Impact of the Orunodoi Scheme on Dalit Women: A Study of Rural Cachar in Assam

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ABSTRACT

The traditional literature suggests that women experience change when they exercise choices and negotiate with the society on their own terms and conditions. This is possible when women enjoy certain degree of economic self-sufficiency, together with other important elements of empowerment. The Orunodoi programme, introduced by the Government of Assam is an initiative to provide women with a modest level of financial assistance. The scheme was launched in the year 2020 to end destitution and empower women in a limited way. The present study investigates to understand the impact of the scheme on scheduled caste women of Cachar district of Assam. As Scheduled Caste women are considered among the most marginalized, often residing in rural areas with limited employment opportunities, the changes experienced by them may provide a broad perspective on the transformative potential of the Orunodoi programme for women in general. The study is an empirical one conducted on the basis of primary data collected from the beneficiaries in rural Cachar.

Keywords: Orunodoi scheme, dalit, empowerment, destitution, caste, DBT
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Introduction:

The program referred to as the 'Orunodoi' or Arunodoi is a flagship financial assistance scheme launched by the Assam government on 2nd October 2020. The scheme was announced by the then Finance Minister (and now Chief Minister) of Assam, Shri Himanta Biswa Sarma, in his 2020-2021 budget speech on 6 March 2020. Within the framework of the 'Orunodoi' scheme, a monthly monetary allowance of Rs. 1250 is provided to a female member of the family who fulfills the necessary eligibility criteria. The eligibility requirements include that the applicant aspiring to avail the benefit should be a female with age above 18 years. Besides, it is essential that the woman is a permanent resident of Assam and belongs to a household with an annual income not exceeding two lakhs. The woman must also possess a bank account that is registered in her name. However, priority shall be given to such female members of families who are widow, separated, unmarried, or physically challenged and belong to poor households irrespective of their coverage under the Food Security Act, 2013.

Households without a female member or which have former or current political members of parliament, legislative assembly, Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRI) and urban local bodies, government employees, employees of cooperatives registered under the Assam Cooperative Societies Act, 2007, certain professionals, such as, doctors, engineers, lawyers, chartered accountants, architects, registered government contractors and income-tax payers are excluded. Lastly, farmer families which own more than 15 bighas of agricultural land, tractor, four-wheeler or mechanized boat, refrigerator, washing machine or air conditioner are also disqualified from the ambit of the scheme (Govt. Notification 2020, p.3-4).

Based on the above-mentioned eligibility/ ineligibility criteria, the preliminary selection of the beneficiaries is done at the Goan Panchayat (GP)/ Village Council Development Committee (VCDC)/ Urban Local Body (ULB) level. Then the list is forwarded to the District Level Monitoring Committee (DLMC) for scrutiny and finalization. The scheme is implemented under the direct supervision of the district's Deputy Commissioner (DC), who also serves as the chairman of the DLMC, with members including MLAs, Additional Deputy Commissioner (ADC), and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Zilla Parishad. The district development commissioner is the member secretary of the DLMC. To facilitate the implementation of the scheme, four Orunodoi s*ahayaks* (helpers) may also be appointed at a fixed pay of Rs. 15,000 per s*ahayak* for a period of two months in each district. *Sahayak* will help in the identification of beneficiaries and assist them in filing application. According to the in-charge of the district Orunodoi Cell, beneficiaries are often selected when the state government issues an order and releases fund to the district administration. The applicant wishing to avail the benefit then submits an application in the official format with a photocopy of the front page of the bank passbook, relevant supporting documents, such as disability or divorce certificate, and any other document, such as, PAN, AADHAR, or Voter ID. The application requires personal and residential information, family details and bank account details. If an eligible woman does not apply at the time the government releases the fund for a district, she may apply later to the Orunodoi cell. Every District has an Orunodoi cell under the office of the DC, which receives applications and presents them at the DLMC meeting.

About the Scheme

Assam Chief Minister, Shri Himanta Biswa Sarma while launching the second version of the 'Orunodoi' programme said that it is 'the largest social sector scheme in the history of the state that has the capability of radically transforming the lives of millions of its residents.' (Business Standard 2022). The primary goal of the programme is to eradicate poverty and promote socio-economic inclusion of financially vulnerable families in the state by providing a sustained monetary assistance. Besides, the scheme aims to minimise the number of similar initiatives and merge them together for more efficient delivery and outcome by using the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) platform. Initially, the monetary benefit for the programme was set at Rs. 830. Specific allocation was earmarked to pay for medicines, subsidy of pulses, sugar and fruits and vegetables. But in July 2021, the amount was increased to Rs. 1000 and subsequently to Rs. 1250 in 2022 (Kotiswaran 2022, p.14). The amount of Rs. 250 was added for the payment of electricity bills of the poor families. An important attribute of the scheme is that it does not primarily target women. However, through the transfer of financial assistance to a specifically chosen female member of the family, the scheme aims to eliminate destitution and empower women. A woman member is chosen as beneficiary, presumably due to her restricted mobility and greater sense of accountability to the family. The programme is therefore intended to fulfill the twin objective of giving financial aid to a poor family while improving the status of women simultaneously. By prioritizing women who are widow, separated, unmarried, or physically challenged as beneficiaries, the scheme aims to expand its benefit to the most disadvantaged section of the society, thereby fostering a sense of self-esteem in them. The Orunodoi scheme extends to any eligible female irrespective of her place of residence in Assam. Thus, beneficiaries of the scheme belong to both rural and urban areas.

Till date, over 2.6 million households, which essentially equates to 2.6 million women, have registered themselves in Orunodoi programme (The TOI, 2023). The extensive coverage of the programme, with a particular focus on women who are deserted and disabled, is likely to have a significant impact on the lives of female beneficiaries. How has the program influenced the lives of women? Does the program possess the potential to empower women? Has the program been successful in achieving the objective of providing a minimum level of subsistence to families while empowering women? The present study is an attempt to find answers to the questions posed on the basis of an empirical study conducted on the scheduled caste women of Cachar district of Assam.

Rationale of the Study

Discrimination of women and particularly of dalit women is a phenomenon that does not warrant further elaboration. An extensive body of literature has explored this issue in depth. The theory of intersectionality, a key framework in gender and development studies, recognizes that experiences of marginalization are shaped by the interplay of multiple overlapping identities. '…Many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race and gender discrimination…and that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race and gender dimensions of those experiences separately (Crenshaw 2010). Dalit feminism, built on the idea of intersectional feminism, integrates caste as a primary axis of oppression. Dalit women, located at the crossroads of various institutional hierarchies, experience far stringent marginalization than their counterparts in other castes and communities. A triangular trap of discrimination based on their triple identities of caste, gender, and class often hinders their access to resource, opportunity, and agency. 'Dalit women need to be differentiated from the dominating menfolk in 'Dalit', as Dalit women represent victimhood of three types: the exploitation of class, caste and patriarchy…they suffer even more violent versions of patriarchy than upper caste women, precisely because of the relative powerlessness of the Dalit men, which Dalit men tend to compensate by lording it over their women' (Teltumbde 2017, p.53). These systemic disadvantages get further intensified when there is **locational disadvantage**, particularly for those living in remote rural areas or slums as is often the case with dalit population. The spatial isolation serves to reinforce their social invisibility and restricts their access to state welfare schemes or employment opportunities. Guru and Sarukkai (2012) argue that caste is spatially organized in Indian society, and Dalit communities are frequently relegated to the peripheries, both in a literal and metaphorical sense, thereby reinforcing their systemic invisibility and exclusion from mainstream development process. In Cachar district, the significant concentration of a large dalit population in villages is an supplementary yardstick that inherently exacerbates economic hardship and marginalization of dalit population, particularly of women. The study, therefore, situates Dalit women as a distinct analytical category to investigate how state-led welfare programme, such as, Orunodoi might intervene in their lives within a district where employment opportunities are markedly constrained for them. Cachar is one of the industrially backward districts in Assam. Cachar has no heavy industry, except the age-ole tea industry…Live stock is the wealth next to agriculture of a large chunk of rural population.

This economic backwardness and lack of work opportunities in the district have had a considerable deterrence on the advancement of the scheduled caste community, particularly its women. In Cachar district, majority of the SC population lives in rural areas in which avenues of employment are limited to agricultural farming, livestock rearing, and traditional occupations such as carpentry, fishing, pottery, laundry, leather work, and so on.

The total population of Cachar district of Assam is **1,736,617. SC population in the district is** 264,897 (15.3 percent). 216,090 (81.58 percent) SCs reside in rural Cachar, while only 48,807 (18.42 percent) live in urban areas. SC population in urban areas is largely concentrated in and around Silchar town (88.51 percent), while the percentage of urban SC residents fluctuates between 0 and 9.21 percent in case of other four revenue circles of Cachar district (District Census Handbook Cachar 2011).

Silchar is the headquarter of Cachar district and is the only urban settlement having some business and commercial facilities to engage people from rural Cachar in various small and petty jobs. 'Only a small section of dalits in the urban areas are petty shopkeepers, small entrepreneurs or self-employed. In the main cities, they work as *thela* and *rickshaw pullers*. The women are employed as domestic workers or daily labourers' (Sutradhar 2014, p.77). The rest of the dalit population which forms the majority lives in villages and largely relies on agricultural farming and their traditional occupations. When the scope of employment is highly constricted, women face greater challenges. A substantial proportion of the female population in Cachar district is unemployed. Total female workforce in the district including main and marginal worker is only 1, 38,310 (16.27 percent) of the total working population and the non-working female population is 7, 12,023 (83.73 percent) (Cachar District Population, Caste, Religion Data 2011). Compared to the state and national scenario, the female participation in the workforce is much below in Cachar district. Data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (2022-23) indicates that Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) is 37.00 percent at the national level. According to Periodic Labour Force Survey Report (PLFS) 2020-21, 27.2 percent of women are regularly employed in rural areas in Assam (Women's Workforce Participation in India: State wise Trends 2023). But in case of Cachar district it is only 16.27 percent which is much lower than both state and national level average. 'The major deficit in the district is the female work participation rate…The low female work participation rate shows that economic independence of women is fairly restricted'. Dalit women's involvement in the labour force is likely to be further restricted since the bulk of them reside in rural areas. Against this backdrop, a DBT scheme such as the Orunodoi is likely to have substantial impact on the lives of rural dalit women. The current research, therefore, aims to delve into the impact of the scheme and its capacity to bring about changes, if any, in the lives of rural SC women of Cachar district.

Methodology

The methodology of the study can broadly be classified into two main parts, viz., the sampling scheme and statistical tools used for data analysis. The sampling scheme involves the objective selection of respondents, while statistical tools are used for the purpose of data analysis. In the following sub-sections necessary elaboration of the methodology is provided.

Sampling Scheme

The final sample unit in this study is the SC woman beneficiary of the Orunodoi scheme in Cachar district. At the inception of the study it was presumed that the sampling frame of beneficiaries shall be available in the Orunodoi cell of DC's office. However, on visiting it was found that the information is considered as "classified" and is not made available to individual researchers. Thus, the population of the study was considered as one which is real in nature but with a non-existent sampling frame. As a result, in addition to collecting information from the beneficiaries, the author had to take up the dual responsibility of locating them.

To select the sampling units (respondents) of the study and to ascertain that the population is well represented in the sample, multistage sampling was considered. The survey instrument was a structured interview schedule implemented by the researcher herself. Schedule was prepared in four different sections - personal details and household information to understand the socio-economic profile of the respondents; awareness and enrolment related information, such as respondent's knowledge about various aspects of the scheme, their period of enrolment in the scheme, year of opening of Bank account, regularity of the payment, frequency of withdrawal of payment and expenditure incurred in various aspects; the impact of the scheme on the lives of women in terms their family status, decision-making ability and social participation and finally the level of satisfaction and suggestions from the respondents were collected.

In the present study, one village from all the seven legislative assembly constituencies (LACs) of Cachar district were considered as the targets of beneficiaries are fixed by the LAC. However, for selecting villages, as first stage units, a proviso was imposed regarding the number of SC households. The villages with more than 50 percent of SC households were only considered as the first stage units. This was done so that the incidence rate is high and the sampling technique can take the researcher to a considerable number of SC women beneficiaries quicker than an unrestricted random sample. Therefore, the estimates derived from the sample cannot be considered as representing the entire dalit women in the district. However, it gives valuable insight about the impact of the scheme on dalit Women in the villages with higher proportion of dalit population in the district. The information about villages in terms of total number of households categorized by caste was taken from the District Census Handbook, Cachar, 2011. Since there is no significant variability in the economy, communication and demography of the LACs, one village from each of the constituency, satisfying the proviso mentioned above, was selected randomly as the first stage unit of the study. The second stage units, i.e., SC households, were chosen at random from the first stage units, i.e. the selected villages. The information related to the households was available in the office of the concerned GP office, which served as the sampling frame for the second stage unit. Table 1 provides further details of the first stage and the second stage sampling units.

Table- 1

Information about Households in the Sampled Villages (First Stage Units)

Legislative Constituenc	Name of Sampled Village	No. of Total Households	No. of SC Households	Percentage of SC Households
Silchar	Ambikapur Part IV	368	250	67.93
Sonai	Tulagram Part II	848	459	54.13
Dholai	Debbari	580	524	90.34
Katigorah	TeliTikar Part I	105	99	94.29
Barkhola	Dudhpatil Part III	119	98	82.35
Lakhipur	DakhinFulertol	131	95	72.52
Udharbond	Arcuttepur Grant	906	525	57.95

Source: District Census Handbook, Cachar, 2011

In the present study, 10 percent of SC households were randomly selected from the villages listed in Column 2 of Table 1. A sample of 10 percent was chosen as it would make a balance between representation and feasibility of data collection for an individual researcher. The beneficiaries were then identified from the selected households as the third stage and the ultimate units of the enquiry. Because of the lack of a list of beneficiaries in the GP office, the author landed into several such second stage sampling units (SC households) which did not possess any sampling unit of interest (no beneficiary). Such second stage units were dropped from further consideration. During the survey, non-availability and some cases of non-response were encountered. In the process of the survey 166 respondents were identified. However, information could be collected finally from 140 respondents due to the non-availability and non-response of some beneficiaries.

Table -2

Information about Second and Third Stage Sampling Units and Beneficiaries sampled

Legislative Constituency	Name of Sampled Village	Second Stage units (No. of SC households)	Selected SC Households (10% of Column 3)	Number of SC Householdswith beneficiaries from the selected households
Silchar	Ambikapur Part IV	250	25	16
Sonai	Tulagram Part II	459	46	38
Dholai	Debbari	524	52	42
Katigorah	TeliTikar Part I	99	10	03
Barkhola	Dudhpatil Part III	98	10	08
Lakhipur	DakhinFulertol	95	10	10
Udharbond	Arcuttepur Grant	525	53	49
	Total	**2050**	**206**	**166**

Source: District Census Handbook, Cachar, 2011 and author's computation **Statistical Tools Used**

After collecting information from the respondents through interview schedule and noting their conversation for the qualitative information each of the case was subjected to scrutiny. The quantitative information was analyzed with SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences, version 22). The qualitative information was subjected to post-classification to the extent possible. The data set was then evaluated in terms of frequency against different non-overlapping categories to understand how various socio-economic parameters were related to the beneficiaries. Since the study was confined to SC majority villages, any potential influence of caste on the status of women in rural Cachar remains unexplored in the present study.

Major Findings and Analysis

The data obtained was presented into four parts based on the interview schedule to provide a clear picture of the respondents and the impact of the programme.

Socio-economic Profile

In terms of socio-economic status of the respondents, it was found that more than half of the respondents (66.06 percent) belonged to the income group of Rs. '5001-10000', while 20.30 percent of the respondents was from households with a monthly income of less than Rs. 5, 000. 11.05 percent was found to have income above Rs. 10000 and only 2.59 percent of the respondents were found to be completely dependent on the income of the Orunodoi scheme and other government schemes like Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKAY), material aid from anganwadi and old age pension. Beneficiaries belonging to the upper income category mostly come from families in which there is an earning male member. 90 respondents which constitutes 64.29 percent were found to belong to the age group of 35-60 years, while 28 (20.00 percent) were found above 60 years of age and only 22 (15.71 percent) of the beneficiaries belonged to the age group of 18-34 years. Age-wise distribution of women was found to have been almost even in all seven villages as the highest number of beneficiaries was identified in the age group of 35-60 years. In this context it may be noted that although the scheme is primarily designed for women who are suffering destitution and disability but in reality, the benefit of the programme is availed mostly by women who are in working age group and have the support of the family. One of the reasons for the larger enrolment of middle-aged women is that many of the necessary formalities for enrolment to the scheme could be accomplished by the male members of the family on their behalf. This is corroborated by the fact that the largest number of beneficiaries (58.09 percent) in the present study were found married having family and children, followed by widows (24.11 percent), Unmarried (11.38 percent) and separated (6.42 percent). Out of the 16 unmarried respondents two were found with orthopedic disability and one with hearing impairment. Two separated women were found with speech problem and night blindness and a single married woman was found with congenital disability of short fingers in left hand. Altogether only 6 (4.29 percent) women were found with some kind of disability. Thus, it is pertinent to mention that the objective to end destitution and provide assistance to disabled women is not fully addressed under the scheme and there is as such no measure evolved by the government to prioritize their inclusion. As education shapes consciousness about various social welfare measures, information relating to the educational attainment of the respondents was collected. The highest number of Orunodoi beneficiaries (44.16 percent) was found to have studied up to primary level, 36.24 percent have studied up to middle school, i.e., Class VIII, 6.42 percent were matriculates and 13.18 percent was found illiterate. It is important to note that there was no such beneficiary who was found to use the sum of Rs. 1250 to pursue education. In the sphere of occupation, the bulk of the respondents (58.00 percent) were found to be housewives or widows, engaged in unpaid domestic work besides assisting in livestock rearing, sowing vegetables, preparing homemade *mura* (bamboo stool), *phaka* (bamboo handfan), baskets, mats, straw and so on. 42.00 percent was found to have engaged in jobs like paid domestic work, housekeeping job in nursing homes, cooking in PG hostel, selling vegetables and old clothes, working as anganwadi worker, tailor and tea seller.

Awareness, Enrolment and Expenditure

After making an assessment of the socio-economic profile of the respondents, an attempt was made to gather information about the awareness of the respondents and their enrolment procedure. About 9.00 percent of the respondents got enrolled and became beneficiary in December 2020 immediately after the formal announcement of the scheme in October 2020. 41.28 percent were enrolled in January 2021, 36.36 percent became beneficiary in February-March, 2022 and 13.36 percent got enrolled in August 2023. The largest percentage of the respondents (41.28 percent) became beneficiaries just prior to the assembly election of April 2021 in Assam. One of the reasons for high enrolment of beneficiaries prior to election is that such schemes influence the electorates positively. The Assam government since 2016 has launched 37 welfare schemes for almost every section of the society including youth, women, senior citizens, farmers, and the unemployed to provide cash assistance, medical care, loan subsidy and health insurance. Recently, the government also launched the Orunodoi 3.0 to include the transgender population in the state (The Hindu 2024). The extensive coverage of various schemes, reaching over 50 percent of Assam's population, may not just be a social welfare effort but can also be a means to influence electorates positively. The growing trend of freebie-driven politics has already sparked debates on the long-term implications of these schemes. Even the Supreme Court of India has taken cognizance of freebie culture in India and observed 'rather than permitting them to be a part of the mainstream society by contributing to the development of the nation, are we not creating a class of parasites?' (Ojha 2025). The Supreme Court also referenced to cash handout programs such as Ladki Bahin, which was a crucial driver of the BJP-led alliance's landslide victory in Maharashtra, to back up its claim. During the survey it was found that many of the respondents decided to vote for the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (B.J.P) in Lok Sabha election 2024 simply for the Orunodoin benefit. In case of rural dalit women, Orunodoi sum was found to be an important factor influencing their political preference. In colloquial Bengali few beneficiaries commented '*Tobuo bhala je ei sarkare amarar sukh dukhher katha bhaber'* (still it is better the present ruling dispensation is thinking of our betterment). On the question of whether a survey was held, the bulk of the respondents (88.00 percent) said that it was done twice and the monthly cash transfer of 11 respondents was stopped after the survey without serving any notice to this effect. All the remaining beneficiaries received uninterrupted cash transfer which is a significant achievement of this DBT scheme. On the question about how did they get to know about the scheme, respondents gave different replies. 34.24 percent got the information from GP member, 24.1 percent was informed by the local B.J.P party workers, 17.00 percent learned about the scheme from co-workers, 14.38 percent learned during election rallies and 10.28 percent became aware of the scheme through television/newspaper. When asked about the opening of bank A/C, 58.46 percent of the respondents were found to have opened the account much prior to their enrolment in Orunodoi scheme to receive the benefits of Ujjawala Yojana, old age pension, installments of Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) and cash transfer during COVID pandemic, while the rest of the respondents (41.54 percent) opened the bank account to enroll them in Orunodoi scheme. Thus, the Orunodoi have contributed significantly to the formal financial inclusion of rural dalit women. Since May 2024, the Assam Government has also appointed the members of Self-Help Groups as DigiPay Sakhis to assist women in their Bank operation for various DBT schemes (The Hill Times 2024). To assess women's awareness, certain questions relating to the scheme were posed to them. In response to the first question about the year of introduction of the scheme, an overwhelming majority of the respondents (85.79 percent) were found aware. But in the following question of eligibility/ineligibility criteria, about 90.74 percent of the beneficiaries were found to have no clear idea besides that the scheme was designed for women and preference was given to widow women. Beneficiaries almost in similar percentage also seemed to have no clear idea about the process of selection of beneficiaries. On the question of awareness about other government schemes available for women, majority of the respondents (66.32 percent) were found aware and many of them were availed by the respondents like Ujjwala Yojana, Widow Pension scheme, nutritious food for pregnant women, material aid from anganwadi and financial assistance from SHGs with government subsidy. About the utilization of the monthly amount, it was found that the highest number of beneficiaries (34.28 percent) spent the amount in incurring medical expenditure of either of their own or of their family members, followed by 22.14 percent of the beneficiaries who spent the amount in the repayment of loans/debts of SHGs, Bandhan Banks and Kisan loans, 15.00 percent paid tuition fees for the children, 12.86 percent invested in repairing of the house under PMAY, 10.71 percent spent in purchase of grocery, agricultural seeds, local travelling, payment of mobile bills and refilling gas cylinders, a minuscule number of beneficiaries (4.30 percent) had saved the amount for future contingency and only one respondent (0.71 percent) was found to have spent the amount in the purchase of luxury item like lotus cream.

Socio-economic Impact of the Scheme

To understand the impact of the scheme on the socio-economic status of women, it was asked that whether the financial support received from the scheme contributed to the economic independence of the respondents. The bulk of the (88.00 percent) respondents informed to have full control over the Orunodoi earning and only 12.00 percent reported otherwise. However, an overwhelming majority of 93.00 percent expressed their inability to save anything from the Orunodoi amount. On the question of observing any change in their family status, a significant majority of the beneficiaries (70.42 percent) admitted that the Orunodoi payment improved their status in the family, reduced their dependence on the male member and fostered a sense of dignity in them. They were happy to contribute to day-to-day family expenses, children's education, savings, and also in family's crisis management. 19.26 percent reported no change in family status and 10.32 percent opined that money had no effect on family status. On the question of the impact of the scheme in decision-making, 52.00 percent reported no change in their personal sphere of decision-making. 41.00 percent experienced a better say in family affairs, while 7.00 percent seemed to be not sure of any change in this regard. Of the 57 respondents who opined to have achieved some say in decision-making, 32 of them were working women. Thus, it may be said that the Orunodoi amount of Rs. 1250 per month has enabled a large number of women (70.42 percent) to undergo a positive change in their family status and it was also effective to encourage a significant percentage (41.00 percent) of women to exercise their opinion in family's decision-making. Majority of the women (52.00 percent) did not experience similar change is perhaps due to the fact that freedom of decision-making is not something related to money earning only and is a complex phenomenon interwoven deep in the socio-economic fabric of our society. A scheme of selective cash transfer for poverty eradication cannot, therefore, achieve great success overnight. On the question of socio-political consciousness and participation as well, the majority of the respondents (51.7 percent) did not undergo any change. However, a significant number (43.6 percent) registered change and 5.21 percent did not respond. Most of the respondents who had registered change were found to have become conscious about participating in Goan Sabha meeting, in visiting SHGs, Banks and attending election rallies. When asked about the potential of the scheme to contribute to women empowerment, 32.00 percent of the respondents acknowledged that the scheme might contribute to women empowerment if the amount of monthly transfer is enhanced to Rs. 2500/3000, while 52.00 percent believed that such scheme would not result in any qualitative change in their lives unless there is proper education, job opportunity and change in social perception towards women, 10.35 percent said that due to corresponding price rise, Orunodoi amount did not ultimately help them and eight (5.65 percent) women felt that such transfer had disincentivised young women from seeking employment and pursuing higher education. Such scheme, they believe, might encourage dependence in the long run instead of fostering self-reliance among women. While implementing such programmes, the government must also consider the ultimate outcome of the scheme to ensure that it contributes to women's empowerment rather than their dependence.

Perception and Suggestion:

In terms of perception, about 90.00 percent of the respondents perceived the scheme as an important financial support which should extend to all poor women. Most respondents (73.13 percent) expressed their satisfaction and appreciated the government for this monetary assistance. Response of 17.26 percent of respondents was lukewarm. In local dialect they used a proverb to explain their situation 'nai mama thakia kana mama bhala' (it is better to have something than nothing) and 9.61 percent expressed dissatisfaction and said in local dialect that it is like '*Nun ante Panta puray*' implying that the amount is too small to experience any change.

When recommendations were solicited to improve the impact of the scheme and ensure greater involvement of women, an overwhelming majority (72.34 percent) recommended to increase the amount of cash transfer as a means to ascertain the success of the scheme, 11.16 percent emphasized the establishment of a transparent mechanism to select beneficiaricies, 8.39 percent emphasized on conducting surveys on regular basis so that genuine stakeholders get preferences, 6.00 percent suggested the need of selection of beneficiaries in an open meeting of Goan Sabha which is not happening right now. Beneficiaries get decided by the GP secretary randomly and 2.11 percent recommended conducting sensitization programmes. On the whole, it was found that the scheme was being considered as a substantial financial support by the dalit women under study and the perception of the respondents was positive about the scheme. The scheme might not have revolutionized the life of rural dalit women but surely provided some relief in their everyday struggle.

Conclusion:

As claimed by the Assam Government, the Orunodoi program is an initiative to empower women and provide financial support to poor households irrespective of their coverage under the Food Security Act, 2013. While such a goal is commendable in principle, the scheme's capacity to empower women, especially those from marginalized communities, demands a more critical evaluation beyond the government's official claim. Empowerment, after all, is not merely about the provision of material support but about transforming the structural conditions that reproduce inequality. Carolyn M. Elliott argues that 'empowerment has too often been used in instrumental ways to meet the goals of development programmes rather than to transform structural and gender inequalities' (Eliott 2008, p.x). This instrumental approach risks reducing empowerment to a quantifiable matrix rather than understanding it as a dynamic process of expanding human agency. Such a critique aligns with Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, which underscores that access to resources alone is insufficient if individuals lack the substantive freedom to convert those resources into meaningful outcomes. Sen argues that capabilities or in other words the real opportunities to achieve valued ways of living are shaped not just by individual assets but by broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts within which individuals live. For example, access to education is empowering if society allows women to benefit from it in real terms. 'Women's education strengthens women's agency and also tends to make it more informed and skilled. The ownership of property can also make women more powerful in family decisions' (Sen 1999, p. 192). Feminist perspective of empowerment also emphasizes on the aspect of expanding scope of abilities and potential while changing the power dynamics within the society. To them 'empowerment must involve undoing negative social constructions, so that people come to see themselves as having capacity and the right to act and influence decisions' (Rowlands 199, p.14). Therefore, empowerment cannot be reduced to cash transfer unless it is accompanied by a definitive purpose of strengthening women's capabilty. In the present study, the Orunodoi programme was introduced without any corresponding strategy of skill development, legal and financial literacy of women. None of the women seemed to have been thinking to use the earning for future self-reliance. Women's control continues to remain confined to small Orunodoi sum as opposed to their male counterparts who act as guardians and control family's resources. A key indicator of the success of any government scheme requires both an efficient mechanism of implementation adopted at the government level and also awareness on the part of the beneficiaries. In this regard, a large number of beneficiaries were found to be unaware about various important aspects of the scheme and also there was no proper data that could be made available by the Orunodoi cell or GP office about the beneficiaries and their process of selection. This is a concern that raises apprehension about the success of the scheme in the long run. A persistent challenge lies in the scheme's top-down, state-driven approach, which risks cultivating dependence rather than enhancing self-reliance. Majority of the respondents who achieved a better say in family matters were employed. This prior exposure perhaps had enabled them to take the advantage of the Orunodoi benefit. The significant improvement in respondent's family status was also not solely an outcome of change in social perception towards women, but rather linked mostly to the financial gains that women were obtaining to the family. The scheme also had not contributed to the economic self-reliance of women which is an important constituent of empowerment.. The scheme lacks the potential to address the structural inequalities nor does it meaningfully expand the "capability set", i.e., the range of valuable life options available to them. Moreover, in the absence of a fair, transparent, and participatory mechanism to identify and reach the most marginalized, such schemes risk reproducing exclusion. Women who lack literacy, mobility, or awareness may remain outside the ambit of such initiatives. Without deliberate measures to ensure inclusion, these programs may end up reinforcing, rather than reducing, existing disparities. To move beyond subsistence and toward self-reliance of women, the Orunodoi program must be reoriented around principles of democratic accountability, transparency, and structural inclusion. This entails:

- Participatory decision-making in the selection of beneficiaries to ensure the inclusion of the most marginalized;
- Financial and legal literacy initiatives to equip women with the knowledge necessary to navigate and claim their entitlements;
- Linkages to skill development, education, and employment opportunities that enhance long-term capabilities;

- And an explicit focus on social transformation—challenging caste-based and gender-based discrimination.

Thus, it may be said that the Orunodoi scheme represents a step toward economic support. But it remains limited in scope as an instrument of empowerment. To fulfill its transformative promise, it must evolve into a framework that strengthens women's agency, expands their choices, and actively works to dismantle the structural barriers that constrain the lives of women in rural Cachar.

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