this context, it is needless to say that in the matter of the settlement scene, the bride is a silent character. Neither she enjoys the right to talk, or to express her opinion, nor is her liking given importance. She has to accept the deal. She rarely dares to oppose though it goes against her desire. Sometimes, of course, she is reluctant to say anything due to her embarrassment.

Gender inequality creates much trouble in this region. The women are treated as subordinate and inferior to men, hence they cannot enjoy an average quality of life in terms of health, morality, access to education, access to employment, etc. In a family, a female child becomes the victim of indiscriminate and injustice. She does not enjoy the equal right and privileges as compared with a male child. Special care is taken as regards to food, clothes, health, education, etc. for the male children in the family. The girl child is not provided with all the requirements or pampered carefully. The survey reveals the very tragic condition for the girls within the family. According to a woman, 'a girl is a girl. She has to go to the house of others; the boys will remain with us to look after us at old age.'¹ Regarding health of a girl, the view of the family, 'a girl may fall ill, but she is sure to recover because of her debt to serve others. So, she needs no care.'² So, 'whatever the level of her ailment, no harm will do to her.'³ This is the way how a girl receive treatment from her family

Here, in the family, the birth of a girl child is not gladly accepted. It is a matter of great anxiety if the wife becomes the mother of two or three consecutive girl children. Unfortunately, if a mother cannot give birth to a male child or becomes childless, she is neglected and not treated well in the family and society as well. The infanticide is not a rare case. Sometimes, she is forced to abort. All these affect the physical and mental health of the women. Less food, more work and shyness of complaining about ill health worsen the situation.

The idea of Vedic age regarding this, 'A girl should be brought up and educated with great effort and care.'⁴ are not followed here by and large. In fact, the belief of this area for a girl that, 'a girl is born to serve others. Since her childhood, she is dedicated to give out especially for the male,'⁵ is strictly followed. We can remember the statement made by Manu, who codifies the law of ancient Indian society. In his *Manusmriti*, he says, "Girls are supposed to be in the custody of their father when they are children; women must be under the custody of their husband when married and under the custody of her son as widows. In no circumstances is she allowed to assert herself independently."⁶ is still prevailing in this society. But the other words in the same book, 'where women are honored there the Gods rejoice, where they are not honoured, all sacred rites proves to be useless, the house shall utterly perish,'⁷ is not really pursued.

In this society, a girl is not provided with equal rights and liberty to expose their potentialities equally as compared with male. Though, a girl is having the talent in music or dance or other performing art, the display of it before public is restricted by the family. The female dancer, who is called *Nachni* female dancer), is regarded as public wife and degraded in the society.⁸ So the girls don't find any platform to stand on. Thereby, they always suffer from an inferiority complex. They fail to lead any activities relating to society and family as well.

From a sociological viewpoint it is observed that here, it is the in-laws house where a girl finds her shelter. There is no scope to gain knowledge about the outside world beyond these four walls. A woman is strictly prohibited to go outside alone without accompanied by a male member, which reminds us 'The women take the meal on the left-dish after all members of the family have already eaten up. Even a newly-married wife, though feels much hungry, 'cannot take food prior to her husband or aged father-in-law or mother-in-law. A wife regrets, 'what a peculiar system is prevailing in this society!' A woman recollects 'during my initial days, when I had come here, I could not resist the hunger, but after three months I got habituated.'⁹ This dedication is not brought into account and they become the victim of the domestic violence.

Purulia district is a centre of different types of socio-cultural beliefs. Many evil customs, superstition, blind faiths, wrap the society from top to bottom. Out of these, the *Witch* (daini) is very prominent. This age-old custom is much prevalent here. If any disease is broken out in the society, it is believed that it certainly

Asian Resonance

is caused due to some evil forces from among the village. A woman is suspected to be that particular evil power. The *Ojhas*, *Gunins* are called to detect it and with an 'easy effort', they identified a certain woman, who is doing this harm to the society. She is declared and blamed as *Daini* (witch). The woman is summoned in the 'village court' for judgment and the assembly gives 'verdict' to pay a high amount of cash as punishment. It includes physical or mental torture by cutting her hair, beating, or humiliating womanhood. The society cuts all the links with that family leading to isolation, and, as a result of excommunication and continuous stress the 'witch' is compelled to commit suicide.

This inhuman practice occurs frequently in the remote rural belts. It is a kind of blueprint of a deliberately planned murder. If this stigma is put to any woman she has to wait for the worst. It is anti-human, unsocial, and irrational in scientific angle, still this practice prevails in the society. Neither the rural people dare to speak against it, nor do the so-called higher educated rural persons daunt to protest by defending the 'witch family'.

The women of this area enjoy the supremacy over all household activities but some restrictions are imposed in pursuing the social and moral behavior. The women gather together in front of *Kali Temple* or *Hari Mandir* (found almost in every village) for worshipping God, but are not allowed to perform priesthood. The condition of widows is much pitiable. They are kept outside from participation in every social functions relating to birth, marriage or death. Clothed with 'white sari', celebrating *bratas*, and by working hard to earn livelihood, they pass their ill-fated life without happiness. The childless younger widow takes shelter in her father's house after left the in-laws house. But wherever stay, they suffer a miserable life. Sometimes, if the luck favours, they get re-married which is called *saangha*. Here, every woman has to work hard. Even the weak old women are seen 'bearing firewood on their heads or dragging a pitcher of water for their daily needs.'¹⁰

Another evil tradition, prevailing in Purulia district is dowry, which becomes an obstacle for the development of the women community in this area. Since a very long time it has rooted deeply in the soil of this land. It has a very terrific affect on the marital relationships and the condition of the parents of the daughter. For a poor father, it is difficult to provide a lot of dowry to the groom's father. In this rural area it is collected either by selling pieces of land property or by lending money from *mahajanans* (money-lender). If the father fails to provide dowry deal within the scheduled date, it might be a cause for denial of the settled marriage. If a small amount is due, it turns the destiny of the girl in her in-laws house for her father's 'fault'. She suffers a lot of mental torture, eventually, which become the cause of suicide or murder. In Purulia, it happens frequently. The society cannot do anything against it. Moreover, the bride's family feels prestigious for it. The more the dowry is provided, the more the reputation can be attained.

In this rural society, the attitude towards women is very unbendable. There is no chance of approval of any distraction. It does not endorse any unsocial behavior within its conservative system, such as Inter-caste marriage. If a girl is married to any boy from outside caste of her own choice, the parent feels much ashamed and is blamed by the society. The 'outcast' daughter is now declared as 'dead', and as per the 'advice' of the kith and kin, the parent cut off all personal and social relations with her by performing her funeral rites and rituals. In a few cases, she is forcibly snatched out and severally beaten up or killed to restore social reputation.

Positive Aspects for Development: Findings

In this district, generally, the woman takes it as a part of life but the women, though few in number, are raising their voice to protest against the social injustice by generating awareness among the women. Some are coming forward to represent as elected member in Panchayat system to participate in Govt. administration. Some find jobs outside the home area. 'Female Self Help Groups have been considered as the main propelling force regarding generation of nursery in different blocks of the district.'¹¹ The *SHG* is formed in every village and it supervises the different social and economic activities including mid-day meal scheme for children. *ICDS* project keeps a vigil to the health of the rural women. *Kanyasree Prakalpa* and other projects encourage the rural girls to get into the school campus.

At present, Parents start thinking of the ill-effect of child marriage. From the girl's counterpart also. the scenario is somewhat changing its attitude. Some of the teenage girls in Purulia district of West Bengal daunted to come forward to protest against this social evil custom ignoring the pressure of the society. Bina Kalindi, Sangita Bauri, Mukti Majhi, Afsana Khatun, Sunita Mahato, become the "messenger of the social change" as they resisted child marriage of their own and inspired other girls to oppose the practice, for which they were rewarded from the honourable President of India in 2011.¹² According to The District Magistrate of Purulia, Shri Avanindra Singh, IAS, 'they are becoming Torch Bearers of this social movement and have become icon of Women Empowerment to decide not only their own destiny but the destiny of millions of girl children in rural India.'¹³

Gradually, the rural females are becoming aware of the health hygiene and nutrition. The rising awareness among women demands for having sanitary facilities with toilet in the house. The Nirmal Bangla mission of the State Government and Swachh Bharat Mission of the Central government are working to ensure sanitary facility. This prompted a 12th pass brave girl, Lipika Mahato, from remote Sahanjuri village in Baghmundi area of Purulia District to tell her father to ensure proper sanitation facility at the in-law's house before her marriage.¹⁴

Kanaklata Murmu, a woman of a remote village of Kumari, in Purulia's Manbazar II block, have been able to perceive the hypocrisies of their society. She points out that 'keeping a woman tied to her

home is like cutting off the wings of a bird'. She observes 'women here are constantly facing restrictions, whether in their parents' homes or their husbands', she added wryly, "Even if they are beaten by their husbands, they need their permission to file a police complaint!" Her understanding 'Men drink, beat their wives and sometimes throw them out of their houses. We slowly came to understand that the food we were getting in our husband's homes did not come for free. Every woman was working hard to keep her family going, and she too had rights to live in her husband's home as equals.'¹⁵

To promote general awareness, equity, education and empowerment, The International women's Day was celebrated In Arsha and Baghmundi block by Gramin Bikash Trust amidst hundreds rural women, where the theme was "Inspiring Change."¹⁶

On the 9th and 11 of April, 4000 women in Jhalda and Burrabazar Block of Purulia, West Bengal come together to celebrate womanhood and the stories of their struggles as they take on developmental mandates in their village(s).¹⁷

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is found that though modern education and facilities have influenced much in women empowerment, still rural women in Purulia district are lagging far behind. Simply they have to follow the 'informal' rules and restrictions from their own society. Often, the womanhood is shocked, the course of life is disrupted due to several bindings and rigidity of social suppression but, they cannot go out of the societal laws imposed on them. The conservative mind-set always wants to subjugate the 'weak' female class within its structure. Yet, in spite of all the problems for the development of rural women, a row of light is seen in its changing pattern. The Governments along with NGO's are optimistically working for raising consciousness among the women. The women community responds to the call and is coming forward in order to come out of the miserable condition, with the start of an enlightened social movement to review their influential role, to reconstruct their social responsibilities, to establish self-esteem and to ascertain their dignified position in the society. As Swami Vivekananda says, 'There is no chance for the welfare of the world, unless the condition of the women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly only with one wing', indeed, unless and until the condition of women is enhanced in all sector-economic, social, educational, health-care, nutrition, political, legal etc., the development of Rural Society of Purulia district in West Bengal will remain as a daydream.

Suggestions

1. Proper care should be taken to increase the educational consciousness in the women.
2. To make efforts in organizing the women for fighting against the problems and difficulties related to them.

3. A mass program must be taken up to strengthen the efforts for elimination of illiteracy as well as to adopt the social welfare measures to ensure sustainable livelihood in the region,
4. To support the women for financially self-dependence through implementing vocational training free of cost.
5. To initiate awareness camp to eradicate the social evil customs, superstitions and blind beliefs.
6. Empowerment of all kinds is needed in order to preserve the purity and dignity of the rural women.

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