

Entrepreneurship, Sustainability and Economic Empowerment : A Study in the Context of Bishnupriya Manipuri Women in Assam

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Abstract:

In the midst growing unemployment problems around the world, entrepreneurship is one of the prime activities that could be undertaken by women so as to become financially stable. Particularly for those women who live in remote areas and are economically backward having no other viable source of income generation. Entrepreneurship activities, if well established, surely will play an important role in the economic empowerment and sustainable development thereby changing their economic status. The Bishnupriya Manipuri women in Assam, belong to a linguistic minority as well as an economically backward community. But womenfolk of this group of people are rich in art and culture, they have expertise in craft and handloom activities. Hence they could opt entrepreneurship to improve their economic condition and contribute towards their empowerment and sustainable development. Keeping in mind the importance of entrepreneurship, the present study examines the prospects of entrepreneurship among the Bishnupriya Manipuri women and also various problems and challenges that these women face in this field. Besides, the paper also suggests some measures to tackle the problems and foster entrepreneurship among the Bishnupriya Manipuri women, keeping in view the sustainability of the environment. The data for the present study has been collected from both primary and secondary sources. The study finds it important and hence recommends the intervention of policy makers on the one hand and academicians to do research on the other for the widespread awareness of entrepreneurship among women in general and encourage the Bishnupriya Manipuri women in particular.

Keywords: *Entrepreneurship, Sustainability, Economic Empowerment, Bishnupriya Manipuri Women*

Introduction:

The 73rd session of UN General Assembly in its resolution on entrepreneurship for sustainable development 73/225 clearly acknowledged the significant role of entrepreneurship in the context of 2030 agenda for sustainable development. The resolution stressed that Entrepreneurship by creating employment opportunities and innovation not only contributes for economic development but also improves social conditions by addressing social and environmental problems and challenges. Besides, the resolution focused on the development of comprehensive and holistic approaches including both long-term and short-term measures for entrepreneurship. This indicates the role and significance of entrepreneurship to accelerate sustainable economic growth and also remedial measures to deal with adverse effects of COVID 19 pandemic on the development of entrepreneurship at micro as well as macro levels. National Knowledge Commission (Gordon & Natarajan, 2017) defines entrepreneurship 'as the application of knowledge and skills and competencies or monetizing a new idea by an individual or a set of people by launching an enterprise or diversifying from an existing one thereby to pursue growth while generating wealth, employment and social good'. Thus, entrepreneurship involves the entrepreneur who possesses innovative skills and takes risks. It also includes various functions undertaken by the entrepreneur to establish the enterprise. Amongst the various elements such as land, labor and capital, innovation and risk bearing are the two basic and fundamental elements of entrepreneurship. In fact, innovation i.e., doing things in a new and better way is the hallmark of entrepreneurship. While doing something new, it necessarily involves risk factors as there is every possibility to incur loss due to competition, change in government policies and customer preferences. In spite of this, entrepreneurs take risks and start enterprises. Thus, as a purposeful activity entrepreneurship undoubtedly creates new opportunities while building and scaling something revolutionary that advances the society. In other words, the role of entrepreneurship is very important as it not only helps solve the growing unemployment problem among the people but also contribute to the sustainable development of a society as well as the nation.

As half of the human resource, participation of women in entrepreneurial activities is not only important in the context of economic empowerment but also in respect of sustainability. This is so because there is a close link between women empowerment and sustainable development. Empowerment of women can be understood as a multidimensional process of providing power to women in respect of equal access to resources, rights as well as freedom of self-determination and also to ensure their equal participation in the process of decision making in all spheres of life. In short women's empowerment involves raising the capacity of women to determine their own lives and make strategic choices about different issues. While

sustainable development is generally defined as "development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). However, over the period of time, many changes in development perspectives, sustainable development is also perceived as development having three interrelated elements and/or dimensions such as social development, economic development and environmental protection. All these three elements need to be fulfilled collectively otherwise it will impede sustainable development. It indicates the fact that both men and women should equally contribute to all dimensions of development so as to keep a balance in the environment. Without emphasizing empowerment and equal participation of women, sustainable environment is not possible. However, gender inequality still prevails which adversely effects women empowerment. Therefore, improvement of socio-economic and political condition of women and gender equality are the prima facie for sustainability. So far as economic development of women is concerned, entrepreneurship plays an important role as entrepreneurial activities stimulate women to become financially viable and strong. In fact, development of women as entrepreneurs will generate multifaceted socio-economic benefit and helps to achieve rapid, all round regionally and socially balanced economic growth. The underlying meaning is that women and girls are at the same time effective and powerful change makers who can play a significant role for sustainable development through their active participation and leadership in social, economic, political and environmental spheres. There are many women entrepreneurs around the globe who not only raise their voice but also actively involved in sustainable initiatives and climate adaptation as well as mitigation measures.

Women entrepreneurship is relatively a recent phenomenon which came into lime light in the late 1970s. In India women entrepreneurship has come a long way from papads and pickles to engineering and electronics. In the era of globalization women particularly in urban areas are creating history in non-conventional areas like consultancy, import and exporting garments, interior designing, textile industries, chemicals, pharmaceuticals and so on. In India there are different institutions that not only endorse but also work for the development of women entrepreneurship. These institutions are – Federation of Ladies' Organization (FLO) 1983, Federation of Indian Women Entrepreneurs (FIWE), Consortium of Women Entrepreneurs of India (CWEI) 2000, Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI) which has launched two specific schemes for women Mahila Vikash Nidhi and Mahila Udhya Nidhi, The Ladies organization of Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) etc. Mention may be made of Bharatiya Mahila Bank that provides business loan to the women entrepreneurs to start their new business which does

not require collateral security if the loan amount is less than one crore. Besides, the government of India through NITI Aayog has launched women entrepreneurship platform (WEP) to create an ecosystem and support women entrepreneurs and sponsors across the country. It provides the services such as incubation and acceleration for business at initial stage, skill training and mentorship, funding and financial support, assistance in marketing, corporate partnerships and most importantly the platform as well as network to share each others experiences. Moreover, the Government of India has undertaken various measures and schemes to promote women's entrepreneurship activities such as—

- a) Shree Shakti package introduced in 1989 by State Bank of India that provides financial assistance up to Rs. 25000/- to women entrepreneurs without collateral security and guidance. Similarly, Priyadarshini Yojna by Bank of India provides financial assistance to start small business and retail trade.
- b) Mudra Yojana Scheme that offers loans ranging between Rs. 50000/- to Rs. 10 lakhs ideal to start and expand small or micro business such as small shops, beauty salons, coaching centers for running home based small business.
- c) Dena Shakti Scheme by Dena Bank provides loans for women who wants to start new business in the fields of agricultural and allied activities, trade, manufacturing, micro credit, education, housing etc. The maximum loan limit is Rs. 20 lakhs while the interest rate is fixed at 0.25% below the base rate.
- d) The Udyogini scheme specially for those women whose family income is below Rs. 1.5 lakh per annum. It provides loan up to Rs. 3 lakhs at a very low rate of interest.

Various studies however, show that in spite of all these schemes, involvement of women in entrepreneurial activities is very low in India. This is because the successful implementation of these schemes depends on many factors like socio-economic and cultural condition prevailing.

Objectives:

The main objectives of this paper are –

- 1) To find out various entrepreneurial activities available to Bishnupriya Manipuri women particularly in Assam.
- 2) To identify the factors that put serious challenge on the Bishnupriya Manipuri women to expand their business.
- 3) To provide some suggestions to foster entrepreneurship among the Bishnupriya Manipuri women so as to facilitate sustainability and economic empowerment.

Materials and Methods:

For the present paper, data has been collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data has been collected with the help of interview schedule through multi-stage sampling. At the first stage, the sample of areas from Assam where a substantial number of Bishnupriya Manipuri people are settled has been selected through the technique of purposive sampling. In the second stage, samples or respondents have been collected from the selected areas mainly Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi districts. Since community wise population is not available, the exact size of population of the areas is not known and given the time constraints, a total number of 100 respondents has been collected through the technique of simple random sampling. The secondary data has been collected from different text books, journals and websites etc.

Discussion:

The Bishnupriya Manipuri women belong to a microscopic linguistic minority community living in Assam since ages ago. They have a unique culture and language that distinctly identifies them from all other communities of Assam. Originally, Bishnupriya Manipuris were the inhabitants of the princely state of Manipur particularly the villages near the Loktak Lake. During the 18th century, due to various internal conflicts and the repeated Burmese invasions, a major segment of the Bishnupriya Manipuris fled away and settled in other places within and outside the Manipur kingdom. In course of their outward movement, some of the Bishnupriya Manipuri people settled in the plain lands of Jiri-bam, a district of Manipur. While outside Manipur, they settled in Assam, Tripura and Sylhet now in Bangladesh. Thus, though Dr. G.A Grierson in his Linguistic Survey of India (Weierson, 1994), mentioned about the existence of a considerable number of Bishnupriya Manipuris in two or three villages of Manipur particularly near Bishnupur who could speak Bishnupriya language. However, they are now completely overshadowed by the Manipuri (Meitei) language. Nevertheless, they still retained their ethnic identity and continued to identify themselves as Bishnupriyas or Hindu Manipuris.

The Bishnupriya Manipuri community is patriarchal in nature and as such the male members enjoy greater power and control in respect of decision making. The Bishnupriya Manipuri women though lead a better and honorable life due to the absence of dowry system and other social evils but in terms of decision making and independence, they always have to fight for their equal rights. Moreover, regarding the inheritance of property, though law grants equal property rights but it is found that most of the Bishnupriya Manipuri women do not claim their share of paternal property either due to ignorance or out of the fear of developing strained relation with their siblings. During the survey, it was found that 90% of

married women do not possess property such as land or house. In-fact these are owned by the male members of their family. This clearly indicates the economic dependency of the Bishnupriya Manipuri women. However, regarding their family responsibilities it was not limited to the domestic sphere. Rather, Bishnupriya Manipuri women are very hard working and share equal burden to meet their family expenses alongside their male counterparts. This often necessitates them to undertake handicraft work on one hand and go outside to work in the paddy fields on the other. In the present decade with globalization and liberalization, there is greater participation of womenfolk of this community in all spheres and no one can deny the important contribution made by these women in the family as well as the societal level.

Prospects of Entrepreneurship among the Bishnupriya Manipuri women:

The Bishnupriya Manipuri community is economically backward. Majority of these people live in rural areas and both men and women participate in agricultural activities and cultivation, which is in fact the main source of their livelihood. Apart from agriculture, handloom production is another important source of economy to this community. Particularly, womenfolk are engaged in the production of their traditional garments not only for their own consumption but also for business purpose which ultimately make a great contribution towards their economic development. Since the Bishnupriya Manipuri women are good weavers and skilled in producing various handloom products which are in high demand in the global market. These products are also environment friendly and there is an ample opportunity for these women to set up new enterprise in the field of handicraft and handloom production. In fact earlier, handloom production was the main source of livelihood for these women. However, with modernization coupled with growing education among women that opens up new alternatives of earning money, not many women particularly from the new generation are willing to engage in handloom activities. Thus only 10% women are found to be engaged in this field. Apart from handloom enterprises, entrepreneurial activities were taken up in the field of beauty & cosmetics, fashion and interior designing, photography, writing, foods processing and beverages etc. which are indeed popular areas for these women. In fact, when there was gross unemployment problem due to COVID – 19 pandemic on the one hand and demand for vocal for local on the other, these activities appeared as a good source of income for these women. For example, a Bishnupriya Manipuri woman Sunita Sinha from Silchar established her business on traditional food items of Bishnupriya Manipuri Community such as *Heedol* (Dry fish paste), *Longchak* (stink beans) during the Covid period which is now running very successfully as these traditional food items are sustainably cultivated and are in great demand. But it becomes very difficult and challenging for most of the

Bishnupriya Manipuri women to emerge as successful entrepreneurs owing to several factors. Even in the field of handloom activities which was once the main source of their income, Bishnupriya Manipuri women have small business enterprise with little success rates.

Findings:

1. It may be worth mentioning here that even in recent past Bishnupriya Manipuri women had a great reputation in handloom production, weaving traditional garments for their use as well as for business purpose but these are slowly disappearing among the young generation.
2. The problems and challenges faced by Bishnupriya Manipuri women-entrepreneurs are multidimensional. During the survey it is found that compared to males, 75 percent Bishnupriya Manipuri women faced absence of financial access.
3. Since Bishnupriya Manipuri community is patriarchal in nature all economic resources like land and capital are controlled by the males. All major decisions relating to the management of property (movable and immovable) are taken by males.
4. Women are legally entitled to have a share to their parent's property, but none of the samples avail it either due to ignorance or due to the fear of having strained relations with their parents and siblings.
5. Nearly 50 percent of the sampled Bishnupriya Manipuri women entrepreneurs are not independent enough to control their own earnings and find it very difficult to start and manage a new business by their own.
6. Among Bishnupriya Manipuri women 60 percent are economically dependent and are not confident and willing to take risk of starting a new enterprise. Most of them lack self-confidence and don't want to invest money and take risk.
7. The main reasons of such lack of motivation are – financial dependency, low success rates of business activities, lack of time, gender-based responsibility, lack of family support etc. This is probably because they are more inclined towards machine made products on the one hand and their growing interest in other occupation on the other.
8. Due to the patriarchal nature of the community, domestic responsibilities are the principal duties for Bishnupriya Manipuri women. In fact, women have internalized this gender-based roles as their primary duty. Consequently, women hardly get time at their disposal to contribute in business activities. They encounter a serious tussle when they plan to start a new business or enterprise.

9. Among others, infrastructure which includes raw materials, institutional and organizational set up is very essential for starting a new business whether large or small. These infrastructural limitations pose a serious challenge at the initial startup which hinder these women to expand business at a greater level.
10. It is found during the survey that 60 percent of the Bishnupriya Manipuri women entrepreneur lack proper business skill and knowledge. They are educated up to secondary or matric level and don't have any business acumen or training.
11. It is observed that, the financial assistance provided by the government to buy materials of weaving, knitting and handicrafts to start a new business are not properly distributed among the needy women.

Suggestions to Promote entrepreneurship among the Bishnupriya Manipuri women:

Promotion of entrepreneurial activities among the Bishnupriya Manipuri community in general and women in particular is very essential for their sustainable development. Particularly during the post pandemic period where employment opportunities are very less in both public and private sectors, the importance of entrepreneurship to deal with growing economic and unemployment crisis remain very vital. In case of Bishnupriya Manipuri women who are double marginalized i.e. one at the community level as their community is economically backward, and on the other at the gender level, the role of entrepreneurship is very significant in raising their financial condition as well as economic empowerment. Therefore, in order to promote entrepreneurship among the Bishnupriya Manipuri women some suggestions are put forwarded under the following.

Awareness should be created in the community level on sharing of domestic responsibilities and other household works, so that women who possess business skills as well as knowledge can get sufficient time to devote to their enterprise.

The Government and Non Governmental Organisation must organize some vocational training and skill development programs. The financial institutions should provide financial support for the infrastructural development under various welfare scheme. On the other hand, the political leaders or public authorities should abstain from nepotism and other vote bank politics while distributing financial schemes to the women of this community.

Conclusion:

Sustainable development of a community in particular and a nation in general is not possible if half of the human resources are left behind. Until and unless women are empowered and gender equality is achieved, development cannot progress in a balanced manner. Therefore, economic empowerment of women is one of the pre-requisites to achieve the

goal of sustainable development. In the midst of growing unemployment problem during the post pandemic era with less employment opportunities in public as well as private sectors, entrepreneurship could play a significant role in solving such problems and help women to contribute in the process of sustainable development. However, the study finds that entrepreneurial activities are very low among the Bishnupriya Manipuri women. There is a need to develop entrepreneurial zeal among the womenfolk so that they can empower themselves and can contribute to the sustainable development of their own community as well as the country.

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