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# A CRITICAL ANALYSIS ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN AND THEIR EMPOWERMENT IN ASSAM

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“You can tell about the condition of the nation by looking at the status of its women”.

- Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru

**Abstract:** Assam, being a part of North Eastern states is situated in the south of the eastern Himalaya along the Brahmaputra and Barak river valley, which has a population of about 34.492 (2017) million but the status of women in Assam is slightly different from the other state, whereas like other states in India women in Assam also enjoys a quite inferior status in compared to the men of the state. The status of women empowerment in Assam can be measured through different indicators like 1) employment status 2) educational status 3) political participation of women. So there is a need to create awareness towards achieving the desired goal of women empowerment in the state.

The paper will basically be a comparative study of men and women in Assam with reference to different tribes and how empowerment of women is seen through their political participation and education status.

**Keywords:** Women Empowerment, Political Participation, Education, Employment.

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**Introduction:** India is a land of ‘Unity in Diversity’, which refers to the state of togetherness but it has endured with different customs, traditions and practices, both in good as well as bad ways. The need for the empowerment of women arouse due to the discrimination and domination done to women by men. Women are suppressed a lot and are target to various types of violence and discrimination and India is no different in this case. Women are a very important part of our society but still they are accepted as the weaker sex whereas she is the backbone of a family to be called as a “Family”. From the time of their birth they play different roles in the society but still she is regarded as a “weak figure” compared to men. The concept of women empowerment not only focuses on giving them strength and skills to rise above but also to educate men regarding the issues of women and to make them aware of the sense of respect and duty toward women as equal. This paper tries to showcase the picture of women empowerment and their status in the North East India specifically in Assam.

**Assam:** Assam is one of the eighth state of Northeast India which is boarded by Bhutan and the state of Arunachal Pradesh to the north, Nagaland and Manipur to the east, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram and Bangladesh to the south and West Bengal to the west. There was time when the entire North Eastern Region (NER) was known by a single name “Assam”. The state has 35 districts which consist of 30 different tribes. The state is rich in its natural resources and has conserved the one-horned rhinoceros along with other wild life. It is one of the richest biodiversity zones in the world and which is remarkably rich in Orchids species and the Foxtail Orchid is the state flower of Assam. The total population of Assam according to 2011 census was 31,169,272, 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.

## **Empowerment of Women:**

When we talk about empowerment there are multiple questions that raises like:

- What is empowerment?
- What is women empowerment?
- Why is it important?

So, what is empowerment? If we go for the dictionary meaning of the term it means giving authority or power to someone to do something and it is also a process of becoming stronger and more confident, especially in controlling one’s life and claiming one’s rights. Empowerment for women refers to creating

an environment where women are given equal freedom to make decisions for themselves, for their own benefit and as well as for the society. As women constitutes around 50% of the world's population it is important that they are also given the equal opportunity and freedom that is given to the men of a country otherwise a large part of women of the world will remain unemployed whereas the world economy suffers due to unequal opportunity for women in the work place. "According to the Indian Constitution, it not only grants equality to women but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women for neutralizing the socio economic, education and political discrimination faced by them".

**Women Status in Assam:** Women status is determined in terms of socio-economic indicators such as income, poverty, education opportunities of better health and education. According to our Indian Constitution Article 14, 15 and 16 guarantees the absence of discrimination on the ground of sex, race, etc. Although women play an important role in our society of Assam not much of a study is done focused on the status of women till date. There are very little resources that give us the information about women status in Assamese society. There is a fact that women has been worshiped in ancient Assam and from the early period of Kamrupa, it is found that an important honor is given to the *sakti* worship. The status of women in the Assamese society is slightly different then rest of the other countries as there is no dowry system. Let's look upon the status of women through different aspects with comparison to men.

*Employment Status of Women in Assam:* Employment in Assam for women is very poor with regards to their self-reliance. As there is low literacy rate in Assam which results in the poor performance in employment and in order to analyze the employment status of women, let us divide the workers into main, marginal and non-workers and see how the percentage of men and women differs in three areas of Assam i.e. Lower, Central and Upper Assam.

**Area wise Percentage of Main, Marginal and Non-Workers in Assam, 2001:**

**Table 1**

Area	Main workers		Marginal workers		Non-workers	
	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Lower Assam	43.23	7.31	5.59	7.85	51.34	84.84
Central Assam	42.38	8.33	6.96	9.50	50.65	82.15
Upper Assam	41.68	15.62	11.47	39.55	47.63	66.90
<b>All Assam</b>	<b>42.45</b>	<b>9.82</b>	<b>7.41</b>	<b>10.89</b>	<b>50.13</b>	<b>79.28</b>

**Source:** Census of India, 2001

If we look at (Table1) the comparison of men and women in terms of Main, Marginal and Non-workers in the areas like lower central and in upper Assam we can clearly see the difference between male and female workers between Main workers, Marginal and Non-workers. In case of Main workers, the percentage of male are higher than that of women whereas in case of Marginal and Non-workers the involvement of female is more compared to the percentage of male. This shows the disadvantage of Assamese women in the employment sector. This also shows a massive gender disparity between men and women, where there is unequal distribution of employment between men and women and women are facing low labour force. From the above table we can also see that the participation of women is more in upper Assam than compared to that of the lower and central Assam. Moreover the employment status of the state also depends upon the literacy rate of the state and as there is low literacy rate in Assam there is low employment status in the state.

*Education Status of Women in Assam:* Education plays a very important role in our lives. We start learning from the time we are born and keep on learning till the time of our death. It is a continuous process and it also helps in modification of our behavior through the experience of learning. It is generally thought to be the process of acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, beliefs and habit and as

women is a very integral part of our society education is seen to be as an essential element for social change and development. 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, look after her husband and children, and thus be restricted to domestic work. (Haloi N. , 2015)

#### Literacy Rate in Assam 1951-2011:

Table 2

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

In the above given details in table 2 from census of India, 2011 which shows the literacy rate of Assam from 1951-2011 it can be seen clearly that the women literacy rate is less compared to that of men but it cannot be ignored that now women are holding prestigious post in government sectors and also pursuing higher education during the last two decades.

*Political participation of women in Assam: (section taken from paper written by me on "women and politics"):* The political participation of women of Assam has started from a very small scale from the very beginning of the freedom movement although there is very less known fact of women and their participation and their role in administration till the close of 14<sup>th</sup> century whereas the history of Assam begins with the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. There were instances of women taking active part in and played a direct role in the administration but after the invasion of the Burmese, Assamese women had to restrict themselves to the four wall of the house and engage themselves to the household work. There was no opportunity for them to go out and work not even for their own state. In 1921, when Gandhi visited Assam for the first time and after his visit there was a shocking impact of non-cooperation on the people of Assam and gained strength all over the state. Many influential people from Assam such as Gopinath Bordoloi, Tarun Ram Phukan, and Ambikagiri Rai Choudhary joined the non-cooperation movement and devoted themselves as full time to the advancement of the non-cooperation campaign. The women of Assam such as Ratna Bezborua, Guneswari Mazumdar, Girija Devi, Lilabati Kakati and many others took active part in the movement and joined hands in India's freedom struggle. (Borah, 2018)

According to the given source from the Election Commission of India it can be seen that the women participation is still less compared to that of men be it be before independence or after independence. . In 1962 general election the women turnout was only 42.63% compared to men which was 63.31% same in the case of 1971 election the men turnout was more than that of women but if we compare the percentage of women in the election from the year 2006, 2009 and 2014 there was a less margin of men and women that that elections. (Borah, 2018)

Women from the past has always been taught what to do and what not to do, they are always been observed by the society and are confined to certain kinds of work only which are made compulsory for them and they should abide by it. To create political awareness in a state of a society they have to fight

for their rights, they should themselves realize the need of bringing change because no other person or no any other person will be able to bring it until and unless they themselves want to do so. (Borah, 2018) Let us look upon status of women with reference to different tribes in Assam. The tribes or the ethnic groups that I have picked to look upon their status in their own community are the Mising women and Tiwa women of Assam.

**Comparison of Men and Women Participation in Parliamentary General Elections in Different Years:**

**Table 3**

Years	Men	Women
1962	63.31%	42.63%
1971	60.87%	49.11%
1977	65.63%	54.91%
1980	62.16%	51.22%
1984	68.18%	58.60%
1989	66.13%	57.32%
1991	61.58%	51.35%
1996	62.06%	53.41%
1998	65.72%	57.88%
1999	63.97%	55.64%
2004	61.66%	53.3%
2009	60.24%	55.82%
2014	67.09%	65.63%

**Source:** Election Commission of India

*Status of Mising women in Assam:* Assam is a land of different tribes, it almost consist of more than 32 tribal groups. Mising is one of the ethnic groups where the women of this community depend mainly on rights and this community depends mainly on socioeconomic and cultural activities of the society. They are hard working and indulge themselves in every household work and other sources. They provide a helping hand to their husbands in the fieldwork and take care of the house. A Mising woman is tremendously know for her representation of her community by her costumes, ornaments and manners. They have equal right in the house although the male is the head of the family and has the responsibility to maintain the house, they also have the equal right to involve themselves in rituals, social ceremonies etc. Mising women play a very important role in the economic development as they have the direct right to participate in every work. The Mising people have a very vibrant material culture and in terms of cultural activities the women has the center of attraction right from preparing the local rice beer “apong” to taking part in dancing and singing. He Mising girls also takes part in bihu dance of Assamese community. Talking about the education of the Mising, we can say that they are deprived from receiving education because they are preoccupied by one or the other work and looking at their daily task they hardly has time left for their education. But there are awareness programs introduced by the government which helped in educating the women of these tribes and to some extend the literacy rate is increasing positively.

*Status of Tiwa women in Assam:* As mentioned above that Assam is the pot of different tribes and Tiwa is one of the many tribes of Assam. Ethnically they belong to the mongoloid group and reside in the area of Assam and Meghalaya. They are basically of two types- one, the hill Tiwas who resides mostly in the areas of Karbi Anlong and Ri-bhoi district of Meghalaya and second the plain dwelling Tiwas who resides in Morigaon and Nagaon district. Although a modern Tiwa family is a patriarchic family, the women in the family are assumed to have an honorable status in the family. The Tiwa community belongs from agricultural social life where women is also given an equal status compared to that of the men in the fields and their role in economic field is more than men. Similarly Tiwa women have a significantly equal status in terms of religious life whereas, the political participation has changed to a great extend from that was before and now women also enjoys equal rights and freedom as provided by

the Indian constitution. But when it comes to the education sector, Tiwa women still faces negligence because the tribal still don't understand the importance of education.

**Conclusion:** After looking at the different aspects regarding status and empowerment of women in Assam, it can be said that in order to empower women in different in different spheres the old rituals need to break through which bound them to take a step towards themselves. Both men and women mindset is necessary in this case and only government cannot bring about change and development if one is not ready to accept the other as equal to them. There is a need to create awareness towards achieving the desired goal of women empowerment in the state, where women can exercise their own rights and freedom and take decision for them in order to build a better future.

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