

## **‘Empowering Marginalized Women through Education’: A Comprehensive Study on Rural Scheduled Caste Women in Cooch Behar District, West Bengal**

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**Abstract:** The importance of women education and empowerment is immense for the inclusive growth of a country and nation. In case of West Bengal expansion of female education in SC (Scheduled caste) community is a powerful weapon to reduce Poverty, Economic Dependency, Gender Discrimination, Social Exclusion. This paper focuses on the correlation between level of education and empowerment through decision making of women among SC community of Cooch Behar district. Objective of the study is to find out the level of women education in study area and secondly, to find out level of gender biasness in education and employment of the study area. Present study is based on primary data, collected from 100 SC female respondents from two different (Cooch Behar Sadar Municipal area and village Khamarsitai under Dinhata subdivision) parts of the district through selected questionnaire and are illustrated by appropriate statistical technique with relevant explanation. According to the study women literacy and employment rates differ greatly between two regions just for different socio-economic conditions and infrastructure. Government facilities, class reservation is equal for every SC woman but due to family ignorance, gender inequality, economic backwardness women in remote villages are deprived, where as in municipal area/town this is not the case. The findings indicate that there is a direct relation between women empowerment and educational attainment through decision making behavior of SC womens in the study area. There are several other factors responsible besides education, which positively stimulates empowerment status of all female respondents are age of marriage, parents’ education, household asset, husbands’ education, economic condition, residence area, social media access. The social status of SC women and level of women empowerment in municipal area is relatively better as compared to village. Implementation of skill base education, expansion of employment and more income generative activities needed for women empowerment in SC predominated area. Administrators, legislators, scholars can utilize it as an instrument whenever they decide to take numerous proactive measures for social welfare in the future.

**Keywords:** Welfare, Scheduled Caste, Women Empowerment, Decision Making, Education.

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### **I. Introduction:**

‘Women are the inevitable part of any society’ (Banu & Rawal, 2015). Their every step directly or indirectly affects our daily life. Basically, women are mirror of our civilization. Development of country is never possible without the welfare of women in our society. Since a healthy family is built around women, so, women have immense role in developing a country or society. Women are very precious part of our society. However, in many areas of society, the position of women is still not as expected. Families in minority, Dalit Communities are patriarchal. Women education and women empowerment are very necessary to promote the prominence of women opinions in a patriarchal society. ‘Education is mentioned as the main key factor in overcoming the barriers and obstacles that women face and the basic tool for empowering through take her decision and bringing them into the mainstream of development’ (Kritz et al,1990; marzile, 1995 & Sundaram, 2014). Education is essential factor that improves skills among women and helps women become self-reliant. With the expansion of institutional qualitative education to accelerate the level of women empowerment in SC dominated rural areas, the cooperation of the central and state government is absolutely necessary. Both Central and State Government have sanctioned various philanthropic schemes for the welfare of Minority, Backward class women, but in reality, due to lack of adequate publicity and awareness the results are less effective.

#### **Objective**

The objective of this study is to find out how female education affects women empowerment in SC dominated regions. Moreover, present study has some additional objectives also.

- i) To explore the connection between women education and employment.
- ii) Do women who are relatively more educated in SC families make their own decisions? If not, then what is the reason?

- iii) To what extent have all the measures taken by the Central & State govt. been implemented for the self-reliance of Scheduled Caste women?

## **II. Backdrop of the study:**

The concept of women empowerment was first introduced in International Seminar on "Women Empowerment" in 1985 (Kumari, 2006). Literacy rate and employment have unique relationship. Though both have own uniqueness, yet education is considered to be the vital device for empowerment as education's most efficient artefact is empowerment (Pandit, 1997; Anju et al., 2002). Education not only provides knowledge; it improves skill and efficiency which helps to keep the existence and dignity of women alive in the society. Education gives higher social as well as political, economic and legal status and confidence in decision making (Ghuman, 2003; Yogendrarajah, 2013).

Expansion of women literacy rate not only reduces poverty in remote area, but also improves the socio-economic conditions of that area. The need for women education is emphasized all over the world (Dhamija, 2006). According to Bhatt and Sharma (1992) the core reason for the low literacy rate among Dalit women is uneducated parents, economic instability, large family size, etc. Illiteracy is the main obstacle for lack of empowerment among the women. Education can help each woman to educate their children as a good teacher of the family as well as human society (Sharma, 2006 & Sen, 2008). Since the life of a children is formed around the mother, so role of a mother in shaping future generation is infinite. Therefore, women perform an undeclared duty in formation of healthy society.

In 21<sup>st</sup> century women are equal to men in case of rights and opportunities according to the Indian Constitution. In democratic India education of women capture the top priority to development the status of women (Cameron & Mohammed, 2010). Indian constitution promotes several initiatives for women empowerment by reservations of seats in case of education, politics, jobs. There is no doubt that the expansion of girls' education in SC dominated areas plays an essential role in changing women's daily lives.

In the previous studies, different authors / experts have given different opinions regarding how education is related to employment of women, decision making and freedom of life in Dalit Community. But my present study emphasizes on different socio-economic conditions surrounding rural and urban area are mainly responsible for the disparity in literacy rate and employment of backward caste women in villages and towns.

## **III. Methodology:**

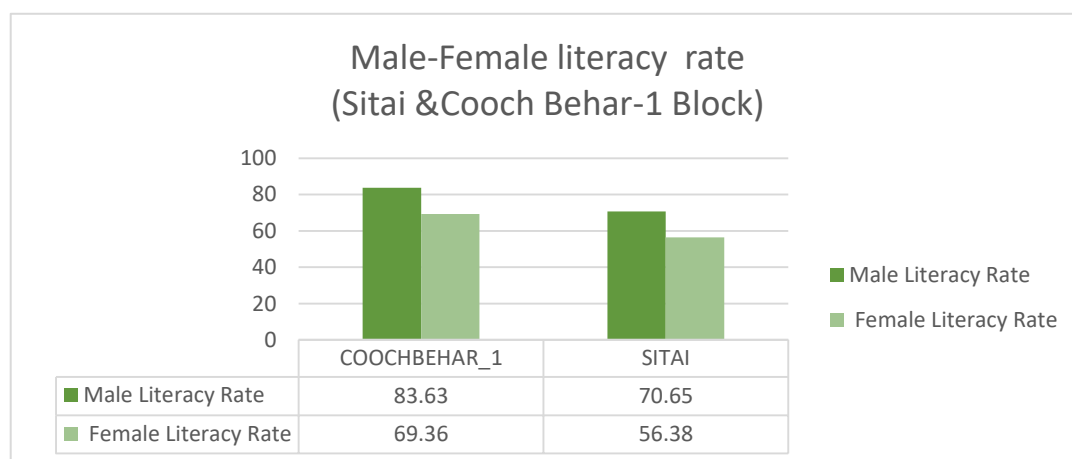
The present study is based on both secondary and the primary data. Primary data collected on the basis of stratified random sampling method from 100 SC female respondents selected from two different (Cooch Behar Sadar Municipal area and village Khamarsitai under Dinhata subdivision) parts of the district through selected questionnaire and are illustrated by appropriate statistical technique with relevant explanation. 50 samples have been collected from municipal area of Cooch Behar Sadar and 50 samples from Khamarsitai village. It is qualitative research in which a researcher uses practical experience to gain an in-depth understanding of the subject matter. Semi structured questionnaires and interviews, focused group discussions were conducted with respondents to assess their condition. A combination of both subjective and objective research method is used in the study to analyze the impact of women education and empowerment in district Cooch Behar.

## **IV. Study Area Description:**

Cooch Behar is one of the districts of West Bengal. According to Census of India, 2011 Cooch Behar contains almost about 50% Scheduled Caste population of total population. The district is situated located in the north-eastern part of state West Bengal and bounded by the district Jalpaiguri in the north and north-west, the state Assam in the east and international border of India and Bangladesh in the south and south-west. The district lies between 25° 57'47" to 26°36'20" north latitudes and between 88° 47' 44" to 89° 54' 35" east. The area of the district is 387 sq. km., which contributes 3.82% of the area of the state of West Bengal (DCHB, 2011). The effective literacy rate of SC population in dist. Cooch Behar is 73.57% (male 80.67 and female 66.01).

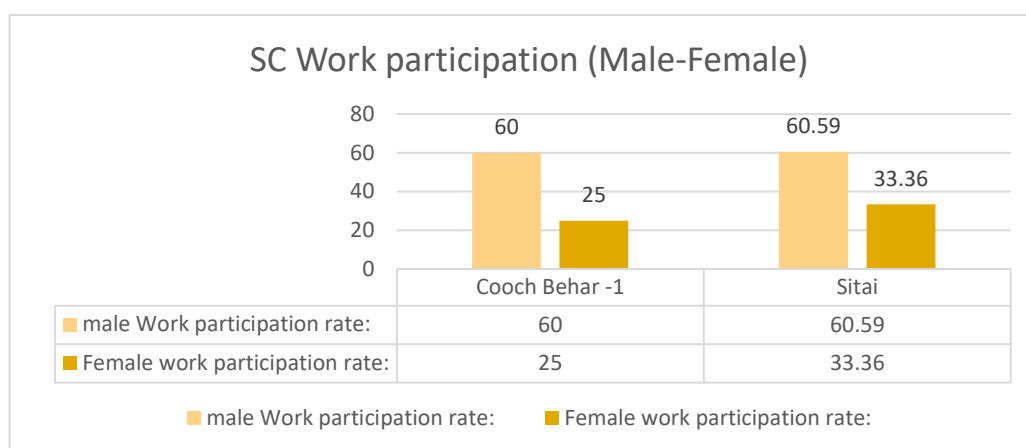
## **V. Results and Discussion**

This paper aims how educational attainment affects women empowerment and how the education factor improves the quality of life of women in remote area. At the same time women empowerment in rural and urban Scheduled Caste dominated areas depends on different determinants. All the information regarding the impact of education and women empowerment collected from both the primary and secondary sources are discussed below in detail. Demographical statistics from DCHB (District Census Hand Book) of Cooch Behar-1 & Sitai block discussed below.



Source: DCHB, Cooch Behar, 2011

The above diagram shows male-female literacy rate in two blocks (Cooch Behar-1, Sitai) are different. According to DCHB literacy rate in block Cooch Behar-1 is high as compared to block Sitai due to different socio-economic conditions and gender biasness. Female literacy rate in block Cooch Behar-1 (69.36%) is relatively high as compared to block Sitai (56.38%). The reasons for which are the awareness of the parents about the future of their children, socio-economic condition of urban area, relatively good infrastructure of educational institution in town. The statistics of SC women education is alarming in block Sitai. Different scholarships provided by central and state govt., proper governmental monitoring is very important for the development of women education as well as women empowerment in this region.



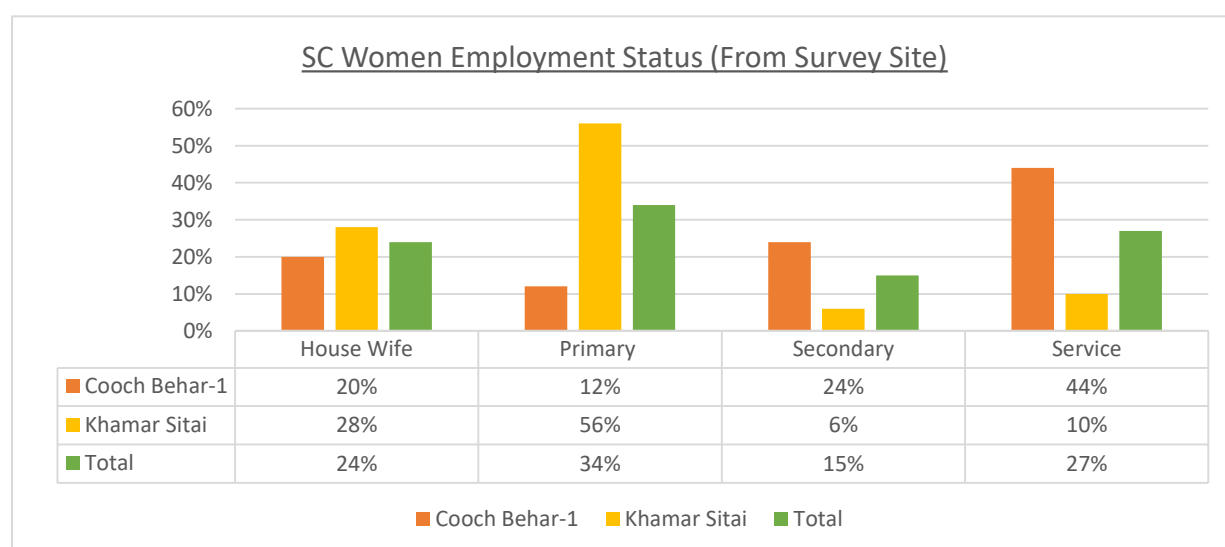
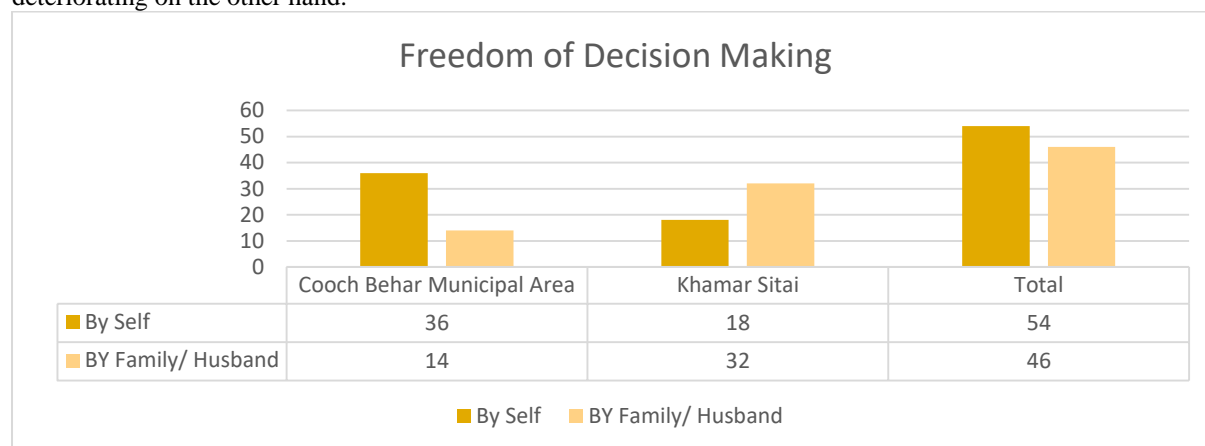
Source: DCHB, Cooch Behar, 2011

Above graph represents work participant rate of SC (Male-Female) of block Cooch Behar-1 and block Sitai. In both block female work participation is very low as (25.00%, 33.36% respectively) as compared to male. But SC female work participation in village Sitai (33.36%) is high as compared to Cooch Behar-1(25%), although SC female literacy rate is high in cooch behar-1. Female work participation is higher in Sitai block but most of them are working under unorganized sector, like agriculture. However, in block Cooch Behar-1 block, a large proportion of employed SC women are associated with organized sector, so their PCI (Per Capita income) is also high. On the basis of above two diagrammatic presentations, we can say that educational attainment has a direct relation with the rate of women empowerment.

Source: Primary Survey

Primary sample survey on SC Women in dist. Cooch Behar shows most of the women (34%) are related to primary sector. More specifically due to low women literacy rate, poor infrastructure in Sitai block 56% women are engaged in primary sector. In Cooch Behar Municipal area due to high literacy rate among SC community most of the women (44%) are employed in service sector. According to the survey 24% of SC women are house wife i.e., financially dependent on their husband or head of the family which is an obstacle in case of women empowerment in SC dominated area. According to the research of various economists and social scientists,

participation in the service sector should be maximum for a region to develop economically. But the service sector statistics from survey site are truly alarming. As a result of low employment rate among the women of SC community, economic dependency is rising on one hand and social status of women in the society is deteriorating on the other hand.



Source: Primary Survey

Women's ability to make personal, social, political and family oriented decisions is an important determinant of women empowerment. In Cooch Behar municipal area SC women have played a leading role in personal decision making as literacy rate is relatively high. On the other hand, in village Khamar Sitai which is dominated by SC community a large proportion of women are partially or fully dependent on their husband or other family members for personal decision- making. Which indicates a patriarchal society. Due to various socio-economic reasons, women's Freedom of Choice and quality of life are hampered due to low literacy and poor quality of education in remote areas of SC Community. Lower the women education and employment rate, lower will be the speed of women empowerment. Educational attainment is positively related to women employment rate as evidenced by our primary survey. Among Scheduled Caste women increased educational attainment significantly contributes to their empowerment. It leads to better employment opportunities, financial independence, improved decision making in family as well as in society. Education not only provides employment but also provides skill, efficiency, self-confidence which promotes ability to take their personal decision by own. Education increases awareness about legal rights, health condition, quality of life of women.

Findings:

- i) There are a number of families in rural SC dominated areas who consider investment in girls' higher education is an additional cost. Families prefer marriage over higher education for girls.

- ii) In SC families of villages household size is large due to female educational attainment and in case of town due to relatively high literacy rate among SC women household size is small.
- iii) Lack of proper information regarding different schemes associated with women empowerment provided by both central/state govt.
- iv) Self-help groups are not working efficiently.
- v) In rural areas most of the SC women depends on their husband to take any personal decision but this is not the case in case of Cooch Behar-1 block due to high literacy rate.
- vi) Apart from education there are many other factors that influences employment status, like parents' education, economic background of family, age of marriage etc.

Suggestion:

- i) Promoting more affirmative actions for the development of women education.
- ii) Increase employment and income generative activities for the welfare of SC women in dist. Cooch Behar.
- iii) More awareness for women literacy.
- iv) More legal awareness camp.
- v) More scholarship for expansion of higher education of SC female students.
- vi) Implementation of skill base education.
- vii) More vocational training for girls/women.
- viii) More advertisement on schemes that leads to women empowerment.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Present study highlights a strong correlation between educational attainment and the empowerment of SC women in Cooch Behar district. Women with higher education represents greater autonomy in decision-making, economic participation as well as social mobility. Education not only enhances awareness of rights and economic opportunities but also enhances skills and self-confidence needed to navigate social and economic challenges. However, present research reveals persistent barriers, such as cultural norms and economic constraints, that continue to limit educational opportunities for SC women. To achieve extensive empowerment, policies must focus on expanding access to quality education, reducing gender biasness. The social status of SC women and level of women empowerment in municipal area is relatively better as compared to village. Implementation of skill base education, expansion of employment and more income generative activities needed for women empowerment in SC dominated area. Administrators, legislators, academicians can utilize it as an instrument whenever they decide to take various proactive measures for social welfare in the times to come.

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