

Journey toward Equality and Empowerment: A Study on Rural Craftswomen of West Bengal

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Abstract : *Empowerment of women in the backward region is a challenge in association with provision of gender equity measures in demographical context. Rural craft making is an arena in which women folk is largely absorbed. The objective of the study is to address the research gap on the status of women empowerment in relation to locational aspects of the craft villages. With the application of ethnographic methods in field survey, this empirical study reveals the relative importance of intrinsic and locational factors in determining the level of decision making of craft women engaged in dokra craft. From case studies on Panchmura and Bikna in Bankura district of West Bengal that have been sampled for differential behavioural characteristics, the space effect on women empowerment has been derived.*

Keywords : *Gender, craft, women, space, empowerment*

Introduction

Traditionally man enjoys superior position in the patriarchal society, which leads to a gender disparity. The extent of freedom to access household resources and income may be the key to assess and interpret the level of such disparities. Traditionally inclusion of every person in the process of empowerment irrespective of their gender is very much important for the all-round development of a society. Removal of the gender gap that persists between male and female is the issue affecting equity from which a mechanism to achieve equality is derived (Council for International Development, 2012). Economic empowerment is identified as one of the fundamental requirements in order to assure gender equality (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific [ESCAP], 2013). Gender equality is an ideological social situation, where any person is able to enjoy equal freedom in terms of self-development and access to decision making irrespective of gender identities. It is an antithesis of the role set by rigid norms of a conservative gender biased society. It advocates for judicious treatment of different genders as per essential requirements and needs. The word empowerment is deeply connected

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with the ability to make fundamental livelihood decisions in true sense, which is highly related to the economic freedom of a particular person (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2000).

Gender equality is institutionally defined as the equality under the laws of land, including the equality of opportunity and equality of voice (Mason & King, 2001). On the other hand, gender equity considers the status in differences of need, preference; power and position prevail in the society among genders. Women empowerment is a mechanism to uplift the status of women relating to provision of power for making socio-economic as well as political decisions. The goal is to ensure equal freedom in choice and action as enjoyed by a male counterpart on entitlement of family and social resources in the process of developing their self-esteem and self-identity through enhancing their ability, skill and knowledge (Hunt and Samman, 2016). According to World Bank, empowering women is the key in reducing the poverty and it is intimately related with the issues of social inclusion. Among the deprived, disadvantaged and socially excluded sub-groups of the society, women constitute the common subset due to overlapping of a number of disempowered social sections (Malhotra *et al.*, 2002). The existing gender gap in economic sectors exerts adverse effects on economic development (Press Trust of India [PTI], 2018). In a report (2013) the International Labour Organisation (ILO) have identified decreasing rate of women participation in labour force as a major issue for the slow growth in employment of India. Economical self-dependency is the pre-requisite for women empowerment, which is connected with issues of women nutrition and health, poverty reduction, economic as well as social welfare (Golla *et al.*, 2011). In case of India, informal economic sector draws the unskilled women labour from rural to urban areas, who are found as the most deprived, since they are absorbed out of compulsion arising from acute poverty in villages. In West Bengal, workforce participation rate for females is higher (19.4%) in rural areas than urban (15.4%) areas due to hidden role of female workforce in such occupations (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2017). In addressing the research gaps on analysis of its spatial pattern, this article concentrates on specific rural crafts appreciated in rural tourism market for their traditions. Rural crafts are considered as manifestation of ethnic identity of a particular society. The indigenous knowledge on techniques of craft making has been transmitted from generation to generation as oral tradition and practices (Sen, 1994). In such informal sector, economic activity is entirely household oriented. Women of these households, particularly who are married found more absorbed in craft making to support their families. The hypothesis is appreciation on their contribution depends on the social environment guided by location of individual craft makers as reflected in their level of participation in decision making process with reference to the adaptation of spatial gender norms in which societal position of women differs despite of whatever is their contribution in comparison to the male family members.

Background of the Study

Global women empowerment issues are predominantly associated with prospect of microfinance facilities, different aspects of self-help groups, women entrepreneurship, diversified workload of female work participation etc. Women participation scenario in tourism sector is an emerging research arena devoted to the benefit of the planners working for government or non-governmental authorities. Creative industries like craft making may be a way to empower rural women and poverty reduction (Setyaningsih et.al, 2012). Commercialising of craft products has intimate relation with the development of crafts and their artisans (Suich & Murphy, 2002). It is further noteworthy to mention that capacity building and inclusion of women workforce is the key factor for any rural women empowerment programme which ultimately improves the skills, personality, self-confidence, self-esteem of the rural craft-women (Ojha & Mishra, 2013). However, the benefit of different training and welfare measures are not equally distributed among male and female craft makers because of gender-specific constraints, which restrain women to avail the advantages of new kind of opportunities (Governance and Democracy Division, 2018). From literature triangulation, it appears that the scope of women dominated crafts, its demand for leisure among urban based female tourists (Creighton, 1995), the socio-economic status of craftswomen and impact of tourism upon them (Cone, 1995), the relationship between craft and gender (Almamari, 2015) are among the popular areas of current research. In most of the scholarly articles, the discussions have been found confined in artistic and aesthetic aspects of the crafts with little glimpse on craft society and its socio-economic problems having close affinity with the geographical location of the particular craft village. This study is an attempt to analyse the influence of space upon empowerment status of rural craftswomen absorbed in family craft business which is none but the attempt to address a research gap on status of women participation scenario in rural handicraft industry of West Bengal. In this context the following research questions have motivated the present study

- Whether women involved in craft making process enjoy better status in decision making in the context of family affairs?
- Whether family support on women involvement in craft making and business vary from craft to craft based on dominant regional culture?
- Is there any relationship between literacy / educational attainment of craft women with leadership/decision making capabilities?
- Whether more involvement in individual craft making has any association with better access to health facilities for craftswomen?

The prime objective of the study is to investigate whether locational aspect of the craft village is more important than the nature of an individual craft relating to the scope of women involvement from social geographic point of view. Purposive

sampling is made on selecting two neighbouring craft centres (Fig. 1) among the 11 rural craft hubs being identified by the Government of West Bengal in collaboration with UNESCO (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) in the year 2013, have been selected for the present study. The apparent difference in nature of female participation and varying share in decision making process despite of location in the same administrative district and enjoying almost the same logistics has attracted the scholarly attention to investigate the issues relating to rural urban divide in this context. To fulfil the objective of making a geographical appraisal on the varying empowerment status, the following craft hubs have been selected for a comparative study:

1. Kumbhakar para (22°57'52"N, 87°09'39"E) of village Panchmura, about 36km from Bankura, a district headquarter in the western region of West Bengal
2. Shilpodanga (23°14'44"N, 87°04'46"E) of Bikna at the outskirt (about 4 km.) of Bankura town where the culture is predominantly urban and craft women enjoy better exposure to health, education and direct marketing opportunities of their product due to locational advantages.

Materials and Methods

Women empowerment is a continuous process in relation to changes of in women mobility and level of social interaction, women labour pattern dimensions, access to and control over resources, entitlement in intra-household decision making (Nithyanandhan and Mansor, 2015). Among the components of women empowerment worldwide, worth mentioning components are self-worth, freedom of choice, access to opportunity and resources, control over own life at their home and in the social sphere which manifest in the ability to influence the direction of economic and social change not only locally but also internationally (United Nations Population Information Network, 1990). Further, Alsop and Heinsohn (2005) have identified three assessing criteria to measure the degree of empowerment – existence of choice, use of choice, achievement of choice. With such theoretical considerations, extensive fieldworks in the form of ethnographic surveys have been conducted in purposively sampled craft villages taking into consideration of societal and locational aspects. Focus group discussions have been organized on the special occasion while attending the village fairs. Four categories of respondents have been identified from pilot survey:

Type I: Skilled women with language proficiencies who are able to interact with the outer world to market their crafts.

Type II: Women who are compelled to be confined in their households but are influenced by the type I women and also actively participate as stakeholders if craft fairs are organised in the villages.

Type III: Women devoid of proper guidance and scope to participate in craft business in spite of desire.

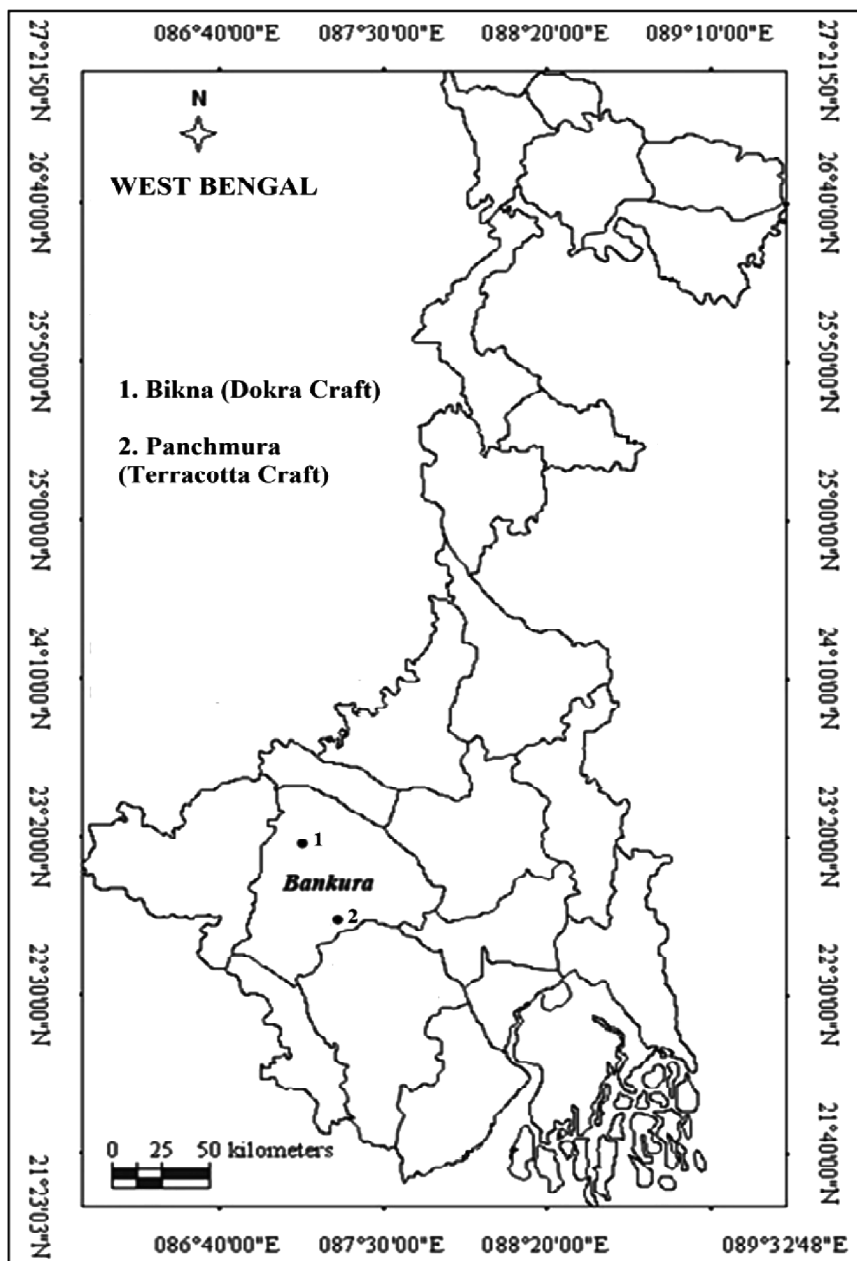


Fig 1: Location of Bikna and Panchmura: Dokra and Terracotta craft centre

Type IV: Conservative women who are not ready to interact with the outer world and conceive that such interaction is the pursuit of any male member or elderly family member.

With such classification, stratified random sampling has been adopted for investigation relating to equity and empowerment status of craft women. The structured questionnaires have been designed to relate the locational aspects and involvement level in particular craft making with special reference to their ethnic and social background in order to address the research gap in this context. In the survey schedule, questions have been deliberately put forwarded addressing three distinctive directions, namely: for acquiring general information (name, age, cast, family profile etc.), craft related questions and self-assessment appraisal on empowerment status. To understand the push and pull dynamics of the motivational factors and constraints for of rural women in stepping out to the outer world, craftswomen have been intensively and exclusively interviewed from each and every stratified class as mentioned earlier ensuring equal representation.

Prolonged engagement and persistent observation methods have been adopted for assuring the sanctity of the qualitative research. This study is nothing but an ethnographic venture dealing with a number of indicators (table 1) in association with their respective domains including:

1. Literacy and education status of craft women
2. Involvement level in production and sale affairs
3. Exposure to health services in general and maternal health services in particular
4. Decision making status on reproduction and major family affairs particularly marriage and property oriented decision making.

The data extracted from filled up questionnaires have been subjected to experimentation with allotment of weightage to compare the status of two well renowned craft villages of West Bengal in respect of women empowerment. The final scores on each and every indicator have been derived by calculating the average of each sub criteria. For example, to obtain the score of 'marital age status', average value has been calculated from the given weightage scores of five age groups (i.e. <18, 18-20, 20-22, 22-24,>24) for both the craft villages. The total sample size is 60, purposively selecting 30 craftswomen from each craft village. In response to the fundamental research question, a study concerning distance decay of women empowerment subjected to proximity of urban culture is conducted with the application of the methods of qualitative research.

Discussion and Findings

The study reveals that the craftswomen of Panchmura are neither self-dependent nor confident enough in taking any business decision. They rarely interact with the outsiders. It has been observed that the business affairs are being handled by the male family members. At Panchmura, married women are not allowed by the society to put their claim on their parental properties. It is nothing but the

manifestation of the level of women empowerment instead of an achievement in educational attainment at village level compared to many other craft centres of West Bengal. For terracotta craft of Panchmura, women are considered just as a helping hand but at Bikna few women are internationally recognized as artist and a good number of craftswomen took part in marketing activities at different fair and festivals. It is noteworthy to mention that in Dokra village there is a tendency to marry within the village and as the married girls are not the outsiders, they enjoy better status in decision making on any family and business affairs. There is a secondary school near the Dokra village Bikna and it has been observed that most of the girls from artisan families are dropped-out and get married at early age, where as girls of artisan families from Panchmura are usually admitted in a nearby collage after completing the school education, which is rare indeed in the context of the statistic of the state. At Bikna the reason behind a girl's drop-out from school is marriage. Women participation is high in Dokra craft making which also widen the scope of craftswomen to take part in decision making. It has been observed that both at Bikna and Panchmura, craft makers have developed co-operative societies for the welfare of their business in their respective craft centres. There is no female representative in such society at Panchmura while female artisans have been incorporated in the co-operative society of Bikna which may be considered as a reflection of better women empowerment status in case of Dokra craft.

To analyse the present status of women empowerment, seven indicators have been selected (Table 1) and subsequently weightage have been given to each and every indicator depending on survey outcomes in order to compare the women empowerment status in Dokra and Terracotta villages chosen for the study:

Table 1: Weighted indicators comparing women empowerment status

Indicators	Weighted Score for Bikna	Weighted Score for Panchmura
1. Marital Age status	26.67	31.33
2. Literacy and Educational Status	34.76	48.57
3. Exposure to health service	31.1	32.78
4. Decision making on family affair	25.56	35
5. Honour perceived by community on their contribution	25.33	21.33
6. Access to income and profit from crafts	42.67	43.33
7. Access to market for direct sale	56.00	26.00
Total	242.09	238.34

The findings are listed below:

1. It appears that despite of acquiring better weightage status in human development related indicators, the cumulated score of Panchmura is less than Bikna because of huge difference arising from score obtained in the context of exposure to market.
2. The locational advantage of Bikna plays vital role since urbanization is a way of life shaping the behaviour of Bikna artisans conducive for making business.
3. Despite of better access to education and health facilities, the mindset of rural Panchmura is responsible for such low empowerment status of craftswomen in comparison to Bikna, the settlement environment of which is near to an urban slum. It also appears that conventional education has no significant relation with the empowerment status of craftswomen.
4. The craftswomen of Bikna are accustomed in direct interaction with consumers while in Panchmura, they keep distance from visitors admitting responsibility of the male members of the family to interact with the tourists, who arrive at their villages in the attraction of Terracotta craft.

Conclusion

Rural crafts are basically household centric in which women participation is a common characteristics. But due to social constraints, the contribution of craft-women both in production and marketing are usually found unrecognised. Despite the welfare measures adopted in these craft centres, the gender inequalities still prevail and female subordination is a common feature of craft villages. However, the magnitude of it depends on level of engagement in craft making that varies from craft to craft as found from the comparison between Dokra and Terracotta crafts sampled from the same district in special consideration with locational aspects of the respective craft centres. With an appraisal of their performance level, income and resource entitlement, educational and health status, psychological and personal well being connected with leadership and decision making abilities, it is revealed that apart from such intrinsic factors, there is immense influence of an external factor. The location of the craft centre within its socio-cultural milieu appears vital in determining the equality and empowerment status on the way of life of craft women living in the same geographical region. Urban influence is very much visible among the women of Bikna when they interact as revealed from their marketing sense, product showcasing, dressing sense etc. This is why at semi-urban Bikna, women empowerment and equity status is higher in comparison with Panchmura, a comparatively remote village in spite of its better literacy and educational attainment.

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