

ROLE OF EDUCATION IN EMPOWERING WOMEN: AN ANALYSIS IN ASSAM

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Introduction:

Women empowerment is one of the important means of human development. Empowering women generally implies the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women. It not only implies to improve the material well-being of women, but also their active participation in development process. Among various factors, education plays an important role in empowering women. Education not only improves the intellectual power of women, but also improves their status in their families and societies. An educated woman can actively participate in working force, can help her children in studies and can response to any challenge confronted by her. Gender equity is another important outcome of education. Thus, education can empower a woman not only economically, but also socially and politically. Assam, which is a state of North-Eastern region of India, constitutes 3.12 crore population among which 1.52 crore population are women. Although the female literacy rate of the state is increased to 66.27% in 2011 from 54.61% in 2001 and can overcome the national average (65.46%), the gender disparity in education still persists in the state. Again, disparity in literacy rates is also visible among women in urban and rural areas of Assam. As per census report 2011, the female literacy rates in rural areas is 60.05% whereas in urban areas is 75.40%. Thus, this paper makes an attempt to study the prevailing education scenario among women in context of Assam.

Objectives:

The main objectives of the paper are-

- 1) To observe the current educational status of women in Assam.

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- 2) To discuss various obstacles in the path of attaining education by women.
- 3) To recommend suitable policy measures in favour of promoting women education.

Methodology:

The paper is completely based on secondary data collected from various articles published in journals, books, census report etc.

Discussion:

The Educational Status of women in Assam

Assam is a state of North Eastern India. As per census 2011 report, total population of the state is about 3.12 crores out of which women constitute about 49%. Again, the average literacy rate of the state is 72.19% among them, male literacy is 77.85% and female literacy is 66.27%. Thus there exists a large gap of literacy rates among males and females. However, the notable thing is that the total literacy rate of Assam has increased overtime i.e. an increase of 8.94% from 2001 to 2011. Again, the female literacy can overcome the national average of 65.46%. But there has been observed a large difference of literacy level among rural and urban population of Assam. As per census 2011, the male and female literacy rates of rural areas in Assam are reported as 75.40% and 60.05% respectively whereas the figures are 91.81% and 79.85% respectively for urban areas. This brings a clear picture that women in rural areas of Assam are more deprived from access to education in compared to that of urban areas.

Table 1: Literacy Rates (in %) as per Census 2011

	Total Literacy	Male Literacy	Female Literacy
India	74.04	82.14	65.46
Assam	72.19	77.85	66.27
Rural Assam	69.34	75.40	60.05
Urban Assam	88.47	91.81	79.85

Source: Census Survey of India 2011

If we compare the literacy status of women among various districts of Assam, then it is observed that all the districts of upper Assam have high literacy rates above state average except Tinsukia.

Female literacy rate is highest in upper Assam whereas central Assam and lower Assam have shown almost same performance in the field of women literacy. Another notable thing is that female literacy rate increases across the districts along with the increase in total literacy rate.

Table 2: Literacy Rates (in %) in districts of Assam

District	Literacy Rate	Male Literacy Rate	Female Literacy Rate
Nagaon	72.37	76.51	68.07
Dhubri	58.34	63.10	53.33
Sonitpur	67.34	73.65	60.73
Cachar	79.34	84.78	73.68
Barpeta	63.81	69.29	58.06
Kamrup	75.55	81.30	69.47
Tinsukia	69.66	77.19	61.73
Dibrugarh	76.05	82.82	68.99
Sivasagar	80.41	85.84	74.71
Jorhat	82.15	87.63	76.45
Kamrup Metropolitan	88.71	92.13	85.07
Karimganj	78.22	84.12	72.09
Golaghat	77.43	83.56	71.09
Lakhimpur	77.20	83.52	70.67
Goalpara	67.37	71.46	63.13
Morigaon	68.03	71.90	64.04
Karbi Anglong	69.25	76.14	62.00
Baksa	69.25	77.03	61.27
Darang	63.08	67.87	58.04
Kokrajhar	65.22	71.89	58.27
Udalguri	65.41	72.58	58.05
Nalbari	78.63	84.36	72.57
Bongaigaon	69.74	74.87	64.43
Dhemaji	72.70	79.84	65.21
Hailakandi	74.33	80.74	67.70

Chirang	63.55	70.24	56.65
Dima Hasao	77.54	83.29	71.33

Source: Census Survey of India 2011

In case of educational attainment, completion of primary stage of education, continuation of school up to 15 years of stage etc. can be taken as basic indicators. Attainment of higher literacy rate alone does not make a community educationally advanced (Devi, 2013).

In Assam, however, after launching Sarba Siksha Abhiyan Mission, the gross enrolment ratio in schools has shown a positive picture. When the enrolment rates of class I-VIII of schools for general education in different states of India are compared, it is seen that the enrolment rates are comparatively higher in NER than some states of the rest of India like Bihar, Goa, UP and Chandigarh (Das, 2013). In her study Das (2013) found that in Assam, the gross enrolment ratio in class I-VIII of schools for general education is 83.54% whereas in case of girls, it is 84.90% and for boys, it is 82.21%. Again, as per DISE report 2011-12, the gross enrolment ratio at the primary level in Assam is recorded as 104.4% whereas for upper primary level, it is 96.8%. However, despite the increase in the number of children enrolled in schools, more than 1.19 lakhs children remain out of the ambit of education.

Although enrolment ratio in schools has shown apposite trend, at the same time the drop-out ratio, especially for girls, has revealed as a big obstacle. The average drop-out rate for girls has increased from 5% (2009-10) to 11.9% (2011-12) at primary level and from 13.5% (2009-10) to 14.3% (2011-12) at the upper primary level (DISE¹, 2011-12). The drop-out rates of both boys and girls in Assam remained higher than all India average from 2001 to 2011.

Table 3: Drop-out rates in Assam

Years	Primary		Upper Primary	
	Girls	Total	Girls	Total
2007-08	9.6	10.3	15.1	16.1
2008-09	7.9	8.8	14.4	15.6
2009-10	5.5	5.7	13.5	14.7
2010-11	7.2	8.3	14.4	15.2

2011-12	11.9	12.8	14.3	15.2
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Source: DISE/SSA

In case of secondary education, the GER of girls in secondary sections is computed as 52.4% (SEMIS², 2010-11) which is higher than national average (46.23%). Again, the state average drop-out rate for girls in class IX is 14.0% and in class X is 24.5%.

The enrolment of women in higher education in Assam is also low. In Assam, the GER of female in higher education is only 14.2% (AISHE, 2011-12) whereas in all India level it is 18.9%. Enrolment of women in Ph.D programme, M.Phil., Post-graduate degree and other diploma courses is also lower in Assam in compared to some other states of India. The Gender Parity Index (GPI) in higher education (18-23 years) is 0.98 which indicates poor educational status of females as compared to males in Assam.

Table 4: Enrolment at Various Levels of Higher Education in Assam (2011-12)

Ph. D		M. Phil		Post Graduate		PG Diploma	
Female	Total	Female	Total	Female	Total	Female	Total
721	1883	31	43	21697	41028	1080	2170

Source: AISHE 2011-12

Thus, from above discussion, it is clear that in Assam, there is a gender gap exists in attaining education and participation of girls at all stages of education is below 50% which is a matter of concern.

Main barriers of Women and Girls in Achieving Education:

There are various social, economical, geographical, political factors which may affect on education. Some of them are given below-

Poverty is a basic reason of poor enrollment of girls in schools. Being poor reduces the odds of attending school, especially for girls. Poor parents are generally not interested to spend their

money on educating their child, particularly on girl child. Rather they want to make their daughter eligible for domestic work.

Living in rural areas, particularly in remote areas also prevents girls from attending school. The people of remote areas are not aware of importance of education.

In some culturally conservative families of rural areas, parents have lack interest to provide formal education to their girls. The adolescent girls may be viewed as morally suspect if they continue going to school. The young age at marriage and the importance of preserving a girl's good reputation in such cultures lead to widespread withdrawal of females from school at puberty, particularly if they are attending coeducational schools (Khan, 1989). Again, some conservative parents do not want to send their daughters to school without female teachers.

Parents may value only the return to a child's education that comes back to them which may not come after marriage of their girl child. This can adversely affect on girls education.

Taking care of family members such as young siblings at home is one of the reasons that keep girls out of school. Again, some traditionally and culturally preservative families still believe that the sole occupation of women is to bear children, look after husband and children and thus be restricted to domestic work.

Availability of nearby institutions has a greater impact on females than on males. Travelling long distances may be a security concern for girls and women.

Girl children belong to minority community; scheduled tribe, scheduled caste etc. are less educated or non-educated. In Assam, school exclusion is considerably more prevalent among Muslim children, among older children from socially disadvantaged groups.

In case of achieving higher education, marriage is the main hurdle for women. Women's age of marriage often clashes with ph D programmes and women who have children during their postgraduate studies must interrupt their studies.

A study made by Abusaleh Shariff (2014), it is observed that in the age group of 22-35 years, only 8% men and 4% women have access to higher education in North Eastern region of India which is the lowest among all the regions of the nation. In his studies, he found that the North East has the least privatized higher education sector and is almost entirely dependent on Govt.-run or aided institutions. Again, the private institutions are quite costly and the poor students can't access it (Times of India, 2014).

Therefore, these are some important reasons of poor educational status of women in Assam.

Measures to Improve the Educational Status of Women:

Some suggestive measures to improve the educational status of women in Assam are given below-

People should be made aware of the importance of education on social, cultural and economic development of a nation. The government and NGOs can play an important role in this respect. It should be made mandatory for parents to send their girl children to school. In Assam, however, many schemes like Sarba Siksha Abhiyan Mission, Mid Day Meal Scheme, Chief Minister's special scholarship exam, distribution of bicycle among the girls of poor families, distribution of laptops and tablets to meritorious students, free eye check-up among students and such other types of schemes are developed by the Government to encourage girl child in attending school. The proper implementation and equitable distribution of such schemes is necessary for required result.

Poor families should be provided with proper incentives so that education becomes affordable for them. Government should provide scholarships to poor girls that may cover indirect as well as direct costs. Again, steps should be taken to eliminate tuition fees and such other fees in both public and private education institutions. In Assam, the current education minister has given the opportunity to get free admission into the institutions of higher education for poor students. Such types of initiatives inspire the poor parents to educate their siblings.

Public investment on education should be increased. Although private schools provide good education, but no country has developed without educating its people through a strong public education system.

Vocational and technical education should be developed among women to make them active in the field of learning and earning. This in turn make them self- dependent. To encourage the girls' education, the government can provide special loan, scholarships and other facilities to the girls for taking higher education and vocational education.

Steps should be taken by both government and NGOs to make schools more girl-friendly by strengthening community ties, hiring more women teachers, teaching in ways that encourage girls, providing sanitation etc. However, many efforts are under ways in the state.

The introduction of more female teachers, the establishment of girls-only schools especially secondary schools, provision of schools within walking distance in rural and urban areas, free and compulsory education at primary and secondary levels, provision of good quality education etc. are some initiatives that can encourage female education.

NGOs can play an active role in educating girl child. Various awareness programmes, workshops etc. should be conducted especially in remote and backward areas so that parents can realize the value of educating their girls. Street drama, Role Play etc. are better medium to convince the parents about importance of education.

Conclusion

Education is a fundamental right for all. No one can be deprived from it. But, in Assam, a large portion of women, especially in rural areas, is still deprived from this right. However, at the same time, significant achievement is attained in the field of education by some women in Assam. For instance, we have seen that in recently declared UPSC and APSC exams, some women from Assam are able to occupy top positions. These types of achievements will obviously create a positive impact on new generation. At last, we can say that along with government effort,

awareness and effort of common people are very necessary for educating girl child so that we can build a developed nation in real term.

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