

Fund Utilisation by Orunodoi Beneficiaries: A Case Study of Bishnupur Kalita Gaon, Dhemaji District, Assam

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Abstract

The Orunodoi Scheme, launched in Assam in 2020, is one of the state's most significant direct benefit transfer (DBT) initiatives aimed at strengthening women's role in household welfare and decision-making. This study, based on a case analysis of 100 beneficiary households in Bishnupur Kalita Gaon, Dhemaji District, explores how the monthly allowance is utilized and what challenges beneficiaries face. The findings reveal that a large share of the assistance is spent on food and nutrition (70%) and healthcare (50%), while smaller portions are directed toward children's education, debt repayment, and limited savings. The scheme has improved household consumption and given women greater involvement in day-to-day financial decisions. However, its overall impact is constrained by inadequate allowance, inflation, delayed disbursement, lack of financial literacy, and socio-cultural barriers. The paper argues that timely disbursement, periodic revision of allowance, promotion of financial literacy, and awareness programs to reduce gender-based restrictions are crucial to enhancing the long-term effectiveness of the scheme.

keywords: orunodoi scheme, women's empowerment, direct benefit transfer, household expenditure, assam.

Introduction

Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) programs have become an important tool in India's social welfare system, providing financial assistance directly to individuals while reducing delays, leakage, and inefficiencies in traditional welfare delivery. By transferring money directly to bank accounts, these programs allow recipients to decide how best to use the funds according to their household needs, thereby increasing both transparency and autonomy. Over the past decade, DBT schemes have been widely used across India to address poverty, improve nutrition, enhance access to healthcare, and promote gender equality. The Orunodoi Scheme, introduced by the Government of Assam in December 2020, is one of the state's flagship programs focusing on women's welfare. Under this scheme, eligible women receive a fixed monthly allowance intended to cover essential household expenses such as food, healthcare, and children's education etc. Beyond addressing household needs, the scheme aims to empower women by giving them direct control over financial resources, encouraging greater involvement in household decision-making, and promoting gender equality at the grassroots level.

Bishnupur Kalita Gaon, situated in Dhemaji District, provides a representative setting for understanding the scheme's impact. The village is predominantly rural and agrarian, with households relying mainly on farming, seasonal wage labor, and small-scale trade. Women in the village are primarily responsible for managing household expenditures, taking care of

children, and overseeing daily household needs. However, traditional social norms and limited economic opportunities have historically restricted their financial independence. The Orunodoi Scheme provides these women with an opportunity to exercise greater control over household finances, which may enhance both their economic and social position within the family and community.

Despite the significance of the scheme, very little research has explored how beneficiaries actually use the funds at the household level. Most studies focus on district- or state-level data, which does not reveal how individual households prioritise expenses or the challenges women face in managing these resources. Understanding these aspects is essential for evaluating the scheme's effectiveness in improving household welfare and women's empowerment. This study aims to examine the patterns of fund utilisation among Orunodoi beneficiaries in Bishnupur Kalita Gaon. It explores how the allowance contributes to household welfare, the challenges faced by beneficiaries in managing the funds, and the extent to which it enhances women's decision-making power. By presenting a detailed case study at the village level, the research seeks to provide insights that can inform policy measures, strengthen the impact of the scheme, and contribute to improving the lives of women and families in rural Assam.

Objectives of the Study

The study is designed to provide an in-depth understanding of how Orunodoi funds are utilized by women beneficiaries and their impact on household welfare. Specifically, the objectives are:

1. To find out how women use the Orunodoi allowance for food, healthcare, education, savings, and paying off debts etc.
2. To understand the difficulties women face in managing and using the allowance effectively.
3. To see how the scheme affects women's role in household decision-making and control over finances.
4. To suggest ways to make the allowance more effective, improve household well-being, and strengthen women's empowerment in rural Assam.

Literature Review

Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) programs have been widely studied in India as an important tool for improving welfare delivery. Khera (2011) observed that DBT reduces leakage and corruption by transferring benefits directly into the bank accounts of beneficiaries, thereby enhancing efficiency and accountability. Muralidharan et al. (2017) further argued that direct transfers increase household autonomy in financial decision-making, as recipients have greater control over the use of funds. These findings are particularly relevant in rural areas, where traditional welfare mechanisms are often slow and less effective.

In Assam, the Orunodoi Scheme has attracted increasing academic attention. Phukan (2021), in a case study of Baksa district, found that the scheme played a crucial role in meeting household consumption needs and improving women's access to essential goods. However,

the study also noted that limited financial literacy among women restricted their ability to use the funds for savings or productive investments. Gogoi and Saikia (2024) provide an analysis of the Orunodoi Scheme, describing it as one of Assam's most innovative welfare initiatives for promoting women's empowerment and financial inclusion. They emphasize that women's empowerment is fundamental to social development, yet traditional patriarchal structures have long confined women to a secondary position in economic, political, and social spheres. Similarly, pegu (2024), in a case study of Sonapur Block, reported that while the scheme empowered women by providing them with direct access to cash, traditional gender roles and male dominance in major financial decisions continued to limit its overall transformative potential.

Overall, the literature suggests that DBT schemes, particularly the Orunodoi program, have contributed significantly to women's welfare and empowerment. At the same time, recurring challenges such as inadequate allowance amounts, inflationary pressures, socio-cultural barriers, and limited financial literacy remain. These issues underline the need for more micro-level research focusing on household-level patterns of fund utilization and the lived experiences of beneficiaries. The present study seeks to address this gap by examining Bishnupur Kalita Gaon in Dhemaji District, thereby adding to the existing body of work on women-centered cash transfer programs in Assam.

Research Methodology

This study used a case study approach to understand how women in Bishnupur Kalita Gaon use the Orunodoi allowance. Both qualitative and quantitative approach used to see how the funds are spent, the challenges women face, and the effects on households. Quantitative data looked at monthly spending on food, healthcare, education, savings, and debt repayment etc, while qualitative data captured women's experiences and difficulties. Bishnupur Kalita Gaon is a rural village in Dhemaji District with around 300 households, small farms, and seasonal labor. Women manage most household finances, but traditional gender roles often limit their decisions for major expenses. The village has basic schools' facilities; medical facilities are farther away. In this study 100 households were selected to include diversity in family size, income, and women's education, all of whom had been receiving the allowance for at least six months. Data were collected through interviews, questionnaires, observation, informal conversations, and review of government reports and previous studies.

Findings and Analysis

a) Fund Utilization Patterns

The study showed that beneficiaries prioritize their spending based on the immediate needs of their households. The allowance is used in the following ways:

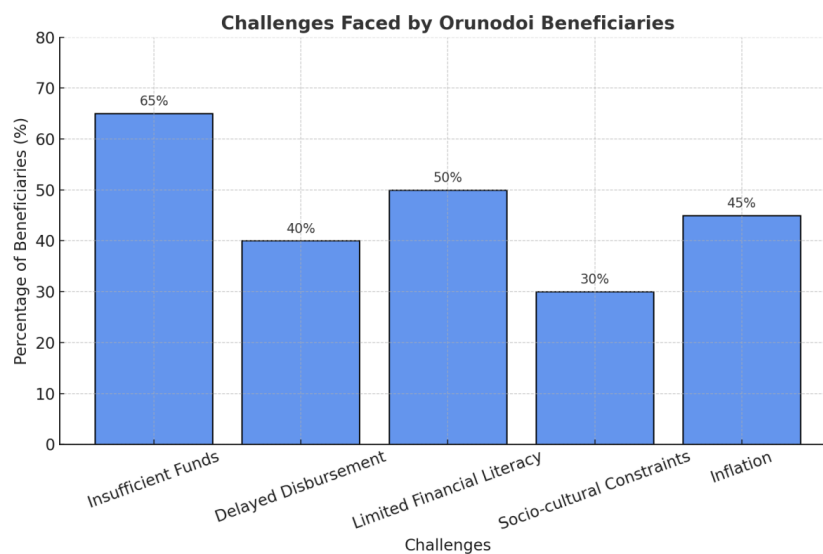
Expenditure Category	Percentage of Households
Food & Nutrition	70%
Healthcare & Medicine	50%

Children's Education	35%
Debt Repayment	25%
Savings / Emergency Fund	15%
Non-essential Items	10%

The Orunodoi allowance is mostly used to meet basic household needs, with the largest share going to food and nutrition. About 70% of households spend the money on staples like rice, pulses, vegetables, and milk, which helps them provide more variety in meals and ensure their families get proper nutrition. Healthcare is another major area of expenditure, with half of the households using the allowance to buy medicines, pay for minor treatments, or visit local health centers. Some families also use the funds to cover travel costs when they need to go to more distant facilities. Only around 35% of households spend part of the allowance on their children's education, including fees, uniforms, and stationery, as the limited amount often forces them to focus on immediate needs rather than long-term investments. About a quarter of households use the money to repay informal loans taken during tough times, while 15% manage to set aside a small portion as savings for emergencies. Spending on non-essential items like higher price clothing, household goods, or small personal needs is quite limited, with only 10% of households reporting such expenses.

b) Challenges Faced by Beneficiaries

The bar diagram below highlights the main challenges faced by beneficiaries of the Orunodoi scheme in Bishnupur Kalita Gaon, Dhemaji District. According to the study, the most significant issue is insufficient funds, reported by 65% of respondents. This suggests that the monthly allowance is often not enough to cover essential household needs, especially during lean periods or in the face of unexpected expenses.



Limited financial literacy is another major challenge, noted by 50% of respondents, which makes it difficult for beneficiaries to plan their spending and savings effectively. Inflation,

mentioned by 45% of participants, further reduces the real value of the funds they receive. Delays in disbursement were reported by 40% of respondents, creating problems for household budgeting. Finally, 30% of women indicated that socio-cultural constraints, such as restrictions from male family members, limit their autonomy in decision-making.

c) Analysis and Interpretation

The findings highlight that beneficiaries prioritize immediate consumption over long-term investments, reflecting the realities of rural households with limited income. Women with basic budgeting knowledge could manage the allowance more effectively, including allocating small amounts to savings or emergency needs. Social and cultural pressures still influence spending, as major household decisions often require male consent. This reflects the need for awareness programs that not only promote financial literacy but also strengthen women's empowerment within households. The study also demonstrates the importance of the allowance in reducing financial stress. By covering essential expenditures, the Orunodoi Scheme allows families to avoid borrowing from informal sources, which often carry high-interest costs.

Discussion

This study brings to light several important aspects of how the Orunodoi allowance is being used by households in Bishnupur Kalita Gaon. The majority of beneficiaries rely on the funds to meet their immediate household needs, particularly food and healthcare. This pattern is common among low-income families, where daily consumption takes priority over savings or long-term investments.

One of the most striking findings is the impact of the scheme on women. Since the allowance is credited directly to their accounts, women have gained a certain degree of financial control within the household. This enables them to play a more active role in making decisions related to daily expenses. However, this empowerment is only partial. Social norms and family hierarchies continue to limit women's authority in matters involving larger financial commitments such as agricultural investments, house repairs, or the purchase of durable goods. Financial literacy also plays a crucial role in determining how effectively the allowance is used. Women who have some knowledge of budgeting are better able to balance immediate needs with small amounts of savings for future use. By contrast, those with little financial awareness tend to spend the entire allowance quickly, often leaving nothing aside for emergencies or debt repayment. Several challenges continue to undermine the scheme's effectiveness. Delays in disbursement make it difficult for households to plan their monthly budget with certainty, while inflation steadily erodes the real value of the benefit. For many families, the amount received is not enough to cover rising expenses, and some beneficiaries reported that they still had to borrow money during emergencies. These issues point to the need for either an increase in the monthly assistance or a mechanism to adjust the allowance in line with inflation. The study also reveals the influence of the social environment in fund utilization. In many households, male members still dominate financial decisions, and women's use of the allowance is often restricted to basic consumption. This highlights the

importance of combining financial support with awareness and capacity-building programmes that can strengthen women's decision-making authority in the household.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the Orunodoi Scheme has succeeded in easing immediate financial pressure on households and has made a meaningful contribution to household welfare. However, its transformative potential remains constrained by limited financial literacy, persistent socio-cultural barriers, and the relatively small size of the allowance.

Recommendations

The study highlights several steps that can strengthen the effectiveness of the Orunodoi Scheme and ensure better utilization of funds. The first and most urgent need is to increase the amount of the monthly allowance. The present sum is too small to meet the growing needs of households, and an enhanced allowance would not only help families cover essential expenses like food and healthcare but also enable them to invest in children's education and wellbeing. Along with this, timely and regular disbursement of funds is crucial. Delays create uncertainty and make it difficult for beneficiaries to plan their monthly budgets, reducing the overall impact of the scheme.

Financial literacy has also emerged as a vital area for improvement. Many women lack basic knowledge of budgeting and saving, which prevents them from making the best use of the allowance. Training programmes and community workshops could help equip women with practical skills to manage household finances more effectively, ensuring that a part of the allowance is set aside for emergencies or future needs. In addition, community awareness initiatives are required to address the socio-cultural barriers that restrict women's financial independence. Sensitising both men and women to the importance of women's participation in household financial decisions can help strengthen women's role within the family.

Another recommendation is to encourage savings and small investments by linking beneficiaries to self-help groups or microfinance institutions. Such opportunities would allow women to build modest savings, access credit, and even start small income-generating activities, thereby increasing the long-term benefits of the scheme. At the same time, there should be a strong system of monitoring and evaluation. Regular reviews of how funds are being used, along with feedback from beneficiaries, would ensure that the scheme remains relevant and responsive to local needs.

Finally, the impact of inflation must be taken into account. Rising costs of food, healthcare, and education reduce the real value of the allowance, limiting its usefulness. A periodic review and upward revision of the allowance in line with inflation would help maintain its effectiveness. If these measures are implemented, the Orunodoi Scheme will not only continue to provide relief for immediate needs but will also contribute more meaningfully to women's empowerment and long-term household welfare.

Conclusion

The Orunodoi Scheme marks an important effort to improve household welfare and promote women's empowerment in rural Assam. The study of Bishnupur Kalita Gaon indicates that

the allowance is mainly used for essential needs such as food, healthcare, and minor educational expenses. By providing funds directly to women, the scheme enhances their participation in household financial decisions and reduces their dependence on male family members for day-to-day expenses. However, the study also highlights some limitations. The allowance is relatively modest, which limits its ability to cover all household needs. Delays in payment, limited financial literacy, inflation, and prevailing social norms further restrict the effective use of these funds. As a result, women's empowerment remains partial, with many still lacking control over major household decisions.

Addressing these challenges could significantly improve the scheme's effectiveness. Increasing the allowance, ensuring timely payments, promoting financial literacy, and raising community awareness would help women exercise greater control over finances and improve overall household welfare. By combining direct financial support with education and community engagement, the Orunodoi Scheme can better achieve its twin goals of reducing poverty and strengthening women's empowerment in rural Assam. In conclusion, the Orunodoi Scheme demonstrates the potential of women-centered cash transfers to enhance both economic and social outcomes. While it helps meet immediate needs, the long-term benefits of empowerment and financial independence depend on complementary efforts to address social norms, literacy, and economic challenges. This study highlights the need for continued monitoring, support, and awareness programs to maximize the scheme's positive impact.

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