Women Status In Assam

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Introduction

Women in India are comparatively backward socially, economically and politically compared to other countries. Assam is one of the eight states of North East India and bordering 7 states like Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and West Bengal. With a geographical area of 78,438 sq. kms. i.e. about 2.4 percent of the country’s total geographical area, Assam provides shelter to 2.57 percent of the population of the country. Assam has a population of 31,160,272 as in 2011 census, of which 15,954,927 are males and 15,214,345 are females. The sex ratio (females per 1000 males) is 954 and the female literacy ratio is 67.27 percent.

Women status is determined to a great extent in terms of socio-economic indicators such as income, poverty, education and skills that opens up opportunities of employment, better health. These indices are also vitally interlinked with the concepts of power and position. At the same time, women must have a share in the decision making process in the family and in the public sphere, and access the rights and opportunities provided by the state and society at large. Thus, this paper is trying to look into the different aspects that shape up the women status in Assam.

Social Aspects

According to Article 14, 15 and 16 of the Indian Constitution guarantee absence of discrimination on the grounds of sex, race, etc. Women have got full rights of franchise like men, as per Directive Principles of State Policy. Parliament has enacted laws giving equal rights to women in marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc. In spite of the above constitutional provisions women are not getting out of the shackles. Women are still shackled to traditions, customs, age-old superstitious and beliefs, orthodoxy, dogmatism like witch hunting and conservatisms. Purdah system, dowry system, early marriage, widowhood are still a strong part of women in Indian society in general and Assam in particular. They remain suppressed by their husbands, in-laws, spend most of their time in household chores and remain economically dependent throughout life and viewed as inferior in the man dominated society. In the joint families, they have no freedom, no privacy and no good treatment from the in-laws. A partial lift is visible through Social Marriage Act 1954, Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 and Succession Act, 1956. In spite of the Marriage Act, rural girls are married below 18 years.

• **Marriage**: Age of marriage signifies the status of women. As per DLHS-III (2007-2008), in Assam 21.8percent of girls are married before the legal age of 18 and 40 percent women in the age group of 20-24 compared to 42.9 percent (Source: DLHS-III 2007-2008).

• **Violence**: violence against women is a manifestation of the historically unequal power relation between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men. Although both men and women face violence, an overwhelming majority of victims of sexual assault and domestic violence are women. Assam is the second state in the country with the highest report on crimes against women. Dowry and witch hunting are the main reason for Assam to get a bad name. Domestic Violence, kidnappings, rape and other crimes which fall under sec 498 of IPC are being the most registered cases in Assam. (Source: Manipur News, Manipur Mail, May 29, 2012).

• **Discrimination**: In India, discrimination against female children has been a subject of concern. In Indian Context, irrespective of the caste, creed, religion and social status, the overall status of women is lower than men and therefore a

### Status of crimes against women:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Types of Cases</th>
<th>Year 2009</th>
<th>Year 2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>1631</td>
<td>1721</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Molestation</td>
<td>1389</td>
<td>1611</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Reported trafficking</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Domestic Violence (Cruelty by Husband)</td>
<td>4355</td>
<td>5189</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Statistical Handbook, Government of Assam, 2011)
male child is preferred over a female child. According to 2001 census, in Assam, the ratio was 932 but it has increased tremendously in 2011 with 954 female per 1000 male. (Source: Provisional Population Totals India-Data sheets).

**Economic aspects of Assam Women**

Women are generally economically dependent and backward. Economic independence, through very essential is not alone sufficient to give women the strength needed to face the battle. Even economically independent women have to depend on their parents or husbands or relatives for shelter. There are misconceptions that they are not economically contributors. Female work participation is another indicator of women’s status in the society. Assam is not the worst among major states of the Indian Union in terms of human development and gender equality but it ranks quite low. Assam has a largely rural agrarian economy, which is characterized by high rate of work participation of women. Though Female Work Participation Rates (FWPR) are high, as it is subsistence farming, women do not benefit economically, though they share a disproportionate share of the work burden. The work participation rate of the women in Assam is considerably lower than that of men in general except in the primary sector where the rates are in favour of women. The participation of women in the secondary and tertiary sectors is lower in Assam. According to Economic survey, Assam 2009-10, women constitute 32.5 percent of all organised sector workers, as opposed to only 19 percent for all India in the same sector. Interestingly, since 1990’s women’s employment in the organised sector has been approximately around 30 percent where majorities of women employed in this sector are employed by Tea Industry which is one of the largest organised sectors in Assam, either as permanent/temporary/casual labour.

**Educational Aspects of Assam Women**

In the field of education, women in Assam are in a better position than the all-India average. The educational attainment of women in Assam can be analysed through female literacy rate and female enrolment rate at different stage of education. As per 2001 census the literacy rate for Assam is 63.3 per cent as against 64.8 per cent for India. While male literacy is 71.3 per cent (India-75.3 per cent), female literacy stands at 54.61 per cent. According to Census 2011, highlighted that an encouraging rise from 54.61 percent in 2001 to 67.27 in 2011, showing a sharp rise of about 31 percent in female literacy rate. The report has put the overall rate of the State at 73.18 percent. The male female gap in the literacy rate is still perceptible although it is declining over time and is much below the all-India average.

Attainment of a higher literacy rate alone does not make a community educationally advanced. Completion of primary stage of education and continuation of school upto 15 years of age, etc. are taken as indicators of educational attainment. The phenomenon of school drop-out is a negative indicator of educational attainment. The drop-out rates of both boys and girls in Assam remained higher than all-India average from 2001 to 2011. The drop-out rate of girls was higher in most of the years.

- **Drop-out rate**: Despite of increased educational attainment of women in Assam the drop-out rate is still increasing. The average drop-out rate for girls has increased from 5.0 percent in 2009-10 to 11.9 percent in 2011-12 at primary level and from 13.5 percent in 2009-10 to 14.3 percent at upper primary level. Some of the main reasons of the drop out or slow progress of the girls’ education are as follows:
  1. The social conditions such as conservations of the parents’ prejudice against the girls’ education, early marriages of the girls, utility of girls at home in order to help their mothers in their household chores and to look after their younger siblings when parents are away to work.
  2. Economic backwardness of the rural community.
  3. Lack of educational facilities
  4. Lack of women teachers in schools especially in rural areas.
  5. Lack of proper supervision and guidance.

**Health Aspects of Assam women**

Health is one of the factors that determine the status of women in a society. Looking at the different health indicators of Assam, women status is in bad shape.

- **Maternal Mortality Rate**: According to the report 2011, Sample Registration System, Registrar General, Assam has recorded 390 MMR against 1,00,000 per live birth whereas the Annual Health Survey 2010-11 has recorded 381 MMR against 1,00,000 live births.

- **Anaemia deficiency**: Most of the women in Assam are suffering from anaemia. The causes are lack of nutritional food due to extreme poverty, illiteracy and lack of awareness. As per NHFS-III, the incidence of anaemia has been found among 72 Percent of pregnant women within the age group of 15-49 years in Assam. Anaemia is prevalent among women in general and NFHS-III records that 69.9 Percent of ever married (15-49 years) are anaemic. (Source NFHS-III, 2005-2006).
HIV/AIDS: HIV/AIDS is most prevalent among young people. As per Assam AIDS Control Society, till December 2011, blood test had been carried out among 1,82,834 people across the state, out of this, 112 pregnant women tested positive for the HIV virus and 76 of them have already been delivered.

Institutional Deliveries: In Assam, the institutional deliveries have gone up. In 2006, there were only 66,000 institutional deliveries in Assam while 420,000 institutional deliveries have been recorded in the state last year. In 2005-06, institutional deliveries in Assam increased by 39 percent compared to the year 2001-02 and in 2011-12, institutional deliveries increased by 212 percent compared to 2005-06 according to the NRHM report.

Political Aspects of Assam Women
It is a fact that the status of women in Assam is the worst in terms of their position in decision making bodies. In Assam in 1977, out of 3 female candidates who contested for the Lok Sabha, 2 candidates were elected. In 1980 out of the two female candidates who contested for the Lok Sabha, none were elected. No women from the State of Assam contested in the 1984 and 1989 elections. In 1991, 7 female candidates contested for the Lok Sabha but none was elected. No woman from the State of Assam contested in the 1984 and 1989 elections. In 1991, 7 female candidates contested for the Lok Sabha. None was elected. In 1996 only one woman was elected to the Lok Sabha out of 9 candidates who contested. Despite of having a glorious history, the status of Assam is worst in term of their position in decision making bodies. Assam has 14 Lok Sabha seats and 7 for the Rajya Sabha. Since its first general election women from Assam do not get proper representation in both houses of the parliament. They are still lagging behind the male counterpart. In the Lok sabha of 2004 out of 116 candidates, only 6 female candidates contested but none win. The position is little but improved in the 2009 elections, where out of 158 candidates, 11 female forwarded their candidature and 2 managed to win the election. Hence, only 14 percent of MPs from Assam in current Lok Sabha are women. (Source: Assam Lok sabha 2009 Elections) Participation of women is low not only in the elected bodies but also in administrative posts.

Different Governmental schemes provided for women in Assam
There are various schemes for the women in Assam which are centrally sponsored as well as state sponsored. These schemes are focussed on issues of employment, education, health, etc.

1. Sawayamisidha: The Sawayamisidha (under the ICDS scheme of The Social Welfare Department of Assam) is an integrated Scheme for women’s empowerment formally launched in 2001 replacing the erstwhile India Mahila Yojana and the Mahila Sambriddhi Yojana. The programme is based on the formation of Women Self Help Groups (SHGs) and enable the SHG to take up schemes and programmes for the social and economic empowerment of women. The long term objective of the programme is to bring about all round empowerment of women by ensuring their direct access to and control over resources through a sustained process of mobilization and convergence of all the on-going sectorial programmes of Government and other agencies.

Under the Social Welfare Department, there are many beneficiaries right from children to women and aged person. Under this scheme, in Assam there are 24 numbers of ICDS project blocks. The various schemes for women have helped women in many ways right from their health in the forms of different nutritional supplements; their economic conditions also improve with the scheme for formation of various SHGs. So far 2400 SHGs have been constituted covering only 58,500 women. About 1173 numbers of SHGs is in nursing stage under this Sawayamisidha scheme. Though the various schemes under Welfare Department have benefitted many, there are many loopholes in the functioning of this programme. This is due to the irresponsibility of the different blocks that are supposed to look after the various implementation of the Social Welfare Scheme to the beneficiaries.

2. Swadhar: The Ministry of Women and Child Development under Government of India set up a scheme for women in difficult circumstance known as Swadhar. The objectives of the scheme are the following:

• To provide primary need of shelter, food, clothing and care to the marginalised women/girls living in difficult circumstances who are without any social and economic support.
• To provide emotional support and counselling to such women.
• To rehabilitate them socially and economically through education, awareness, skill up gradation and personality development through behavioural training, etc.
• To arrange for specific clinical, legal and other support for women/girls in need of those intervention by linking and networking with...
other organizations in both Government and non-governmental sector on case to case basis.

- To provide for help line or other facilities to such women in distress and
- To provide such other services as will be required for the support and rehabilitation to such women in distress.

A number of Short stay homes and Swadhar center have been set up in the state in order to provide shelter to women who are victims of violence or to women in difficult situation. One such NGO providing shelter to such women is WODWICHEE which functions in two different districts of Assam which is not at all sufficient to curve the women violence issues in the state.

3. National Rural Health Mission (NRHM): The government of Assam through National Rural Health Mission has introduced various schemes for women like Janani Suraksha Yojana, Mamoni, Majoni, Mamata, etc.

- Janani Suraksha Yojana is a scheme to provide safe motherhood intervention with the objective of reducing maternal and neo-natal by promoting institutional delivery among the poor pregnant women. A beneficiary under this scheme should have a JSY card along with MCH card. Beneficiaries under this scheme are to receive cash assistance during their child delivery. This scheme has been successfully implemented in the state of Assam and therefore the MMR has remarkably improved. There has been almost 22 times increase in institutional deliveries, but improving safe motherhood still remains a challenge in the state and Assam and still has the highest MMR in the country. This scheme could not be accessed by women from rural areas when ASHA worker failed to inform the women about the scheme.

- In Majoni scheme, at the birth of a girl child in any of governmental hospitals, Rs. 5000 is deposited in the name of the girl child and the girl will get the maturity value of the fixed deposits when she attains the age of 18 years. This scheme is applicable only in two child norm family. Mamoni scheme is a scheme which encourages pregnant women to undergo three ante-natal check-ups that will help in identifying danger signs and offer proper treatment. Under this scheme, every pregnant women will receive a booklet on tips of safe motherhood and for new born care. The same woman will receive an amount of Rs.1000 in the second and third ante-natal check-ups for expenses related to nutritional foods and supplements.

4. National Bowari Scheme: The state government launched this scheme and it will be implemented by the State Social Welfare Department. This scheme is mainly to discourage marriage among girls before they turn 20 years of age. Under this scheme, BPL women who tied knot after attaining the age of 20 years will be paid 10,000 by the state government. The beneficiaries have to produce their marriage certificate or affidavit signed and attested by a magistrate to avail the benefit of the scheme.

5. Baidou and Nabon Schemes: These schemes are made to provide empowerment of unemployed single women and widows. Under the Baidou scheme, one time financial relief of Rs. 10,000 will be given to each unmarried unemployed women of 45 years and above from BPL families. Under Nabou scheme, a one-time financial assistance is provided to unemployed widows. But these schemes are launched in the state by state government in order to provide assistance in the form of cash, there are no data for the beneficiaries of the scheme.

6. Swarnajayanti Gram Swarohgar Yojana: This scheme is centrally sponsored to provide sustainable income to the rural poor. The programme aims at establishing a large number of micro-enterprises in the rural areas, based upon the potential of the rural poor. This scheme is not meant for women only but 40% is reserved for them. Therefore in a society where male are dominant, women do not get access to it fully. This is due to the lack of awareness of information and proper understanding of the scheme.

7. Janani Sishu Suraksha Karyakram (JSSK): This scheme is also a centrally sponsored scheme which was launched on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2011 to provide completely free and cashless services to pregnant women including both normal deliveries and caesarean operations and sick new born up-to 30 days after birth in governmental health institutions of rural and urban areas.

Though different steps are taken by government but many lacunas are still very strong. It is necessary to develop a positive attitude towards women. While government actions and steps are necessary for removing gender inequalities and injustices and for empowering women, these can become effective only if society’s attitudes and outlook towards women change. Women’s empowerment would be achieved only when the attitudes-ways of thinking, feeling and willing-as also ways of behaving of men, women and society towards women become congenial and positive, so as to respect her as a person with an identity of her own, to be treated, as an equally worthy human being rather than taking her as a commodity and primarily as a sex object to be abused, exploited, discriminated and ill-treated.
Conclusion

There is an urgent need to create awareness among the women in particular, of the social evils of the society. Women are so much cocooned by various social customs and taboos, that they often cannot and do not want to bring changes in their own traditional lifestyles, so there is a need for creating socio-political consciousness among women. No amount of government help can really achieve the desired results, unless the women themselves and men realize the need of such a change. The urge to liberate themselves, to fight against the social ills, should come from within. The government along with voluntary organizations should take up concrete steps, to uplift the women status by providing safe, security and peaceful life for women.

References: