

Rural Market, Role of Women and Poverty Elimination

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ABSTRACT

It is a bare fact that poverty is a threatening problem in the developing and underdeveloped countries. India sees women as the one who can do everything maybe even help eradicate poverty. The ongoing Project Shakti of Hindusthan Unilever Limited bears testimony to it as by empowering women changes are sought in livelihoods and development. The aim of the paper is to highlight how a market can be created with even underprivileged women here in north east where Project Shakti or e-choupal has not yet been applied. The creation of such ventures will lead to empowered women and welfare of consumers as well. Apart from secondary sources the paper has been written with the help of information collected from focus group interviews. However, to avail the objectives it is very important to create awareness amidst rural women about prevailing schemes and projects. The reachable goals if they are to be reached by the rural people it is the qualified people who will need to come out and show ways that will justify that only women empowerment will help in decreasing and ultimately deleting poverty and usher in development.

1. Introduction

India is a witness to massive positive growth in terms of information technology, new formats of retail traders, big corporate houses chalking strategies to engulf not only selected cities but the whole of India. These growths also points towards development of rural areas with support from government and private partnership. Schemes for agro and rural industries, communication and information technology, rural development, education guarantee, small scale industries etc were primarily launched with emphasis on making benefits reached to the rural mass. When the question of leveraging of benefits come, an inequality seems to be observed between rural and urban mass. In India, 14.4 million people migrated within the country for work purposes either to cities or areas with higher expected economic gains during the 2001 census period. The number of migrants from rural place to urban also bears testimony to it along with inability of civil society organizations. When schemes laid down by government fail, than market has to be developed to check on migration and offer livelihood opportunities to the rural residents. Rural entrepreneurship is the need of the hour. While addressing the students on opportunities for youth in globalized era, through videoconferencing from Bangalore at the first Parliament of Indian Student Council Leaders on the MIT campus founder Chairman of Infosys NR Narayana Murthy has rightly said that politicians and bureaucrats should make it easy for entrepreneurs to set up manufacturing units in rural areas, which will help to uplift the rural poor. From the government the schemes are being applied to develop rural entrepreneurs without providing the necessary training for running an enterprise. The retail sector is fast moving into the rural scenario and motivated rural youths can be trained by the producers to set up enterprises. Very prominently we have two options- emphasis on women rural entrepreneurship and spread of fast moving consumer goods sector- are eminent to develop a rural market.

2. Women and North East

It is observed that the status of women in north-eastern region of India is slightly different in comparison to those living in the rest of the country. For example, mobility of women in Assam is far higher. This may be due to factors like, a) absence of purdah b) absence of occupational caste groups resulting in caste flexibility and c) a long standing influence of tribal work pattern where village economy revolves largely on women's labour and female entrepreneurship. In the early 1980's the Govt. of India launched the Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas programme under the Integrated Rural Development Programme. The Scheme had been merged into Swarnajayanti Gram Swarajgar Yojana (SGSY) with IRDP, TRYSEM etc. from April, 1999. In the year 2001, it made a tie up with the MNC giant Hindusthan Unilever Ltd. and its Project Shakti with the objectives of changing lives and livelihood in rural places of India. It mainly harped on two primary objectives, to empower women in remote rural areas and to enable HUL to reach inaccessible areas and thus to land a win-win situation. The project's vision is to let the underprivileged women an opportunity of empowerment through entrepreneurship and give the ultimatum to consumers' welfare. This has also been a vital step towards alleviation of poverty. Women self-help groups are tapped by the company and with the help of presentations rural gatherings are made aware of the objectives and benefits of Project Shakti. The company decided to tap into the growing number of women's self-help groups in India by making presentations on the benefits of taking up the offer and demonstration on use of products at rural group gatherings.

After over 5 decades of independence and industrialization in our country, still large part of population remains under poverty line. One of the disturbing news of census 2011 as per the findings of Tendulkar Committee on Poverty, India's poverty rate is estimated at 37.2% of the total population, rather than a figure of 27.5% used previously. This implies an increase in the number of BPL households from

65.2 million to almost 80 million. India's poverty rate is estimated at 37.2% of the total population, rather than a figure of 27.5% used previously. This implies an increase in the number of BPL households from 66.5 million to almost 80 million. Studies have shown that 70 per cent of holdings are held by small and marginal farmers resulting in over crowding on the agricultural land and the effect is diminishing farm produce. Migration of farm worker in large numbers to the urban areas is caused partially by this factor. The fact remains unchanged that in both ways the population remains under poverty line.

3. Rural entrepreneurship and creation of market

The project Shakti applied a very simple technique of merging micro credit with micro enterprise opportunity. The vicious circle of poverty is a cyclical loop of low income, low investment and low savings. This initiative has pulled out people to earn a respectable livelihood. Disguised employment has also been reduced as people have earned skills to develop their own enterprise, take up trading or set up co-operatives. The entrepreneurial principles vital for economic growth and employment opportunities should be injected in the process of rural development. This will contribute towards:

1. Creation of alternative occupations other than agriculture and rise of living standards.
2. Develop awareness towards indigenous products and utilization of available resources to initiate entrepreneurial venture or co-operative societies.

In a society, if prevalence of fair social justice is to be estimated than it will be reflected through treatment of women and their status. In the rural forefront it has been observed that a partial responsibility of family income, saving and budget management is shouldered by the women. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), rural women are responsible for half of the world's food production. They produce between 60% and 80% of the food in most developing countries and it is they who are the main producers of the world's staple crops (rice, wheat, and maize) which provide up to 90% of the rural poor's food intake. This brings the fact to limelight that women are fundamental for ensuring food security and household maintenance not only for their own family, but also for the entire community in general. Their work area might stretch from working in households to industrial/construction sites. In a small way, these women are empowered. To upgrade these same women the requirement is that of scope of more tangible improvement and sustainable development. In the rural section of Assam, it has been observed that women have brought themselves to a level where they follow a conventional lifestyle and take up livelihoods based on available resources. It needs to be mentioned that the schemes like National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NAREGA), Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY), National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) initiated by the government for women and rural sector have also supported for their upliftment in socio economic conditions. The need of the present hour is to develop the rural communities and for any community to develop, the growth and participation of women is essential. Growth will be ensured only with increased literacy, education, accessible and good healthcare and hygiene, active participation in home, not

excluding health and external affairs, knowledge of changes and chances going around and the ability to shoulder responsibilities.

4. Discussions, Findings and Recommendations

The above mentioned developments are possible only when the focus is shifted to granting access to market and its emerging opportunities. Over the last decade it has been seen that women entrepreneurs have increased and this attitude of rural women has ushered in positive changes in the rural communities. The case of Grameen Telephone Ladies, in Bangladesh pioneered by Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus, is one of the prominent examples of rural women entrepreneurship. Taking the example of Assam and North East many areas are torn with conflicts and insurgency problems. The worst sufferers are women and children. Above all these, especially the rural people of Assam, need to face the annual flood havoc which does not allow them to come out of the vicious circle of poverty.

Women's entering into business does not mean that they will dwell with traditional products of handloom and handicrafts or food processing activities. With passing time these products do not give a high return and does not provide enough opportunities to raise one's socio economic status. Another point of concern with women of Assam and North East is that they are not advanced in training to handle management as well as technical knowledge is also poor to enhance production. To create a market to uplift the rural women, the need of the hour is entry of micro and medium enterprises through promising models like Project Shakti, e-choupal, ASTRA which has totally not entered this part of geography. Similar projects are rolled out for Bangladesh and Sri Lanka also. As per report of Corporate Responsibility, Unilever, by late 2007 some 46,000 Shakti entrepreneurs had been appointed and trained, covering 100,000 villages in 15 states and reaching over three million households in rural India. This makes it the world's largest sustained home-to-home retail operation.

Bingen, Serrano, Howard, in a review of case studies have rightly found out that investment in human capital formation could determine the ability of rural communities to participate effectively in markets. They have also put forward the argument that investment in human capital and the skill developed in marketing often determine the ability of a community to access inputs and market production beyond the life of a project. With a vision of such outcome projects are to be designed with specific strategies. The aim will be to motivate and increase participation by poor and rural women especially. The International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) is experimenting with an approach called 'Enabling Rural Innovation' (ERI) focuses on strengthening the capacity of smallholder, resource-poor farmers to access market opportunities and actively engaging in them with the aim of creating an entrepreneurial culture in rural communities, where farmers "produce what they can market rather than trying to market what they produce". The ERI approach encourages active support and participation from rural women which in the long run will create a more sustainable market using a 'territorial approach to agro-enterprise development.' In this

context it is worthwhile to mention that Assam and North east is a store house of natural resources. One of the objective of ERI is to encourage the rural folks to invest in the available natural resources rather than depleting them for short-term market gain. The International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) is presently evaluating the ERI approach with partners and communities in Uganda, Tanzania, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Mozambique, Zambia, Rwanda, and DR Congo.

5. Women and Poverty Elimination

The rural women of Assam and North east need to boost their capability of entrepreneurship. Food and Agriculture Organization, has reinforced its partnerships with UNIDO and IFAD for dealing with agribusiness and agro-industries development. The Livelihood Projects undertaken by MRDS with IFAD stands for the fact that women should be invested upon which will lead to major improvements in productivity and food security. The MRDS is implementing the project in five districts of Meghalaya, i.e. Ri-Bhoi, East Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills, South Garo Hills and East Garo Hills. A community rises when women are provided with required land, water, education, training and finance. World Bank studies show that in many countries of sub-Saharan Africa, food production could increase by 10 to 20 per cent if women faced fewer constraints.(IFAD)

6. Conclusion

The main challenge that primarily rural women face in taking up entrepreneurship are educational and work background, psychological characteristics, motivation, perception, career efficacy, training and skills development,

comparative earning levels, management practices, external networking, desire to succeed and other obstacles(17, Islam) The awareness level amidst rural women in Assam needs to be higher. Leaving aside thoughts of subsidies, these women have to claim the benefits that a nearby state is reaping. FAO and IFAD works with respective governments to:

- Recognize and adjust to trends in farm commercialization;
- Develop reliable farm-to-market and farm-agribusiness linkages;
- Establish roles of the public sector as service providers in marketing and business management;
- Provide the private sector essential marketing, finance, business and input supply services;
- Support producer organizations;
- Overcome constraints to participation in export and high value product market channels.

The women entrepreneurs of Assam firstly need to be organized to avail the opportunities of developing micro enterprises by following the tracks laid down by Project Shakti, Food and Agriculture Organization and International Fund for Agricultural Development. Here the question arises that how will these rural backward women know that such developments are taking place just round the corner. The reach out to these women has to be extended from educational institutions and its members like us whose mission is primarily to commit towards improving the quality of life at large - organizations and society- and to encourage entrepreneurship that will usher in as harbinger of positive change and growth.

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