

Entrepreneurial Skill of Mising Tribal Women of Assam

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Abstract

This paper unfolds the current scenario of Mising women entrepreneurs of Assam. Women entrepreneurs are considered as a tool for the economic development of a country. It empowers the women to establish their self-identity, financial independence and social upliftment of position in society. The Mising ethnic community women performed certain economic activities, practiced since generation. They have turned these traditional occupations into profitable businesses through their hard work and determination. One such traditional occupation is weaving; the high demand for their handloom products in the market encouraged them to establish handloom as a micro-enterprise. The women earn a profitable margin as weavers or entrepreneurs from this handloom industry. Piggery and 'Endiculture' are two sectors, from which they earn a respectable amount. They have not learned this entrepreneurial skill from any outsourcing agency. The analysis of the community reveals that women entrepreneurship is in the tradition, which teaches financial independence to women. In spite of the success as a women entrepreneur, there are certain limitations, which hindrance the growth.

Keywords- Women entrepreneur, Mising women, Handloom, Endiculture, Tribal

INTRODUCTION

Women entrepreneur is defined as “a confident, innovative and creative women capable of achieving self-economic independence individually or in collaboration, generates employment opportunities for others through initiating, establishing and running an enterprise by keeping pace with her personal, family and social life.” by Kamala Singh as quoted by Devi (Devi, 2015). This definition well described Mising women entrepreneur. Entrepreneur skill is an inherent quality acquired by them as a tradition from their mother. Mising women enjoyed

financial independence since time immemorial for innovative economic ideas, which is facilitated by a liberal patriarchal society. The sex ratio of Mising women proves it, which is 954 (1991 census), 959 (2001 census) and 968 (2011 census). They undertook traditional economic activities for financial independence, and among the entire occupation, handloom established them as micro-entrepreneurs.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To identify the economic activities performed by Mising women to generate income.

- To understand the transformation of traditional economic activity as a micro-enterprise.
- To identify the limitations in the growth of the business.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is based on secondary and primary data. The secondary data is obtained from the census of India and ethnographic literature on the Mising tribe. The primary data is based on field methodology. The primary data is collected by participant observation, focus group discussion and one-to-one interview. These tools are used to collect empirical qualitative data. The study is descriptive in nature.

STUDY AREA

The study area is Namoni Sisi Tongani, which comes under the Dhemaji district. This is an ST constituency of Mising Autonomous Council. The Brahmaputra river on its South and Tongani river on the North. Dhemaji is the nearest city. As per Mising Autonomous Council report, 93% are ST population, and Mising community is the dominant one. The Mising women of Namoni Sisi Tongani have mainly engaged in weaving and pig rearing. The Mising women of this block have earned a name for themselves and are known for its micro-handloom-industries.

Brief Introduction of Mising Tribe

Mising belongs to the Tibeto-Burman ethnic group of the Mongoloid race, which constitutes as the second-largest plain tribe of Assam. It is said that the original habitat of Mising is the Tibeto-Chinese border, who migrated to Arunachal Pradesh around the 9th century when the tantric guru Padmasambhava established Buddhism as a strong foundation and King Tsrong Tsan Gampo ordered, move out from Tibet, who refused to

accept the Buddhist religion. In Arunachal Pradesh Mising reside in Abor, Miri and Mishmi hills; however, the inter-tribal conflict pushed the Mising from their settlements, which compelled them to move to Dambuk and Roing region near Sadiya (Nath & Pegu, 2012). They settled in the riverine areas of Upper Assam districts and three districts of Arunachal Pradesh in East Siang district, Lower Dibang Valley and Lohit. Their prime occupation is Agriculture, as 85.6% person engaged in cultivation. Livestock farming is another source of earning for the Mising family.

Social Status of Women

The social position of women is lower than the male in society. Although Mising practices a patriarchal system, women equally take responsibility for socio-political activities of the community and the economic upkeep of the family. With respect to household management, they are treated as equal partners. In the political sphere, their role cannot be wiped out. They can participate in the 'Dolung Kebang', the prime organization which discusses various issues and problems faced by the village to find out a suitable solution. They have equal rights and say in the political organization called 'Mimbir-Ya: me, but membership is restricted to only unmarried boys and girls. This is a benevolent organization, which carried social welfare activities such as the construction of 'Murang Okum' (dormitory hall) during festivals, providing physical labour to families who could not finish their agricultural activities in time, repair home, village road, bridge construction and duties assigned by the society. They work in the agricultural field, such as preparing the soil for sowing seeds, transplanting, weeding and harvesting.

Economic Activities of Mising Women

The enterprising skill of the Mising tribe is well described by Dalton in 'Ethnology of Bengal'. Dalton wrote, "The Miri managed to keep to themselves the entire trade between Assam and the Abors." In the same book, he stated, "The latter consist of great collections of Tibetan metal bells...sometimes used as money valued from four annas to twelve rupees each." Dalton mentioned, they sold wild produce of hills and annually received blackmail commutation as equivalent in the form of a money payment from the British government. Dalton's descriptions identify the trading activities of Mising even in the British period (Dalton, 1860). The trading skill of the community and the liberal attitude of the society for women's financial independence allowed them to carry out certain works, which became the backbone of the community.

Riksengarig: This system is known as individual cultivation practiced by the young girls of the community. They cultivate cash crops like mustard seeds or black pulses in a small and separate plot. Nowadays, seasonal vegetables are also grown. The production is sold in the market. The income from 'Riksengarig' belongs to the daughter, which cannot be demanded by the father. The girl uses the earnings to buy ornaments, thread or valuable things to be used in times of marriage. It reduces the burden of the family as they earn for themselves.

Ericulture: It is an agro-based economic activity mostly practiced by Mising women. Ericulture means the silkworms are reared by feeding castor plants and harvest its cocoons for 'Endi' silk. It is said that the original home of endi in India, and the state Assam, Manipur and Meghalaya alone

produced around 94% of the total. In Assam, 90% endi is produced in the Brahmaputra valley and the surrounding hills, as the riverine banks and certain hill tracts have abundant castor plants used for endi worm rearing. Endi pupae are a delicacy for the Mising tribe, valued for their taste and high protein value. Rearing of 'Endi' and its weaving is the predominant work done by Mising women to supplement the family income.

In ancient times, poor or widow women sold endi clothes to the rich family of the community by the barter system. The acculturation encouraged Mising women to sell endi yarn and clothes in the market. It empowers Mising women economically.

Weaving: It is the main economic activity of Mising women. This traditional craft is uplifted by Mising women into a profitable income source. In the early days, they weave clothes for families. The raw materials used for weaving are cotton yarn and endi silk. They grow local variety cotton in their homesteads or kitchen garden on small scales to fulfill the required need of yarn of the family for the whole year. It was not done for commercial gains. The yarn is spun from the cotton with the help of a spindle. They separate the seeds from the cotton at the time of spinning with their hand or in a small cotton gin. Traditionally, they wave 'Gadu' (cotton blanket), 'Dumer' (towel), Payeg (bag), endi shawl, for menfolk 'Mibu-Galug' and 'Lubjog-Galug' (shirt), 'Gonin-Ugon', 'Gonnyab-Ugon' and 'Gonre-Ugon' (loincloth), and for women 'Sampa' (wrapper), 'Ege' (skirt), 'Gasor' (shawl), 'Gero' (to cover the body from shoulder to calves), 'Ri:bi-Gaseng' (used in winter season for festive occasion attire), 'Riya' (wrapped around the chest, a long narrow sheet cloth), Kebbung (a cloth used to carry the

baby on the shoulder) and 'Po-Re' (a cloth used to cover the head). They learn the use of 'Muga' silk (yellow golden colour silk obtained from silkworms fed on Som tree leaves) and 'Pat' silk (white or off-white colour silk obtained from silkworms fed on mulberry tree leaves known as Nuni) from the neighbors. At present, they weave cloth from 'Muga', 'Pat', 'Endi', cotton and wool on a commercial basis. Mising handloom products have great demand in Assam. Mising weavers have able to penetrate Indian and international markets also. The handloom products produce for the market are 'Endi' shawl, 'Ri:bi-Gaseng' (as women shawl or Chader), 'Mekhla-Chader' (traditional Assamese women attire), 'Gamosa' (towel), muffler, stoles, Women shawl, Saree, Pouch, curtains, bedcover, fabric for shirt and kurta, 'Mibu-Galug' (male shirt), 'Gero' (customer buy it for its aesthetic beauty and use as a stole) and caution covers.

Livestock farming: It is the second most important economic activity of Mising women after weaving. They rear pigs, chicken, pigeon, goats, ducks, buffalo and cattle. The buffalo and cattle are the common property of the entire family. These are looked after by male members of the family, and by selling milk, curd or cream, they earn money. While each female member of the family, i.e., mother, daughter and daughter-in-law, rear pigs and chickens as personal property and the income of these livestock owned by that person, the family has no share. Pig is the most favored animal, as the piglet and adult pig fetch a handsome amount for the owner. Young girls saved the money to finance their education or to buy valuable items for their marriage. Mother made the expenditure on children's education, buying clothes or meeting

certain household essentials. In a true sense, piggery made Mising women financially independent. In the early seventies, young Mising girls sold pig's hairs in the bunch to petty traders; in exchange, they received metal or plastic bangles or accessories depending on the weight of the hairs. This is extinct totally nowadays.

Rice Beer: Mising women prepare the beer from rice which is called 'Apong'. The 'Apong' has two varieties: 'Po:roApong' and 'Nagin:Apong'. 'Po:roApong' is prepared by mixing cooked rice with a medicine herb called 'Epob' and burnt husk, and in 'Nagin:Apong' only cooked rice and 'Epob'. They prepared it for personal consumption and to offer deities. The 1960 floods brought large-scale devastation to Mising areas. To meet financial needs, poor Mising women began to sell 'Apong' and 'Potikang' (a bi-product of Apong).

In Assam, Mising 'Po:roApong' is famous for its good taste and medicinal value. Nowadays, Mising women sell 'Apong' and Mising delicacy in exhibition food stalls as ethnic food. Few families prepared it for monetary gains, as per demand made by Mising families who require it for religious functions or marriage. They received orders from Mising organizations for communal festive occasions. However, the market is limited; because consumers are only the community members.

Demography of Mising Women Population in Assam

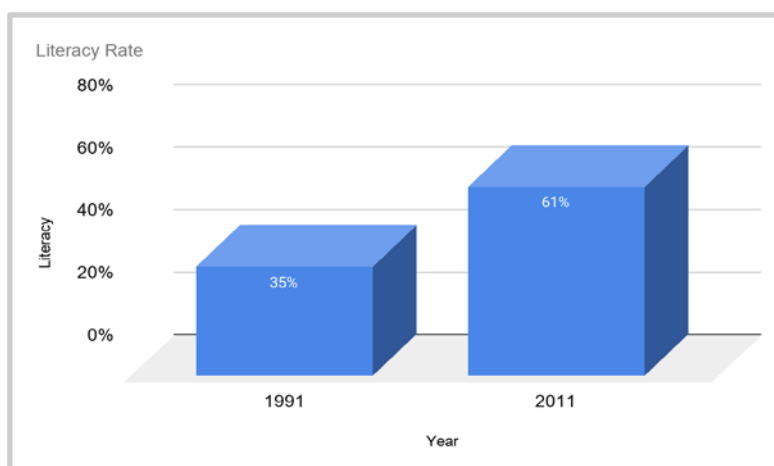
According to the 2011 census report, the total Mising population in Assam is 6, 80,424 male 3, 45,786 and female 3, 34,638. The 2011 census data indicate the highest Mising population is in Dhemaji district, Lakhimpur (2nd) and Jorhat (3rd).

Table 1: Mising women population district wise in Assam

District	Population	Female
Dhemaji	220,042	108,310
Lakhimpur	197,886	97,287
Jorhat	102,270	50,532
Golaghat	53,028	26,231
Sonitpur	49,028	24,106
Sivasagar	27,834	13,581
Tinsukia	18,145	8,752
Dibrugarh	9,285	4,478

Table 2: Occupation of Mising women in Assam

Year	Occupation	Female
1991	Agriculture	91.30%
	Household industry	0.40%
2011	Agriculture	81.60%
	Household industry	4.10%

**Fig. 1: Literacy rate of Mising Women in Assam**

Mising Women Turned Villages as Entrepreneur Hub

According to the 1991 census, the Mising rural population was 99 percent and 1 percent urban population, improved slightly, and reached 2.4 percent urban and 97.6 percent rural as per the 2011 census. The census data identified that Mising community mainly resides in the eight districts of Assam and rural population. As per MAC (Mising Autonomous Council) data, there

are 1331 Mising villages in these districts, out of which 566 core villages and 765 satellite villages. Rural Mising women, engaged in agriculture for annual family supply, that too subsistent in nature. At present scenario weaving and piggery are their main economic activity along with agriculture.

Individual Weaving industries, SHG (Self Help Group) and Cooperative societies enabled Mising women to establish themselves as micro-entrepreneur. Besides these, the individual

weaving for market-oriented handloom products is produced by 90 percent of rural Mising women in their home. It is the common scenario of any Mising village. A small number of urban Mising women are also engaged in the handloom industry. Few areas emerged as an entrepreneur hub due to their efforts, government schemes and exposure to the market. Blocks and villages emerged as entrepreneur hub are Jengrai village of Majuli district, Murkak Chellak and Sisiborgaon blocks and Vijaypur village of Dhemaji district, Dakhakhana block in Lakhimpur district, Gorjan, Barphula, Baphla and Kalbar villages in Jorhat districts. Their hard work expands the market for Mising handloom products. As per CML (Centre for Microfinance and Livelihood) report, in 2014, in a handloom fair, Mising women entrepreneurs were able to earn Rs.1.4 crore within five days by selling handloom products.

New Role of Mising Women as Entrepreneur

A large chunk of Mising women remain mere weavers; however, a few emerged as successful entrepreneurs; the most successful personality is Anuradha Kuli. She is famous for her collections of sarees, nature dye stalls and 'Mekhla-Chader'. She had displayed her fabric in Lakme Fashion Week, and celebrities like Vidya Balan wear saree designed by her. The women entrepreneurs display their products in exhibitions, supply to wholesale, designer boutique, shop, fabrics to designers, sell online or door to door sale by link men. Selling 'Endi' yarn is also a source of income.

Pigs are sold to local traders, for which they receive handsome amounts. In each exhibition,

they set up food stalls to sell pork meat and 'Apong'.

LIMITATIONS IN THE GROWTH OF BUSINESS

Lack of skilled person: Women engaged in handloom industries are either illiterate or college dropouts; few graduates are also engaged in the industry. They have a lack of awareness to push the industry in the national and international market and a lack of skilled people to coordinate this unorganized or micro-enterprise with proper market linkage.

The chain from producer to the ultimate consumer is not a direct one. There are middlemen who procure from the weaver; they supply to the wholesale market, retailer or direct consumer. See figure

Livestock farming: They rear pigs, ducks, pigeons, goats and chickens for earning money. However, the high volumes of return encourage them to rear pigs for business purposes. The problem is that they rear only a few pigs at one time, the number never crossing more than ten.

Education: The income from handloom and piggery are used to pay the tuition fees for children. So, investment and production in handloom remain the same year after year.

Dislike for milk and milk products: They rear cattle and buffalo, which is the sole duty of males. The lack of awareness and dislike for milk products don't encourage them to upgrade it as a profitable business.



Flood: Mising villages are in the flood-prone area of Assam. Each year, devastating floods submerged their agricultural field or filled the field with sands and damaged their property. This is the main reason for continuing subsistence livelihood. It discouraged them from huge investments in alternative livelihoods or in agriculture.

Sericulture: Few women rear 'Endi' and 'Nuni' (Pat) silkworms for selling yarns. They are not willing to expand the farm size for more returns.

Weaving and Piggery: Mising women made investment only in these two sectors. Their dependence on these two limited their earning.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing discussion reveals that Mising women shaped traditional economic activities into a profitable micro-enterprise that established them as women entrepreneurs. They still continue the age-old traditional livelihood activities to surplus the income of the family and for financial independence. The awareness sessions and training can enable them to properly handle their business which suffers from growth and subsistence level.

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