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Women Empowerment: A brief overview in the context of Assam

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Abstract

In recent years, the empowerment of women has been recognized as the prime issue in developing the status of women. We all know that no society can march ahead and achieve the millennium development goals and sustainable development without the active participation of the women. But due to the patriarchal subjugation, women suffer from various forms of discrimination, inequalities, oppression, harassment etc. They have been discriminated in all aspect like- social, political, economic, education, and access to rights, health and so on. Apart from that due to the overwhelmingly patriarchal culture, women have always been relegated to a secondary position. So, through this writing attempt has been made to understand about the various inequalities faced by women in a patriarchal society. And it can be said that for the empowerment, women themselves should be very conscious about their rights and liberties. To keep equal footing with men in this dynamic world, they must challenge and change the ideologies, patriarchal attitudes and stereotypical view of family which have marginalized them for so long. The women class must realize their subordinate position and should take some efforts for emancipation. For that, the change of mindset of both male and female is necessary. The children should be socialized properly without gender bias. Awareness amongst the illiterate women should be developed by organizing some awareness programs in rural areas. For the implementation of several schemes, the Govt. NGOs and the SHGs should work properly. And to reduce violence against women, it is necessary to value education in schools, colleges etc.

Key Words: Women Empowerment, Discrimination, Patriarchal Values, Assam.

Introduction

Women empowerment has become a global issue in present context. As we know that women comprise merely half of the total population of the world, hence the development of a country is impeccably linked with the development of women. No society can flourish if the women are not given their due place in the process of development. Without any cooperation of women it is impossible to development in the field like economic, political, educational, social and cultural area. As we have seen that everywhere in the world people are voicing about the protection of human rights and the freedom of women, so women empowerment or women right's is considered as an important milestone to understand the global well-being.

Women empowerment is a process, which enables women to establish self-control, autonomy and confidence in a situation of oppressive society. Self-depending and economic liberty are the main resource for empowering women. Deprivation of all forms, inferioritization, limits of choices, and lack of confidence among women are some basic obstacles of women empowerment. It creates

threats to gender security (Dharitri Thakuria 2013). Hence, there is need for removing the obstacles; otherwise it may debar women from developing their capabilities to the fullest. So, women empowerment is a development in the context of women's life, which enables her rising capacity for leading a complete human life.

Women are the backbone of the society. But it is unfortunate to see that the Statistics of women all around the world declare two deplorable facts-

- Of the world's one billion illiterate, two thirds are women.
- The value of women's unpaid housework and community work is estimated at 35 percent of GDP worldwide

So, these facts vividly portray that a good number of women around the world are subjected to intellectual, economic and social discrimination no matter how loud the drums of women empowerment are beaten up by the ruling governments across the world. There are various policies have always been introduced and enacted towards women empowerment, but the cases of violence against women- both in public and private spaces reveal new dimensions of women oppression. The Government of India has introduced multiple policies and schemes for the empowerment of women. The newest amongst it is *Beti Bachao Beti Parhao*. It is aimed at spreading awareness amongst the people in India towards protecting the daughters from social evils and to empower them through education. But if we look in to the political arena, participation of Indian women in politics is found to be very disappointing if one looks at the percentage of women among the parliamentarians. "The constitutional amendments for reservation for women in Panchayats and urban local bodies have brought more than 1 million women into the positions of leadership and governance at the grassroots. Some states have proactively increased the one third reservations to 50 percent further bolstering the presence of women in decision making roles. The number of women in the upper echelons of power however continues to be very low" (Report of the Working Group on Women Agency and Empowerment, 2011). It passes a negative message towards women empowerment and affects the human development index adversely. Assam being a part of the Indian federation holds the same truth. (Rani Mudiari Deka 2013).

Women and Education:

Women are the indispensable part of a society. Education has been recognized as an essential agent of social change and development in any society. Hence, to think of harmonious development without educating women is impossibility. Moreover it can be rightly said that to educate a women is to educate the whole family. As we know that the development of future generation mainly depends upon the education of women section. So, the education of women is realized to be the most essential part for the development of the society. It helps every woman to educate their children in a proper way and also helps them to be good manager of the family as well as the active member of the society. The children learn their manners and behavior at home and mostly mothers are responsible for cultivating good behavior in their children .Every educated woman can run her house well and make it a paradise on earth .Every educated woman can think well about her future and her aim in life and then choose the appropriate subject which will be useful to her throughout the life. In a democratic system the position of women is equal with that of men. However, our cultural conditioning is the main source of atrocities against women. Culturally, a woman in India is supposed to remain confined at home for internal domestic routine work and men on the other hand are the bread earner. However, due to the spread of education a lot of changes could be observed. There is a Chinese saying, "If you wish to plan for a year, plant wheat, if you wish to plant for 10

years, grow trees, if you wish to plan for 100 years educate your women*. This indicates the importance of women education. Napoleon said that, "Give me an educated mother, I shall promise you the birth of a civilized nation. By educating the women we can educate the whole nation, because a country can never rise without the contribution of 50% of its population." Swami Vivekananda once said that, "It is impossible to think about the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is impossible for a bird to fly on only one wing." The fortune of a nation depends upon the educational system of that nation. So it can be said that without the empowerment of women we cannot think about the overall development of a country.

The history of the movement for improving women's status all over the world shows emphasis from the beginning on education as the most significant instrument for changing women subjugated position in society. If we go a little back in history, we see that women education in India has its roots in British Regime. In 1854, the East India Company acknowledged women's education and employment. Initially this education was limited only to primary school level education and the well-to-do families could afford it. During this period, we also read Indian social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar talking vigorously of women upliftment by removing evil practices like sati, child marriage and polygamy. They also worked towards giving rights to Muslim women and the widows as well. It was Jyotiba Phule who was the pioneer in establishing a girls' school in 1863. Apart from that after independence the constitution of Republic India guarantees equality of opportunity to all citizens irrespective of race, sex, caste and communities and directs the state to "Endeavour to provide within a period of ten years from the commencement of this constitution for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of 14 years". However despite these step in respect of women's education, the education status of women is still far from satisfactory due to various reasons. (Anita Arya 2000). The factors retarding the progress of women's education are-

- General indifference to education of girls.
- Social resistance arising out of fear and misconceptions that might alienate girls from traditions and social values and lead to maladjustment, conflicts and non-conformism.
- Early marriage and social inhibitions against girls pursuing education after marriage.
- Prevalence of child labour among girls belonging to weaker sections and the hard domestic chores which some of the unmarried girls-even in the middle-class families are required to perform.
- The prevailing notion that the sole occupation of women is to bear children, looks after her husband and children, and thus be restricted to domestic work.

So, the empowerment of women in India is not so easy. Because in this vast country, different communities are living with a long history of injustice and discrimination towards women as a whole. The movement for empowerment of women in Assam is almost as old as the freedom movement of this part of the country. In 1926, some women attended in the Dhubri session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha under the leadership of Chamdraprabha Saikiani and announced the formation of the Asom Mahila Samiti. Later it was established as Asom Pradeshik Mahila Samiti. After three years of its formation, Tezpur Districts Mahila Samiti was established. Under the banners of these two samitis, the movement for empowerment of women was started.

Despite these, majority of women are living in a position of deprivation, ignorance, exploitation, negligence in Assam. The gender gaps in work participation is considerably high in Assam is as bad as Bihar and Orissa. There is lack of economic empowerment among the women in Assam due to

absence of awareness to acquire basic knowledge and information regarding their rights, advantages and facilities. Though, the educated women belonging to the middle classes to some extent are becoming aware of their rights and facilities but women belonging to the lower class and rural areas are still not aware of their rights. So, it is very much important to awaken the womenfolk of our society and make them aware of their genuine rights for their empowerment. For that female literacy rate in Assam must be increase. Though the increasing rate in female literacy is satisfactory, still it is not equal position with the male counterparts.

Table-1
Literacy Rate in Assam 1951-2011

Year	Person	Male	Female
1951	18.53	28.01	7.58
1961	32.95	44.28	18.62
1971	33.94	43.72	22.76
1981	-	-	-
1991	52.89	61.87	43.03
2001	63.25	71.28	54.61
2011	73.18	78.81	67.27

Source: Provisional population. Census of India, 2011

Though this picture vividly show that the literacy rate of women in Assam is not equal with men but it is seen that women are now pursuing higher education and holding prestigious posts in government offices and private organizations. During the last two decades, there has been a significant rise in the involvement in the field of education. For instance, recently in the UPSC result of 2015 we have seen that the top position is occupied by women. And in case of Assam also we have seen some women are able to occupy rank in UPSC. So, this result will obviously create a positive impact among the new generation.

Women workforce and Employment

Employment is another important indicator to measure the level of women empowerment. Although, women perform almost all the household labour and a considerable portion of socially productive labour yet, women’s labour contribution has not been recognized, nor has it been given due remuneration and respect. With industrialization and monetization of the economy, women’s labour burden has increased, though this is not reflected in their share of the income. Women’s wages tend to be lower than wages for corresponding work by men. Much of women’s labour is none waged since it is categorized as household labour, even when it is for market consumption. Consequently, even if women’s share of work is larger, and this is true of most societies, their share of income is lower. (Assam Human Development Report 2003)

In Assam, employment of women for their self-reliance is very poor. In the area of employment, performance of most of the upper Assam districts is comparatively well than the districts of lower and central Assam. Generally, we have seen that employment status is related with literacy rate. As a result, the low literacy districts of Assam have shown poor performance in employment. The percentage of women employee in the government services of the state is very poor. It was 16% in 2006 (Dharitri Thakuria 2013). Employment of women in government services are seen mostly among the urban women. Rural women are still backward in doing government services. However it

has to be noted that the female participation rate in services is higher in Assam than India. There are minor differences in case of rural employment of Assam and India, but regarding urban female the employment rate is almost same. There is a slight increase in the female work participation rate both in rural and urban areas as we have seen in the following table:

Table-2
Work Participation Rates by Sex (1972-2005) (In percent)

Year	Rural		Urban	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
1972-73	31.8	54.5	13.4	50.1
1987-88	32.3	53.9	15.2	50.6
1996-97	29.1	55.0	13.1	52.1
2001-01	28.7	54.4	14.0	53.1
2004-05	32.7	54.6	16.6	54.9

Source: National sample Survey Organization

Again, there are wide differences in case of literacy rate between Rural and Urban women. As we all know that literacy rate is related with the employment opportunities so, the female workforce participation is also less in Rural areas than Urban areas. According to census report 2001, the literacy rate of rural women is 64.09%. On the other hand the literacy rate of urban women is 85.71%. So, the economic condition of rural women is not well. Thus women are in disadvantageous position in the area of education and employment.

Moreover, in this globalization era there have been a number of factors serving as impediments to the intellectual and economic empowerment of women. Two of the most important are briefly explained below-

- **Traditional values and customs:** In India, cultural ethos and norms play an important role in socialization of men and women. While men occupy the public spaces, women are confined to the private domain. However, this private domain is also guided by the patriarchs of the family. Men are the bread earners for women never got a chance to do so. Indian women have always been considered to be an epitome of sacrifice. They are considered to be great care-takers of the elderly and the children. They are supposed to keep up the religious beliefs and protect the generation from any identity crisis. As such in most societies, their ability to reason has never been considered as an area of analysis or experimentation.

- **Double burden:** With globalization making the world a smaller and a connected one to live in, gender relations have come to occupy a vital position in contemporary debates and discussions. Emergence of areas like *Women Studies* and *Gender Studies* have brought in new concepts and challenges linked to gender. Now women education might not be an area of study but unpaid labor is a serious area of analysis to the feminists. Sharing of responsibilities between the spouses is being emphasized to protect women from double burden.

Women and politics

“Political power is the strongest weapon to empower women, but it is in the sector of politics that women all over the world are lagging behind men. This is due to the fact that the state machinery had been a creation of man and since its inception, women were kept outside it” (Baruah, S.L.,

2003). Political participation depends on the political system. Apart from that education plays the key role in the entry of women in politics. Education remains as a determining factor of any kind of role to be played by man or women in the outer world. Lack of education and awareness always stands as barriers to political entry of women (Rani Mudiar Deka 2013).

In a country, women’s participation in mainstream political activities makes the system more democratic and has broadened the arena of governance (Mamata Narzary 2013). Women’s equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the general process of the advancement of Women. In the context of Assam, despite having a glorious history of the women of Assam, they could not occupy good position in decision making process and leading role in party politics. But, as a voter Assamese women showed a remarkable progress in the recent year. Almost 65% voters turn out. Assamese women have shown their faith on Indian democratic traditions.

A nation’s march towards progress and prosperity remains a dream, its aspiration unfulfilled and unrealized unless women actively participate in all developmental activities of that country. Thus to emphasis the importance of women’s participation and their role in politics is to emphasis the obvious. If proper facilities and encouragement are given, Indian women can participate efficiently in all the national activities on an equal footing with men. The empowerment of women could be brought about only if it is based on granting them basic economic rights, Educational rights and political rights. Thus, it is an imperative necessity to provide opportunity to women in the decision-making processes at all levels to make empowerment of women a meaningful reality (Gangeswar Kalita 2012). To make women aware about politics, there is need of mass literacy program for the eradication of illiteracy. Moreover, an Awareness Campaign about women’s political and legal rights should be organized twice or once in a month mainly in the rural areas. Women leaders should inspire women to participate in the political, rallies, election companying, meetings etc and this will increase women’s interest in politics. Political training should be imparted to both man and women legislators. Apart from that, women must be given a chance in the decision making process.

If we look at the present status of political participation of women, it is still far from satisfactory. Despite having the great role in politics of pre-independent period the number of participation of women in politics remained very low in post independent period. From the very beginning women have become able to occupy few seats both at parliament and state legislative assembly. It can be cleared from the following table:

Table-3
Assamese Women in General Election in India

Elections	No. of seats available	Female contestants	Female elected	% of female to total seats	% of female members in Lok Sabha	% of female members in Rajya Sabha
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1952	10	2	1	10	4.4	7.3
1957	10	2	2	20	5.4	7.5
1962	12	3	2	16	6.8	7.6
1967	14	2	1	7.14	5.9	8.3
1971	14	3	1	7.14	4.2	7.0
1977	14	3	2	14.28	3.4	10.2
1980	14	2	0	0	7.9	9.8

1984	14	1	0	0	8.1	11.4
1991	14	8	0	0	5.3	9.7
1996	14	9	1	7.14	7.2	15.5
1998	14	3	1	7.14	7.2	9
1999	14	9	2	14.29	7.9	6.1
2004	14	6	0	0	9.0	7.8
2009	14	11	2	14.20	8.2	11.4

Source: compiled from data collected from the Election Department, Govt. of Assam & Gender Statistics Assam 2008-09, Govt. of Assam.

So, after looking this table it can be said that the trend of participation of Indian women has not improved from the very beginning. In 1947, there were only elected female candidates from Assam to the Lok Sabha which remained the same even today. Apart from that for several years there were no female representatives from Assam. Gradually, the number of contestant has shown a little increase but the table reflects that the trend is not very cheering. However, it also depends on the political parties. The parties may not want to provide scope to their female members. This may be of their male ego or may be because they do not possess faith on the women candidates to become state women candidates to become state representative in the parliament. Again, in case of Rajya Sabha the participation of Assamese women is found to be much more meager. Till now, only two women from Assam have made it to the Upper house of the parliament. At present, there is only one women member to the Rajya Sabha which is really not a good sign for empowerment of women.

The situation does not differ much in case of the state level election also. Assam has 126 constituencies but the participation of women in state legislature compared to its male counterpart is very low. The following table displays it:

Table-4
Women in Assembly Election of Assam

Year	No. of Assembly seats	No. of contestants	No. of male contestants	No. of female contestants	% of female contestants	No. of female elected	% of female to total seat
1952	108	458	449	6	1.3	1	0.9
1957	105	312	304	6	1.9	5	4.7
1962	105	409	402	4	0.9	4	3.8
1967	144	492	486	6	1.2	4	3.2
1972	126	522	510	12	2.3	0	0
1978	126	648	N/A	1	2.3	1	0.8
1983	109	471	N/A	3	0.6	2	1.8
1985	126	1153	1124	29	2.5	5	3.9
1991	126	160	248	50	5.5	5	3.9
1996	122	1029	1012	17	1.7	6	4.9
2001	126	916	861	55	6.0	10	7.9
2006	126	997	927	70	7.0	13	10.3
2011	126	961	8967	85	8.8	14	11.1

Source: www.eci.nic.in

So, the table shows a rising trend of female contestant and elected member of females especially from 2001 election. But the figure is still very negligible. Such a small percentage of women contestants reflect the unwillingness of women towards active politics. In this regard it can be said that women's political exclusion not only makes it difficult to solve several women related issue brings an atmosphere of injustice by barring women to take part in decision making. Because women can be able to address each and every issue related to women by increasing their collective power through political participation.

Conclusion

After going through this discussion it can be said that for the empowerment, women themselves should be very conscious about their rights and liberties. To keep equal footing with men in this dynamic world, they must challenge and change the ideologies, patriarchal attitudes and stereotypical view of family which have marginalized them for so long. Patriarchal domination, subjugation has been continuing over centuries. So it cannot be overcome in few decades. Thus, the women class must realize their subordinate position and should take some efforts for emancipation. For that, the change of mindset of both male and female is necessary. The children should be socialized properly without gender bias. Awareness amongst the illiterate women should be developed by organizing some awareness programs in rural areas. For the implementation of several schemes, the Govt. NGOs and the SHGs should work properly. And to reduce violence against women, it is necessary to value education in schools, colleges etc. However, it can be said that the real empowerment is not possible without collective efforts of men and women at all levels. ss

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