

# Higher Education for Girls in the North East India

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India is proud of a glorious history of higher education with the establishment of seats of higher learning in Takshasila and Nalanda where students thronged from far and wide. But with the passage of time, due to several foreign attacks and subjugation the tradition discontinued. The growth of the present system of higher education in India can be traced back to the later part of the 19th century when three universities were established in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras in 1857. These are milestones for the spread of higher education in India. But the question of higher education for girls was utterly neglected. In fact Wood's Despatch of 1854 recognised the need for primary education for girls in the British dominated India for the first time. Prior to that the Missionaries promoted primary schooling for girls in the early part of 19th century. A few philanthropists also advocated education for girls. But these sporadic attempts were not adequate for creating a favourable public opinion for female education. Hence higher education for girls was a distant dream in a society where girls were considered to be only mothers and housewives, not as a responsible citizen with equal rights and responsibilities like boys. As a result at the beginning of the 20th century the female literacy rate was very insignificant. Spread of education among girls is a later development due to various factors like social reforms of Aryya Samaj, Brahmo Samaj, Legal reforms like ban on sati and widow remarriage etc, upsurge in the struggle for independence specially women's participation in the non violence, non cooperation, Quit India movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, growth of women organisations etc. These are some of the contributory factors that created a favourable environment for spread of women education in India as well as in the North East. At the time of independence for every 100 boys in primary school, the number of girls was 36 in India. The corresponding figure in middle school stage was 22, at the secondary stage it was 14 and at the university stage there were 7 girls against every 100 boys. But significantly this rise in enrolment of girls in higher education was confined to urban areas.

## **Importance of Higher Education for Girls :**

It is evident that women play a significant role in socio economic development of a country. Women world wide constitutes half of the human population. If society is to develop, it must develop as a whole. No society can prosper by relegating half of the population in utter darkness of ignorance and social injustice like discrimination, superstition, economic deprivation etc. This proves to be more evident in the present context of the prevailing condition where knowledge is power. Today knowledge becomes the driving and determining factor for emerging society. Emergence and influence of knowledge economy in an ever expanding, free economy and competitive world becomes a reality of our fast changing time. In this context it is relevant to discuss the problems of higher education for girls.

India is focussing to emerge as a super power in the immediate future. Significant changes have already been taken place and we are almost nearer to the focussed goal. As we all know in order to realise the cherished dream we require knowledge and skill, not muscle power and money in a society in which information and technology are dominating in a free competitive world.

(a) India with more than hundred and twenty five crores of people is a country with the second highest human population. The future of India depends on how efficiently we become successful in transformation of our human beings into valuable human resources through meaningful education and training. Education and specially higher education without any discrimination on gender or caste or creed is a pre condition for ensuring development of a knowledge dominated economy in India including the North East.

(b) Education is recognized as a fundamental birth right. It is considered as a part of human right for both men and women. Higher education opens new dimensions of higher knowledge through research and creativity. As a part of human right it should be available to both boys and girls. Several International Conventions and Laws also envisaged higher education for girls for achieving gender equality.

(c) Empowerment of women may be fully realized through higher education. Equalising gender oportunities in Higher Education will lead to balanced social development. Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, our former President has rightly observed that : “Empowering women is a pre requisite for creating a good nation, when women are empowered, society with stability is ensured. Empowerment of women is essential as their value system leads to the development of a good family, good society and ultimately good nation.”

(d) The North East India is full of natural resources along with rich ethnical diversity with more than 225 ethnic tribes. Preservation of the biodiversity and pluralistic cultural identity of the region may be ensured through sensitive and educated women of the region. For women all over the world prove to be the driving force and torch bearers for such

ethnic and cultural identity.

### **Higher Education for girls in the North East in Pre Independence period :**

When we discuss about the condition of female education in the North East we must remember that prior to independence the geographical boundary of Assam extended to the whole of the North East excluding Manipur, Tripura and of course Sikkim which is the latest addition. So the status and position of higher education for girls in Assam at that time reflects the status of female education of the North East.

Facilities for higher education in the North East was totally absent till the beginning of the 20th century. Cotton college was established at Guwahati in 1901 and with the inception of the premier college, the facilities for higher education slowly started in the region. But unfortunately, girls were not allowed to be admitted in the Cotton College till 1922-23. So a few enthusiastic girls had to go to neighbouring states like West Bengal for pursuit of higher education. But there were very little facilities of communication at that time. It was also not easy to obtain permission and support for higher education from the conservative parents to go to neighbouring states for higher education. Social values were not in favour of higher education for girls. But in spite of all these challenges a few determined women went to Calcutta and came back successfully with commitment to expand higher education facilities in the North East. In Calcutta, the first girls high school in India was established by John Eliot Drink Water Bethune in 1849 which was subsequently developed into Bethune College in 1879. Late Hema Prova Das of Dibrugarh who passed F.A. from Calcutta University set an example and later on she served as the Head Mistress of the first girls' High School of Dibrugarh. Padmashree Indira Miri was another example who sacrificed her life for spread of education in Assam and Arunachal (then known as NEFA). She also pursued her higher education at Calcutta. Late Sukha Lata Duwara and Sudhalata Duwarah were first graduates from Assam. Raja Bala Das the founder principal of the Handique Girls' College of Guwahati, also completed her higher education from Calcutta. These eminent personalities and a few others are fore runners of higher education for girls in the North East. Prior to independence there were three girls colleges in the North East. Lady Kean College was established in Shillong in 1934 followed by St. Mary's College (1935) and Handique Girls' College in 1939. Thus the facilities for higher education for girls was slowly expanding.

### **Higher Education for Girls in the post independence period :**

In the post independent period we observe an upsurge of female education in India. Guwahati University was established in 1948. It is the first university of the North East. In 1951, the literacy percentage in India was 18.33 and male and female literacy rate were 27.16% and 8.86% respectively. It shows that there is a huge gap of 19% difference in male female literacy rate. Realising the need for education, several schemes and policies were

formulated for expansion of education in Independent India. As a result the literacy p.c. rose to 73% in 2011 and male and female literacy rate rose to 80.09% and 64.06% respectively. Many national and international conventions and their recommendations have resulted in this phenomenal development. The gap between male female literacy rate is slowly narrowing down. The same trend of of positive expansion is also evident in the growth of literacy in the North Eastern states. The following table shows the growth of female literacy in the North East in the last three decades -

**Table I**  
**Trends in literacy rate in the North East 1991-2011**

States	1991			2001			2011		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Arunachal Pradesh	42	52	30	54	64	44	67.7	73.7	59.6
Assam	53	62	43	63	71	55	73.2	78.8	67.3
Manipur	60	72	48	71	80	61	79.8	86.5	73.2
Meghalaya	49	53	45	63	65	60	75.5	77.2	73.2
Mizoram	82	86	79	89	91	87	91.6	93.7	89.4
Nagaland	62	68	55	67	71	62	80.1	83.3	76.7
Sikkim	57	66	47	69	76	60	82.2	87.3	76.4
Tripura	60	71	50	73	81	65	87.04	92.2	83.1
All India	52.21	64.13	39.23	65.38	75.96	54.28	74.04	82.14	65.46

*Source : Register General of India, GOI*

#### **Enrolment of girl students in Higher Education :**

Enrolment of girls at higher education shows a rising trend in recent times. Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of 18-23 age group in India in 2013-14 is 23.0% GER for boys is 23.9% while it is 22% for girls. Girls constitute 44% of 27.5 million students of the age group. There are 43 central Universities, 285 State Universities, 110 Private Universities and about 40,000 colleges where the youths of our country have access to higher education. India proposed for 6% investment of G.D.P. in education and out of this public expenditure in higher education comes close to 1% of Gross Domestic product. It has led to the aggressive emergence of private sector in secondary and higher education both at college and university level including professional colleges. The number of private higher education institutes increased by about 60% during five years from 2007-2012. This expansion of private sector is the result of globalisation and liberalisation policy. Growth of private sector quite naturally has

raised the cost of higher education. Education now a days becomes a commodity which can be purchased by those who are privileged with money. As a result the economically unprivileged students are deprived of quality education in spite of their merit. Weaker sections of the society specially the women, S.C., S.T. students usually belong to the less privileged group and have less access to higher education. Unprecedented growth of private sector in higher education in India is beyond imagination. Along with equity it has threatened the much desired quality and excellence in higher education.

In fact India is still far behind of many developed countries in respect of higher education. In Canada 88% of the youths are in higher education system while it is 80% in U.S.A. and Australia and 54% in U.K. India has fixed the target for India at 25% enrolment by 2015 through expansion of colleges and universities. But we are still behind the target (23% in 2013-14). For social, political and economic development there is no other alternative but to raise the quality of life for millions of people through expansion of quality higher education including women's easy access to it.

Position of higher education for girls in the North East is not totally different from India. Gross enrolment ratio (GER) in higher education in 2013-14 of 18-23 age group along with teacher pupil ratio in the North East India are shown in the following table.

**Table No. 2**

States	All categories			SC			ST			Pupil Teacher Ratio (Regular mode)
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	
Arunachal Pradesh	25.7	26.6	26.1	-	-	-	33.0	32.3	32.6	32
Assam	16.5	15.2	15.8	17.4	16.0	16.7	17.2	16.9	17.1	21
Assam	16.5	15.2	15.8	17.4	16.0	16.7	17.2	16.9	17.1	21
Manipur	37.9	37.6	37.7	67.9	56.0	61.9	24.6	25	24.8	21
Meghalaya	19.7	18.9	19.3	45.4	51.5	48.3	13.7	16.8	15.3	17
Mizoram	23.7	22.7	23.2	97.3	127.4	108.1	24.4	23.1	23.8	14
Nagaland	16.9	13.9	15.4	-	-	-	12.3	13.8	13.1	15
Sikkim	26.4	29.3	27.8	31.6	20.2	25.7	17.1	25.8	21.5	17
Tripura	17.9	12.9	15.4	1.6	1.1	1.4	1.1	0.7	0.9	24
All India	23.9	22.0	23.0	17.7	16.4	17.1	12.5	10.2	11.3	21

*Source : Report of AISHE 2013-14*

The table shows of all the states in the North East, Manipur has highest GER of girls of 18-23 age group. In Manipur, Mizoram, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh GER for girls are higher than national average of 23.0%. Assam and Nagaland will have to chalk out new strategies to be at least at par with national average if not higher. For it is known to all that higher education has direct impact in increasing productivity, raising the quality of life, increasing longevity with better health facilities, increasing political participation and leadership. India aspires for 33% reservation for women in political system. But our representation in the legislation is not more than 15% even today. Higher education may make her voice audible and assertive.

To ensure higher education for girls some humble suggestions may be mentioned below. These suggestions though particularly targeted for North East may be applicable to the whole of India.

(1) The North East should address gender parity as a first priority in the policy of higher education.

(2) Distance Education and I.C.T. (Information & Communication Technology) will provide easy access to higher education for girls. Existing facilities should be fully explored along with new modes of distance education.

(3) As all earlier commissions on Women Education have suggested, concession of fee and scholarship facilities to be expanded to deserving and needy girl students.

(4) Curricular interventions to address the problem of higher education for girls is to be ensured. Job oriented, area specific, flexible professional courses are to be offered.

(5) Entrepreneurship development through vocation, skill based programme are to be specially designed and promoted for girls to provide incentive for higher education.

(6) Good transport facilities, easy bank loan, hostel facilities in rural area, appointment of lady teachers, to ensure safety are to be provided.

(7) Career counselling and placement service specially for girls should be provided in higher educational institutions. Reservation for girls in the job market wherever possible are to be made.

(8) Girls in higher education should be given special incentives in the form of doctoral or post doctoral scholarship to pursue their research.

In the North East girls in higher education have already excelled in their performance and secured better job opportunities in all sectors from health to administration. But their number is very limited.

Social injustice in the form of superstition are still prevailing. The women of the North East will have to fight for the cause of justice till all our sisters are fully equipped with knowledge power.

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