

Women Empowerment and Human Rights of Women in India with Special Reference to Assam

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Introduction :

Women are an integral part of our society and constitute almost half of the total population. Women have an important role to play in every sphere of life. In Indian society women have seen many ups and downs in their life from the beginning. Though the Constitution of India provides equal opportunity for all, in our society we have seen a number of challenges before women.

The constitution of India, adopted in November 1949, contains several articles mandating equality and non-discrimination on the grounds of sex; however several laws that violate this principle continue to exist, particularly in the area of family law and personal law. So far there have been minor reforms in Hindu personal law, however, these changes have been motivated by political expediency and have resulted in the denial of women's equal rights.¹

Article 14 of the Indian Constitution ensures equality in political, economic and social spheres. Article 16 provides for equality of opportunities in matters of public appointment for all citizens. Article 15 prohibits discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex etc. Article 15 (3) of the Indian Constitution allows the State to make any special provision for women and children. Article 39(a) mentions that the State will direct its policies towards securing all citizens, men and women, the right to means of livelihood while Article 39 (c) ensures equal pay for equal work. Article 42 directs the State to ensure just and humane working conditions. The constitution imposes a fundamental duty on every citizen through Article 15 (A) (e) to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women. In reality we have seen a different picture, in many cases women are being deprived and neglected by the patriarchal society and there is the domination of male in society in our country and women have failed to realize their rights as provided by the constitution and the legal system.

Objectives :

The objectives of this article are -

To find out the social irritation that faced by women in participation in decision making, education, works etc. in India with special reference to Assam.

To find out how empowerment of women helps to realize their human rights.

Methodology :

In the process of the research, the researcher has followed analytical methods and secondary sources have been consulted.

Meaning of Women Empowerment :

Women empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building that leading to greater participation, to greater decision-making power and control and to transformative action and it is essentially a down to top process rather than a top-down strategy. The strategy for women empowerment should start from the grass-root level. The father of our nation Mahatma Gandhi while defining empowerment of women had described it as a situation "when women, whom we call abala become sabala, all those who are helpless will become powerful." Empowerment of women in a country like India is more difficult to define because different communities in the vast country have a long history of injustice and discrimination towards women. Women empowerment means that the women have the power or capacity to regulate their day to day lives in the social, political and economic terms. In other words, it refers to increase the spiritual, political, or economic strength of women.

Women have now not only found their place in work places but are also party to governance. In recent years there have been explicit moves to increase women's political participation. Women have been given representation in Panchayati Raj system as a sign of political empowerment. There are many elected women representatives at the village council level. At the central and state levels too women are progressively making a difference. Today, we have women Chief Ministers in five large states of India. The women's Reservation Bill is stated to further strengthen political participation.²

Empowerment of women indicates some aspects such as-

Having decision- making power of their own.

Having access to information and resources for taking proper decision.

Ability to exercise assertiveness in collective decision making.

Having positive thinking on the ability to make change.

Ability to change others perceptions by democratic means.

Increasing one's positive self image.

Human Rights and Women Empowerment :

Human rights are considered as the most essential rights for the development of human personality and protection of dignity. United Nation Declaration on Human Rights, Article-1

provides, "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and a conscience, and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." Human rights are universal, inalienable and invisible. No person or group of person can deprive another individual of her or his human rights. It encompasses civil, political, social, economic and cultural facets of human existence.

In our country the human rights scenario continues to be dismal and depressing. Women are being brutalized, commodified, materialized and subjected to inhuman exploitation and discrimination. Although constitutionally women are equal with men in their rights, but there is a difference between the constitutional rights and the rights enjoyed in reality by women. Most of the women are still ignorant about their own rights guaranteed by the constitution and the policy which are formulated only for them

Women are continuously facing discrimination both at visible and invisible levels and have been left on the margin. They have been unsuccessful in reaping the equal benefits of development. The main reason is their backwardness in educational and economic fields. Women in India lead their lives generally under the shadow of inequality and discrimination. Half of the population is prey to inequality, exploitation, backwardness and injustice and is deprived of human rights. There is a need for a change of values and behaviour in the society, a need for positive socio-cultural and economic empowerment and the will power and strong determination of women to join politics. Jawaharlal Nehru once said, "To awaken the people it is woman who must be awakened. Once she is on the move the family moves, the village moves, the nation moves."

Some of the main hurdles for the actual empowerment of India are ignorance and illiteracy. Among the real life problems that the grass-roots women face are lack of experience, stereotyped cultural attitudes, lack of confidence, lack of economic empowerment and illiteracy, burden of domestic chores and ignorance of procedures and the law, weak linkages between the government and other mechanisms, changing policy environment, lack of knowledge as to how to avail institutional support to address their issues.³

Empowerment is now increasingly seen as a process by which the one's without power gain greater control over their lives. This means control over material assets, intellectual resources and ideology. It involves power to, power with and power within. Some define empowerment as a process of awareness and conscientization, of capacity building leading to a greater participation, effective decision-making power and control leading to transformative action. This involves ability to get what one wants and to influence others on our concerns. With reference to women the power relation that has to be involved includes their lives at multiple levels, family, community, market and the state, importantly it involves at the psychological level women's ability to assert themselves and this is constructed by the 'gender roles' assigned to her specially in a cultural which resists change like India.⁴

Women can be brought at par with men only after providing them in practice all social, economic and political equality and equal rights and through educational empowerment. It is necessary for the protection of women's human rights that every woman is educated, made aware of available legal rights and in practice she is provided with her due legal rights. Education is the best instrument of bringing awareness in any society and by including them in the main stream of development. Primary education and girl's education require utmost attention because the real wealth of the nation is not in the banks but it is in the primary schools. At the same time women have to come forward to struggle for their rights. In fact the struggle for women's human rights is a struggle for human welfare and democracy. Democracy could only be strengthened after women empowerment. The establishment of real democracy in India is only possible when we bring men and women at equal pedestal in social, economic and political spheres.⁵

Social Irritation Faced by Women in Assam :

Indian society is still largely male dominated society and women are often looked down upon. The birth of a female child is often regarded as a disaster; female foeticide is common in some parts of India. When a male child is born everyone rejoices, but when a female child is born many seem dejected and crest-fallen, as if a tragedy has occurred.⁶

In most Indian households, girl child is discriminated and neglected for basic nutrition, education and health-care.

The overwhelming social discrimination against girl child affects her human rights from her birth or even before. In many communities and in rural areas an adolescent girl is married off by her parents around puberty. Early pregnancy, in turn, undermines her health, physical development and the health of the new born babies. A young and adolescent girl is denied the rights to education, depriving her of vital information regarding healthcare, nutritious food, immunization, proper upbringing of children, family planning and reproductive rights etc. thus leading to the second stage of bondage of her life - bondage much larger and more unbearable than years spent at parental home. The girl is treated as a transit passenger on her way to marital household and investing in her survival, safety and education is considered non-productive.⁷

In family, workplace, community and everywhere it is evident that women are exploited and discriminated and the act of violence in forms of aggression. In a paternal society a woman is treated no better than a slave. Women are deprived of means of production and have been restricted to the four walls of the home and are treated as a commodity. She has no independent identity and is subjected to all sorts of injustice, torture, and violence, maltreatment and exploitation both physical and sexual. Women most of the times are even deprived of some of the fundamental human rights and this denial are justified often in the name of tradition.

The long history of Assam is replete with several instances of women's bold and

strong roles in spite of their traditional roles in a particular family set up. Women of Assam also played a significant role in the freedom struggle too. Assam has innumerable examples of women who had shown excellence in different fields and who are at par with their male counterparts. Women have also played a significant role in politics.⁸

Despite these, however, the majority of women in general continue to live in a state of deprivation, ignorance and neglect in Assam, which has led to a situation where they are compelled to lag behind their counterparts elsewhere in the country. The gender difference in work participation, for instance, is considerably high in Assam (being 29) and is as bad as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Orissa. Even states like Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, which are supposedly lower-placed than Assam, have smaller gender gaps in work participation. Among the states of the Northeast too, Assam's position in this aspect is the worst.⁸

Similarly, infant mortality rate (IMR) in Assam (74 per 1000 live births) is also higher than the national average. It is even more alarming in the rural Assam, with 79.5 girl infants dying before completion of one year of age. Prevalence of anaemia among married women in Assam (69.7%) is also higher than the national average (51.8%). Likewise, the gross dropout rate of girls in Assam in the Class I to X stage is 77.92% (national average is 70.60%). Yet another alarming indicator is life expectancy at birth. Latest official statistics have revealed that while the national average of life expectancy among women stands at 66.91 years, in the case of women in Assam it is as low as 60.87 years.¹⁰

The above few indicators only speak of the deplorable state of women in Assam and these are the direct outcome of widespread ignorance among women, which again stems from lack of awareness and facilities to acquire basic knowledge and information. This has also led to lack of economic empowerment of women.¹¹

But, it is an established fact that once so advanced women members of our society are now in a disadvantageous position. Everywhere women are being left powerless, as compared to their male counterparts. Although the educated women belonging to the middle and upper middle classes are marching forward, yet those belonging to the lower or rural areas are still to know their basic rights.¹²

There are number of issues focused as irritation regarding women may be mentioned in the context of Assam. Some of them are-

Discrimination of women and work on the basis of sex.

Lack of access to education to girl child.

Rights violation in relation to marriage, family harmony.

Lack of property rights for women.

Sexual exploitation - at workplace, institutions.

Atrocities on women by police and armed forces during combating operations and investigations.

Lack of access to health care services (both family level and government level).
Domestic violence.
Cultural and belief systems militating against women.
Alienation of resources affecting women adversely.
Displacement of women due to 'development' projects.

Women Empowerment can Help in Realising Human Rights :

Education, employment opportunities, a supportive home and social environment are keys to women empowerment in India. Education is the greatest weapon in knowing their rights and how to protect and promote them. If girl children are educated, they have better career and employment opportunities in life and to fight against all kinds of discrimination, injustice and social irritations and gain self confidence, learn the life, technical and practical skills to demonstrate their capabilities and challenge stereotypes about women.

The 1986 National Policy on Education laid down, for the first time in the history of Indian education, a national curriculum framework as the basis for building the national system of education. Most of the common core elements identified in the policy are related to one or other dimension of human rights education. In Assam there is the urgent need of the human rights education. Human rights education comprising imparting information and knowledge, developing mental capabilities and physical skills and abilities, including value and attitudes, liberating minds and sensitizing conscience and moral responsibility.

Involvement of women in the political arena and in decision-making roles is an important tool for empowerment as well as monitoring standards of political performance at all level. However, in the present political process of entry into decision making political institutions, there is growing influence of money and muscle power, backroom dealings, communalization and criminalization. In the political arena, it may be seen that major impediments to free and fair political participation of women in Assam are marginalization due to disempowerment, patriarchy and criminalized politics. A well trend in the political scenario has been the growth of the strong grassroots mass movements which actively work towards empowering women through articulation of their need.

Women in the villages of Assam enjoy a respectable position in society as compared to women in the rest of the country, despite the fact that wife- beating, separations and unfair rules of the village, based on gender-bias do exist. In the field of agriculture women work as the marginal workers and in the area of livestock and forestry. In the urban areas of Assam, women have a relatively greater flexibility in choosing their professions. Yet, due to limited control and access over resources, women are still far from being at an equitable position.

North East India is region of a high degree of insurgency and underdevelopment . The violence has been devastating for the communities involved, but within community's women suffer most. Although, the status of women in the North East is comparatively better than

women of rest of India and have greater levels of mobility, economic autonomy and control over their labour. In Assam movement of for empowerment of women is almost as old as the freedom movement in this part of the country.

As Koffi Annan, former Secretary General of United Nations said once, "without education we cannot realize how people of other races and religions share the same dreams, the same hopes. Without education we cannot recognize the universality of human aims and aspirations". A growing consensus holds that appropriate human rights education can both help us to reduce human rights violation and contribute towards building up a free, just and peaceful society in various parts of the world.

In order to help girl child survival and reach their full potential, the Beijing Platform for Action recommended that governments, agencies and private sector to:

Eliminate all forms of discrimination against girl child;

Eliminate negative cultural attitudes and practices against girl child;

Promote and protect the right of girl child and increase awareness of her needs and potential;

Eliminate discrimination against girl in health and nutrituion;

Eliminate the economic exploitation of girl labour and protect girls at work;

Eradicate violence against girl child;

Promote the girl child's awareness of and participation in social, economic and political life.

Strengthen the role of the family in improving the status of the girl child.¹³

All forms of discrimination against the girl child and violation of her rights must be eliminated by undertaking strong measures both preventive and punitive within and outside the family. This would relate specifically to strict enforcement of laws against parental sex selection and the practices of female foeticide, female infanticide, child marriage, child abuse and child prostitution etc.

The year 2001 was declared as women empowerment year by government of India. There are different steps taken by the government of India regarding women empowerment. Some steps are-

Constitutional provisions.

Enactment of social legislations.

Enactment of labour legislation.

Women welfare in five years plans.

Reservation of representation.

Constitution of women commission or women cell.

Subsidized loan facilities.

Conclusion :

There should be special emphasis on the needs of girl child like removal of discrimination in the treatment of the girl child within and outside the family. Projection of a positive image to them, for elimination of child labour, there should be a special focus on girl child, special care should be taken to reduce gender disparities, and infant mortality and malnutrition, retention of girls in schools beside eliminate child labour. Mass campaigns need to be organized particularly in the villages in favour of survival of girl child and giving her human rights including education, health, nutrition etc., by creating awareness about the dangerous consequences which the society as a whole will have to face without the girl child, must be initiated to bring a positive change.

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