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HIGHER EDUCATION OF RURAL WOMEN IN ASSAM: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

Education is one of the most crucial indices of socio-economic development of a society. It should transform human beings to human resources. Higher education, in particular, is the main instrument for such development and change. So it is necessary to access to higher education should be available to every citizen of the country regardless of gender or caste . It is very important for the development of a society or a nation to give the importance on women in all spheres of life, like economy, education, health etc. Without the development of women, no developed society can be imagined. Education is a potent tool in the emancipation and empowerment of women. Moreover, educated women can play an important role in building the nation, human capital and the overall socio-cultural and economic development of a country to make it sustainable. Through higher education, they can also possess basic scientific outlook and commitment to the ideals of patriotism, democracy, secularism, peace and development. In this study an attempt has been made to understand the main hindrances of rural women in achieving higher education, specially in Assam as well as provides some remedial measures.

Keywords: Higher education, Women, Rural areas, Assam

Introduction: The development of a nation largely depends upon the qualitative and quantitative development of its manpower responding to the fast changing society. Education plays a catalytic role in human development and social change, while higher education provides an opportunity to reflect on the holistic, social, economic, cultural, moral and spiritual aspects of humanity. Education can be considered as a key ingredient in the overall development of our country and its large diversified population. It is called as a process of human resource development. It is the process which can convert the individual into a resource by

helping them to develop and express their innate potentialities. Today it is seen that the human civilization has changed from agricultural society to cybernetic age where knowledge is considered as capital. Now we are living in a knowledge-based society and knowledge-based global world where knowledge is a great power, economy and strength of an individual and asset of a nation. In this knowledge-based society, women must be educated and must take a leadership role in various sectors like politics, societal development, professional and international affairs. Women constitute almost half of the total population of every society who can determine the fate of growth and development of the society. Although they are representing nearly 50 percent of the total population but they contribute more than that in the development of the society. But it is unfortunate that since time immemorial there have a strong bias against women and thereby there is a tendency to deny equal socio-economic opportunity for them. This neglecting attitudes towards women is prominent in many respects particularly in the field of education also. But it is realized that education is the most powerful tool that can break the pattern of gender discrimination and bring drastic changes for women in developing countries as well as underdeveloped ones. Therefore, it is very important to give women a good quality education in a free environment which can make them aware of their rights and duties, understand the basic concepts of health, nutrition, family planning as well as can make them to contribute in the process of nation building in the same way as men do. For this, women should be exposed to the higher education sector and its infinite opportunities.

Objectives of the study: The objectives of the study are—

1. To find out the major problems of rural women in achieving higher education in Assam.
2. To give more measures for solving these problems for the upliftment of the rural women in Assam.

Methodology: The study is descriptive in nature. The study is compiled with the help of secondary data. The data have been collected from various books, journals and other relevant sources.

Major Findings and Discussion: Before independence, there were a few agencies that were controlling the higher education system in India. At the time of independence, there were only 25 universities, 700 colleges, 1500 teachers in the colleges and universities and we had about 1,00,000 students in higher education. But at present, India has the third largest higher education system in the world. It has its strength of higher education institutes as follows: As of now India has total 700 institutions of higher education out of which it has 44 Central universities, 306 State universities (public), 154 State universities (private), 129 Deemed universities (private and public) and 67 institutes of national importance like the IIT, IISC, etc. There are also around 35,539 affiliated colleges all over India. The number of students in higher education is about 16 million which amounts to a Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of about 13 percent. In spite of the phenomenal growth of higher education in our country, the GER is very low compared to the developing and developed countries in the world.

In case of Assam, at the time of independence, there were only 6 General Degree Colleges (Cotton College, JB College, GC College, Nagaon College, DHSK College and Darrang College). There was no medical or engineering college in Assam. But at present there are about 450 general degree colleges and about 4.50 lakh students are pursuing undergraduate programmes in these colleges. At the time of independence of our country, there was no university in Assam. Now we have 2 Central and 10 State universities in Assam. The number isn't sufficient in comparison to the number of State universities in other developed states in our country. In Assam we can also boast of 3 private universities against 16 in Rajasthan, 15 in Uttar Pradesh, 14 in Himachal Pradesh and 9 in Gujarat. As per the UGC Report on Higher Education in India-2008, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education is 8.8 percent in Assam which is below the national rate of 10.8 percent.

The Indian constitution provides equal rights and opportunities for men and women and also some special provisions for the upliftment of their socio-economic and political status. In spite of the facilities enshrined in the Indian constitution and the several measures to improve and expand the system of higher education adopted by the government, the rate of women education in rural areas in Assam is very poor. The educational attainment of women in Assam can be interpreted through the female literacy rate and female enrolment rate at different stages of education. According to the census report 2001, the literacy rate is 63.25 percent in Assam as against 64.8 percent in India. While the rate of male literacy is 71.28 percent, female literacy rate stands at 54.61 percent. As per the census report of 2011, the average literacy rate in Assam is 73.18 percent, among them male literacy rate is 78.81 percent and the female literacy rate is 62.27 percent. But if we look on the differences in case of literacy rate in urban and rural areas in Assam, we can bring out a different picture. As per the census report 2011, 86 percent people lives in rural areas and only 14 percent people lives in urban or semi-urban areas. However, the average literacy rate in urban area is 88.47 percent in which male and female are 91.81 percent and 84.94 percent respectively. Where as the average literacy rate in rural area is 69.34 percent, in which the male literacy is 75.4 percent and female literacy rate is 63.03 percent. From this data we have seen that the women of rural areas are deprived from their basic constitutional and fundamental right, which is right to education. In such a situation, it is an urgent need to give much attention in the expansion of higher education among the rural women in Assam.

Women, mostly in rural areas represent more than two-third of the world's illiterate adults. Still now we have seen that in the rural areas, more or less girls are considered as burdens by their parents. Their education ceased to be of much importance because after marriage the girls are going to the house of father-in-law with all their necessity of new lives. Generally, most of the people of rural areas are illiterate. There are several causes for much illiteracy in the rural areas of Assam compared to urban areas.

Problems: It is observed that the rate of female participation in higher education is very low and slow. In rural areas the women aren't receiving enough educational attention as their male counterparts due to several factors.

1. **Poor economic condition of parents:** The poor economic condition of parents has always handicapped the desirable progress of qualitative and quantitative higher education of women in Assam. Assam is primarily an agrarian economy and nearly 70 percent of the total population is dependent on agriculture and allied sectors. Economically the rural people aren't sound, so they can't afford the all cost of higher education. The financial hindrance is most significant for creating problem for higher education of women.
2. **Lack of proper education:** Lack of proper education is the main obstacle of women education. Though the government might have many plans and facilities towards educating the girls in rural areas but despite all we haven't been able to improve the standard of women education as expected. Even today, it is seen that especially in rural areas the general perception is that boys are superior to girls and with this perception and attitude girls are given less attention in comparison to boys.
3. **Rapid population growth:** Rapid population growth causes the rural illiteracy. Most of the rural areas of Assam, there are basically found limited educational institutions for girls, which stands as a main problem for women education. There are no sufficient educational institutions for the expansion of higher education as compared to the girl students in rural areas of Assam. So a few brilliant girls are able to get the chance to take higher education.
4. **Early marriage system:** The early marriage of girls also compel them to dropout their education. In some rural areas of Assam, the parents have the idea that after HSLC or HS, the girls should get marry. After marriage, the family members or husband don't allow them to go for education and they are busy in their household works and deprived from higher education.
5. **Conservative mind of the rural people:** Even in the 21st century, the rural people have the idea that girls are a burden rather than a blessing for their family. In regards of the higher education of girls, most of the parents in rural areas are hesitated to send their girls to abroad or other place of distant for higher study. It is because of the physical safety of the girls, especially when they have to travel a long distance to educational institutions and fear of sexual harassment.
6. **Social barriers:** Due to some negative cultural and societal attitude, religious prejudices, orthodox beliefs and traditions, the girls are confined to the boundary of the households. Even today, the people of rural areas are unsecular in mind. They don't support their girls for higher education together with other religion, caste and class.
7. **Medium of instruction:** Medium of instruction is another major problem for the students of higher education in rural areas. Most of the educational institutions from primary to college level follow the medium of instruction is regional language. But the medium of instruction in higher education is English in many disciplines. So the students of rural areas are failed at the time of selection for a job or a seat in higher education institutions.
8. **Joint and bigger family size:** Due to the joint and bigger family size, the girls of the rural areas haven't get the priority to take higher education. All the children of the family deserve some opportunity, but

the parents want to send their boys for higher education for the sources of income and security in future. But the girls are staying at home to perform the household activities.

9. Lack of proper infrastructure: The infrastructure facilities to meet the demand of the increasing number of students in the field of higher education, there is no proper infrastructure to cater to these demands.
10. Lack of higher educational institutions for women: Lack of women higher educational institutions is another problem of higher education. The initiatives of the government is pitiable in this regard. Generally the higher educational institutions are located in urban areas and due to conservative mind of parents the girls aren't allowed to stay outside the home.

Remedial suggestions: It is observed that the women participation in higher education is still much lower in comparison to their counterpart in rural areas of Assam. The following measures are made for promoting women participation in higher education in rural areas:

1. The mentality of the people of rural areas should be changed. They must be given equal opportunities to their girls as that of boys, especially in case of education.
2. More educational institutions, technical institutions for women should be established which would help them to pursue higher education.
3. Government should provide special scholarship, fellowships, financial assistance for girls and bank loans etc. to encourage them in higher education.
4. Educational infrastructure specially access to computer, libraries, classroom etc. should be constructed for making a good learning environment.
5. Guidance and counseling should be provided to girls students and their families to encourage and create awareness among the rural people about higher education.
6. In co-educational institutions of higher education in rural areas, equal treatment should be given to both boys and girls.
7. Emphasis should be given to adopt modern technology based education system in the secondary and higher secondary schools in the rural areas of Assam.
8. There has to create a secured environment without any fear of sexual harassment which may help the girls student to go for higher education.
9. More emphasis should be raised on English language and communication skills.
10. The trend of early marriage system should be withdrawn which oftenly hamper the girls to pursue higher education.

Conclusion: From the above study it can be concluded that gender inequality still prevails in some rural areas of Assam. It can be changed from root level only by changing the mentality of the people. Education for rural women has significant role in all round development of a society. The government should improve the infrastructural facilities for women education so that they can easily participate in higher

education. Besides, the establishment of higher educational institutions in rural areas can help them for attaining higher education. Only higher education can prepare them to face the present world of opportunities and challenges.

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