

BOOK REVIEW

Jha, Hari Bansh (1997), *Empowering Women of Mohattari District: A Case Study of Selected Village Development Committee*, Centre for Economic and Technical Studies, Friederic Ebert Stiftung, Nepal, p. 77 including 21 Tables, Bibliography, Appendix, Glossary and Abbreviations, Price not mentioned.

The issues of empowering women particularly since the launching of the UN decade of women have remained very alive in Nepal. The BEIJING and Cairo conferences on women have brought empowering issues in development at the forefront with a sharper focus on women. Various approaches such as women in development (WID), 'women and development' (WAD) and 'gender and development (GAD) were evolved since early 1970 to bring women into the mainstream of development. The declarations and programs of action adopted at the three global women's conferences (Mexico 1975, Copenhagen 1980 and Nairobi 1985) have added important dimensions on the empowerment of women. The conferences have the message that no progress is possible without a full and equal participation of men and women. In the World Summits on the child, human rights, environment, population and social development, women's issue topped the agenda and women were identified as crucial actors. Efforts were made to translate such approaches in operational strategy, plans and programs. Notwithstanding these attempts and efforts, the record of achievement has been rather negligible. It is undoubtedly due to lack of commitment to required structural changes to usher in power shifts to facilitate women's participation in their own development and in the development of the society in general. In this connection, the publication of the book *Empowering Women of Mahottari District : A Case Study of Selected Village Development Committees* is a noteworthy. There are very few materials on the Women of Mithila region of Nepal. Analytical materials are conspicuously lacking. As such writing on the status of these women is not only strenuous but challenging as well.

The book presents an account of the women living in the Mithila region of Nepal which is surrounded by the foothills of the Himalayas in the north. Indo-Nepal border in the south, the Koshi in the east and the Gandaki in the west. Due to the purdah system and other social taboos, the development of Mithila Women has been greatly restricted. They are so shy, submissive and traditional that they have not been able to contribute significantly in the process of national integration and its development. In this context illiteracy, dowry system, social restriction on inter-caste and widow marriage, lack of political participation etc. are some of the important reasons which restrict them to come into the mainstream of development. Thus, an effort has been made in this book to present an account of the various factors that could help Mithila women to get empowered.

This book is divided into six chapters including conclusion in each chapter. In the first chapter the author presents an account of the history, caste groups and marriage system of the Mithila Zone along with traditional activities like songs,

dance, art, ornaments, paintings, festivals etc. performed by the women. They are

highly religious and they invariably worship Gods and Goddesses and perform rituals with a great sense of devotion. Singing, Painting, tradition of wearing ornaments and of coloring the hands and feet, quality of making different varieties of food items and sweets, paying respect to the elders and of being hospitable to the guests are such rare qualities among the Maithili women which have made them distinct and have helped them to preserve their traditional culture.

The second chapter deals with the problem of the women's education. The Mithila region is still dominated by the traditional outlook in which education to girl and women is not given major importance. Many social taboos and out-dated stereo types about education exist in the society. Lack of educational materials and medium of instruction in the mother tongue atleast at the primary and non-format education level is a major impediment to the educator of the Maithili girls and women.

An account for the discrimination made against the girl child and the women is presented in chapter three. In this chapter, the state of inter caste marriage, widow marriage, remarriage and divorce is also discussed. Gender discrimination is the rule among the Maithili Community rather than an exception. The author points out the "an atmosphere has been created in which there has been a spirit in the activities of sex workers in the Mithila region. By tradition, certain castes of people have been indulging in this flesh trade.

In the fourth chapter violence against dowry system is analysed. The author shows concern about how amazingly little interest the government has shown towards addressing this crucial issue. The ineffectiveness of civil code in the abolition of dowry and the commitment needed on the part of government, NGOs, INGOs, UN agencies and electronic and print media are stressed.

Chapter five shows how the women are poor despite their immense contribution in various socio-economic activities. Sanitation related problems, lower production and productivity of agriculture land, unemployment disguised unemployment etc. are some of the important reasons why the per capita income of the women are extremely low as compared to the national per capita income, the author argues. In this context, development of tourism, growth of handicraft items, women's share in patrimonial property etc. could be some of the steps that need to be taken towards women empowerment. In order to improve the overall conditions of the women and to break the vicious circle of poverty in the Mithila region, implication-oriented recommendations to directly address the situation are pointed out.

Emphasis on women's participation in the political mainstream is discussed in the last chapter. Despite the contributions made by the Maithil women in the political movements of the country, they lag far behind in the political and administrative system of the country. In order to make the women politically conscious and to motivate them to participate in the political mainstream of the nation are also pointed out. As the present unitary form of political structure in

Nepal does not allow federalism to grow, the formation of Mithila Development Council is highlighted. Bibliography, Appendix, Glossary and Abbreviations are given at the end of the book.

The socio-economic, cultural and political aspects of the book are praiseworthy. The work is based on an interview, group discussion and Expert Group Meeting; topics are related with burning issues; facts are based on observations; each section has been explained very well and provides wealthy information to planners, policy makers administrators and politicians. The chapters are furnished with tables representing specific socio-economic, cultural and political phenomena. The topic of the book is explained in simple and clear terms.

However, the words used inside the book are, missing in the Glossary list. A few are *Bariyati* (p. 6), *dwirangman* or *gauna* (p. 7), *lahathi* (p. 51), *sallahkar sabha* (p. 60). Perhaps the author might have a confusion with *bilom* (p. 5) Bilom stands for lower caste men and upper caste women.

Talking to women empowering is a holistic approach which indeed, requires egalitarianism and demands of long-term perspective. Empowering women can be linked to various component and sub components of development activities like population, environment, sustainable development and growth from womens a perspective as well as the entire society to which both men and women belong. It may recall that women's indigenous knowledge on the Judicious use of soils, plants and animals to meet household needs is a valuable asset. Women's role as source managers and livelihood providers are well established in Nepal.

No doubt the book illustrates how painful is the life of Maithil girls and women and thus stimulates the readers towards serious thinking on the subject. The book certainly deserves wide reading.

It is useful and thus worthy of keeping as a reference by those interested readers for women empowering issues.

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