



Socio-Cultural Norms And Gender Dynamics: Unveiling The Realities For Women In North- Eastern Region Of India With Special Reference To Assam

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Abstract

Although women in northeastern India may appear to have a higher status than women in other regions of the nation, the reality is that traditional customs and practices however subject women to several forms of discrimination. Despite the seeming absence of overtly discriminatory practices, the harsh reality is that severe gender-based discrimination still exists, mostly due to deeply rooted traditions and norms. Drawing from secondary sources, this paper seeks to provide insights into how these practices impact the socio-economic lives of women in northeastern region, with a special focus on Assam. By doing so, paper aims to highlight the ways in which these traditions create and maintain inequalities based on gender, eventually imprisoning women inside the boundaries of traditional practices.

Key words: women, gender socialization, gender discrimination, north-eastern region, Assam.

1. Introduction

The North East region (NER) comprises eight states, including Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura (commonly known as 'Seven Sisters') and 'brother' state Sikkim. It has a land surface of 262,230 square kilometers and a population of 38.9 million people from various ethnic and cultural groups. The region is a mixture of hills and plains. The hills account for about 70 per cent area and accommodate about 30 per cent of population of the region and the plains constituting the remaining 30 per cent

of area hold about 70 per cent of its population (Nayak, 2010;Cited in Samantroy,).The North Eastern Region has been a haven for many people belonging to various castes, religions, and ethnic groups in various historical epochs. However, the North Eastern Region is home to over 200 of the 635 tribal communities in India, most of whom live in the hilly states such as, Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Arunachal Pradesh. The tribal population constitutes about one-fourth of the population in this region.

Despite its abundant natural resources, the region has remained largely underdeveloped due to poor infrastructure and limited connectivity. The region is connected to the rest of India through a narrow stretch of land called the 'chicken's neck' and needs infrastructure to support and ensure significant investments and developmental aids. The primary reason of poverty and underdevelopment in the North Eastern Region is the indigenous people self satisfying livelihood way of production, which is made worse by the absence of atmosphere that fosters growth. However, Creating gainful employment opportunities is the single most critical problem in the North Eastern Region, as it still presents the combined outcome of dominance of subsistence agrarian economies, poor industrial base, lack of infrastructure, significant dependence on public sector employment, political insurgency and violence, and gross negligence by the central and state governments towards overall development.

Besides that, Northeast India has a rich cultural legacy and a homogenized culture. Women in the region are perceived to be more liberal due to tribal and indigenous culture. They are believed to be equal partners with their male counterparts in most aspects of life. However, gender studies provide a different picture. Shiv Kumar's 1996 study on gender achievement in India's north-eastern states found Assam in 10th place out of 16 major states. Insurgency has been a part of daily life in the region for decades, with women bearing the brunt. Women play a crucial role in the human community, and gender disparity is a global phenomenon. Northeast India, known for its diverse culture and material traits, has a unique opportunity to advance unity and integration. However, due to the lack of resources and privileges, women in tribal societies experience prejudice. Despite this, women play an significant role in the growth of families and society.

India, as described by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, is characterized by oneness in diversity (the phase he termed as 'unity in diversity') based on differences in race, religion, language, basic values, and culture. The North-East Region comprises eight states, each with its own unique linguistic and cultural practices, kinship roles, history, ancestry, beliefs, and life styles passed down through generations. Though it is commonly observed that women's role in socio-economic and cultural aspects is not well centered as they are deprived to participate such leadership role in the community which man does,(Jamir,2021)Women in Northeast India and India are often treated differently in society, including education, health care, political participation, social, cultural, and economic matters. This inequality is particularly evident in traditional societies where women are worshipped as goddesses in temples and are beaten up by their husbands. Shashi Deshpande, an Indian writer, argues that-women have been derogated in patriarchal society, with women's 'proper place' and identity not recognized. Gender is socially constructed that referring to the distinction between male and female including social and religious restriction in society. Women status in society is directly linked to social and cultural norms, stages of economic development, educational levels, perspective towards women, social and religious taboos, women's

awareness, and political participation. Mitra Phukan, an English novelist from the Northeast, highlights the discrimination of gender in traditional societies, including the prohibition of women participating in funeral processions and lighting the dead body in cremation grounds. Rukmini, in her novel, feels trembling about how male-dominated society has neglected women who always thinks of her husband, children, and family members. Patriarchal society of this region views women as inferior to men, believing that birth is a root of annoyance and that giving birth to a son is dignified. This belief has led to women's exploitation and victimization by men, leading to a revolt against the marginalization of women. Thus it is evident that, women in this region face significant challenges in achieving equal status in education, health care, political participation, and other aspects of life.

2. Methodology

The paper is based on secondary sources of data and required information are collected from books, research articles, e-journals etc. The objective of this paper is to understand the status of women in North-Eastern Region of India with special focus on Assam.

3. The Concept of Gender and its Relationship in Society

Gender is a crucial aspect of social relations, defining the social classification of men and women as masculine and feminine (Oakley, 1972). These roles are determined by traditional practices, institutions, customs, and beliefs. Gender norms are exceedingly difficult to modify due to the threat they pose to male supremacy, which manifests itself via the oppression and discrimination of women (Borah, 2019). Women's contemporary subjugation, according to Nivedita Menon, is a result of social and cultural norms, ideologies, and institutions that ensure women's material and ideological exploitation (gender). Feminists use this argument to challenge the conventional wisdom that the division of labour is based on gender and is, thus, biologically inert (Menon, 2008; cited in Borah, 2019). Over time, the model was expanded to include two more dimensions. Veena Mazumdar categorised it as-a) the degree to which women have true authority over their own lives, and b) how much influence they have on decision-making processes and how successful they are in positions of power and authority.

Feminist scholars argue that power and control determine women's lower status, often due to patriarchal ideologies. This feeling of powerlessness is the root of the absence of faith or confidence. In societies where men are seen as superior, women are expected to demonstrate their weakness and subjection to men. Sen's 'capability approach' suggests that true freedom is only possible if individuals have the flexibility to live their life (Iversen, 2007). However, it is challenging to reconcile this with the ongoing disparity in power in between the men and women.

In northeast India, patriarchal societies are prevalent, with men dominating resources and considered superior to women. Traditional gender roles significantly influence gender relationships. Tribes in the region have a history of warfare and headhunting, making it essential for youth to ensure peace and security. Bachelors' dormitories

served as training centers for young men, teaching them war techniques, traditions, etiquette, and religion (Dena, 2008; Sikdar, 2009; cited in Buongpui, 2013.). However, women and girls were not allowed to enter these facilities. Despite the removal of these practices, the attitude towards women remains 'benevolent subordination' (Buongpui, 2013). Gender socialization in the region is shaped by the deeply rooted culture of patriarchy, which teaches children their gender roles from birth. Thus, Gender socialization affects self-concepts of women and men, their social and political attitudes, perceptions of others, and relationships with others (Anderson and Howard, 2008).

From an early age, children in this region learn gender roles, with girls socialized into household chores such as cooking, fetching water, washing dishes, and cleaning the house (Buongpui, 2013). Boys are taught maintenance chores like looking after fields and cutting firewood, while Girls are expected to stay at home and care for their family, while boys are expected to work outside, illustrating the 'gender-stereotypical roles' (ibid). This process continues throughout a girl's life, with her husband being expected to manage the household. Men show their masculinity by not interfering in household chores, viewing it as a shameful act and underlining the patriarchal notion of men. This negative attitude underlines the patriarchal nature of men.

4. Socio-Cultural Norms that Portrays Women as Inferior Being

Tribal societies in northeast India have a predominantly negative portrayal of women, with various taboos and phrases that reflect the marginalization of women in society. For instances, Zeliangrong Naga men believe that sleeping with their wife before hunting may bring bad fortune to the whole group, while Zeme Naga males are forbidden to touch the meat of an animal killed by a woman. Tangkhuls in Manipur have gender taboos such as not yelling in public, climbing over roofs, and walking below a woman's clothes line. Oral traditions reflect the broad spectrum of marginalization of women in society, with phrases and sayings indicating that women were not given the same status. For example, Hmar women are treated with traditional disrespect is reflected in the sayings that, *Nuhmei varin tuikhur ral a kai ngai nawh*, which means that the wisdom of a woman does not go beyond the bank of a river (Buongpui,2013). According to Rose Nembia (2008) ,women in the traditional Garo society are teased with the proverb that , just as a goat is without teeth, in the same way a woman lacks brain. The Mayon Nagas of Manipur considers women as 'having no principles' since they are thought to have no permanent clan, because their clan merges with her husband's after marriage (Buongpui, 2013). According to Zehol, the Khasis in Meghalaya also believed that 'if the hen crows, the world including the family will change for the worst' (Zehol, 2006) .Such type of Sayings indicate substantiate the historical role of women and justify distorted gendered practices in society and 'reflect the board spectrum of women's marginalization in society (Chakraborty, 2008). They depict patriarchal ideologies and lower women's status, weakening their role within the family and denying them the wisdom and reasoning power, both in private and public domains.

5. Status of tribal women in North Eastern Region

Status inequality is a prevalent issue in the Northeast region of India, where women are expected to fulfill domestic roles and are often disadvantaged due to patriarchal traditions. Women in these regions are often neglected, as families are very important role in maintaining patriarchal support in this region. Tribal women status may mostly be defined by their roles or duties in society, which are largely set by system of descent. The majority of the Indian tribes are patrilineal expects tribes like the Khasi, Jaintia, Garo, and Lalung of Meghalaya in the North-East are matrilineal in nature.

The status of a person often depends on the system of authority they enjoy in the community. Patriarchy, held through the male line, is called patriarchy, while matriarchy is held through the female line. For example, the Khasi tribe in Meghalaya Northeast has a unique status for women, with their daughters inheriting their mother's property and men moving to their wives' homes after marriage. While bringing on the contrary anthropologists view that the existing ongoing .They are often believed to follow matriarchy, but in reality, property is inherited through the mother's line, with the final authority of the household vesting with the mother's brother. Recent threat of men's rights group to establish a patrilineal society and a system to remove unfair means of giving special privileges on women has emerged, which raising the possibility that matrilineal practices and tradition might disappear soon (Jamir,2021).

Women in the North-East region are encouraged to stay within patrilineal limits, and their inheritance of property is forbidden. This gender intolerance is particularly evident in the Naga society, where women are expelled from inheriting parental property, even if they are considered the sole child of their parents .On the other hand, a widow woman can inherit her husband's property but with certain rules being abided to her, each community have their varied rules and regulations maybe certain community compels a widow women to hold the property of her deceased husband until the child is grown (ibid).

The colonial encounter of the British Raj in India and the invasion of foreign missionaries in the region have greatly influenced the development of education and gender equality. While girls were sent to day schools, formal education allowed women to identify discrimination within patrilineal limits. However, girls' education may also be limited due to work demands within the family and marriage market.

In India Tribals which are known as adivasis, comprises around 8.2% of the national population in India and are primarily found in the central and North-East parts of the country. The sex ratio of tribal's in India during 2011 showed 990 females per 1000 males, while it was 940 females among the general population. Women discrimination, differentiation in terms of occupation, as well as status and hierarchical social ordering are typically not present in tribes.

Tribal women in India are valued for their hard work and their customary role in marriage. However, as the capitalist economy gain hold, their economic value is declining, which gives rise to dowry system. Among Jaunsaris, new husbands are required to pay suit money or the amount paid as bride-price by the former husband to the girl during previous marriage (Sougajam,2017). To repay this money, the wife is often sent away

seasonally to cities like Dehradun, Meerut, Sahranpur, Moradabad, Lucknow, and Delhi to work as prostitutes (ibid).

Tribal women in the North-East are well known for their weaving skills, but as result of commercialization, they have lost control over designs, which are often inherited from their mothers. They also receive jewelry from their mother, although customary laws forbid them to own land. Mizo women in Mizoram are highly discriminated against regarding inheritance of property, as they never receive the authority over their own land.

Certain tribes in North-East India are proficient in doing business. For instances, Khasi women running shops in markets of Shillong and Nongpoh in Meghalaya and many women in Mizoram managing huge shops and large businesses (ibid). They are however, essentially irrelevant in the political spheres. Tribal women have no place in village councils or traditional panchayats, yet even in these instances, they are governed by husbands or family members who were already wealthy and powerful in the locality.

5.1. Status of women in Assam

In Assam, women's status is high compared to other Indian states, with the absence of dowry as a custom in marriage. However, women often receive lower wages, poor health, low education, and lower skills than men. They are considered vulnerable and marginalized in various aspects of life, including education, social situations, economic activities, and politics.

The population of Assam is 26.66 million, with 12.85 million females. The sex ratio in Assam is 932 females per 1000 males, increasing to 954 females per 1000 males in 2011. Although girls in Assam are more liberal and free from social constraints, there is still a significant gender disparity in human development sectors. The literacy rate in Assam is 64.28, with male literacy at 71.93% and female literacy at 56.03%. However, the male-female gap in literacy remains perceptible, but it is declining over time. It is a certain incontrovertible fact that the status of girls in Assam is that the worst in terms of their position making bodies (Saikia,2020). Furthermore, there was not seen any political participation of Assamese women during the 19th century. Even during the mutiny of 1828 by the Ahom nobles and the revolt of 1857, there is no record of the major role played by Assamese women (Kumar, 2017). During that time, there was a restriction on the participation of women in the movement. Even in the period before 1915, there was no organized movement for women's participation in social and political affairs. So, it can be said that, women role and position in politics was quite low during the 19th century. However, the establishment of 'Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti' in 1915 marked the emergence of women's organizations in the Brahmaputra Valley (ibid).

The north-east region of India is often seen as gender-neutral, with Assamese society seen as a symbol of dignity and status. However, the domestic space remains vulnerable for Assamese women, as men dominate the domestic sphere, leading to patriarchal violence and torture. This is a common reality in Assam, where domestic violence is considered inevitable for women. The murder of a pregnant woman in Sarulah village, Soalkuch, in November 2020, failed to gain mainstream media attention, and the case was not adequately addressed by political representatives. The pregnant mother was subjected to a barbaric physical assault by her husband's family

demanding dowry. The murder brings attention to the continuous fight for gender equality in the north-east region of India.

In Assam, women face social disabilities due to societal expectations of perfection. Women are often labeled as 'too thin', 'too dark', or 'too short', highlighting the need for understanding that body characteristics are not a choice (Sinha, et al., 2021). In many Assamese societies, women are often forced to live separately, eat, sleep, and enter temples during periods. Society doesn't recognize that body image is a biological process and shouldn't be hidden. Stereotypes about women, such as being born perfect for marriage, are a significant factor in discrimination between men and women. Divorced or widowed women often face humiliation from society, while men are treated differently. Removing these stereotypes can help improve the lives of women in Assam.

Furthermore, the post-independence era in Assam has significantly impacted women's roles and status, even in rural areas. Village women traditionally perform tasks like de-husking of paddy and the rearing of silk-worms for silk, (such as, Eri and Paat-Muga). However, with the spread of education, women in rural areas with salaried jobs are now given an important position in the family and enjoy better socio-economic status. Women who perform household chores and economic activities for the family are sometimes consulted in decision-making, but due to limited control over and access to resources, women remain far from an equitable position. Most women in Assam are marginal workers, with home-based crafts and weaving contributing to some earnings. In urban areas, exposure and education have given women greater flexibility, but employment avenues remain limited, often forcing them to work for small remuneration. In this context, strategic approaches for improving women's status in Assam can help address these issues and improve the situation for women in the state. By addressing the gender disparities and promoting capacity building among women, Assam can work towards a more equal and prosperous society for all.

In Assam, there are various schemes for women, both centrally and state-sponsored, focusing on issues of employment, education, health, and more. The Swayamsiddha scheme, launched in 2001, is an integrated scheme for women's empowerment, replacing the Mahila Yojana and the Mahila Sambridhi Yojana. By giving direct access to control over resources through a constant process of mobilization and confluence of all continuing sectoral programmes or project of government of India and other institution, it seeks to bring about overall emancipation of women.

Under Government of India, Ministry of Women and Child Development launched the Swadhar scheme, which provides basic needs (such as- shelter, food, and clothing) to marginalized women or girls living in harsh conditions without having access to social and financial support. It also provides emotional support, counseling, and rehabilitation through education, awareness, skill upgradation, and personality development through behavioral training.

The National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) has introduced various schemes for women, such as Janani Suraksha Yojana, Mamoni, Majoni, Mamata, National Bowari Scheme, Baidou and Nabon Schemes, Swarnajayanti Gram Swarohgar Yojana, and Janani Sishu Suraksha Karyakram (JSSK). These schemes are designed to support safe motherhood guidance, financial assistance during child delivery, and support for

unemployed single women and widows. The Majoni scheme provides a Rs. 5000 deposit for a girl's birth at governmental hospitals, with the maturity value at 18 years. It applies to two child norm families. The Mamoni scheme encourages pregnant women to have three pre-natal check-ups with booklets on safe motherhood or parenting and newborn care, and as well as Rs. 1000 towards the expenditure of nutritional foods and supplements for the second and third prenatal check-ups.

The National Bowari Scheme, launched by the state government, aims to prevent girls from marriage before they turn 20 years old. BPL women, who marry after 20 years, receive Rs. 10,000 from the state government. While, unemployed and, at the same time, unmarried women can receive financial assistance under Baideu and Nabon scheme. The Swarnajayanti Gram Swarohgar Yojana aims to create micro-finance in rural areas by giving sustainable income to the rural poor. However, due to the lack of awareness and knowledge, 40% of the scheme is exclusive to women. Janani Sishu Suraksha Karyakram (JSSK) provides free and cashless services to pregnant women, including normal deliveries and caesarean operations.

Despite government efforts, many lacunas remain. To achieve women's empowerment, it is necessary to develop a positive outlook towards women. However, government actions are also necessary for removing gender inequalities, but they can only be effective if societal perspective change towards women. Women's empowerment requires respecting them as individuals with unique identities and being treated as equals, rather than as commodities.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper shed light on the complex relationship related to women status in north-eastern region of India. Despite the region great cultural diversity, it has witnessed socio-cultural norms that maintain gender inequality and make women feel inferior in society. The patriarchal culture that dominates society, traditional roles that women are allocated, barriers to economic and educational prospects, have all contributed to these challenges. The paper has highlighted some of the challenges faced by the north eastern women in their society. Gender inequality and gender based discrimination is global issue that requires urgent attention. The experience and difficulties of women in this region are a reflection of broader struggles for women's rights and equality.

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