The Level of Empowerment of Women in Assam

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Abstract

Assam has traditionally a patriarchal society just like other states of India. In recent times we see the growing presence of Assamese women in national and international arena. Whatever may be the reason, Assamese women were always visible. Due to print and electronic media, today, activities of Assamese women have got wide publicity. But the irony is that despite their growing presence, we see some worst examples of growing patriarchy which are really paradoxical and can be called threat to women empowerment. In this secondary data based analytical study an attempt is made to examine the level of empowerment of women in Assam for possible contradictory result from the collected data.

Keywords: Patriarchal, visible, paradoxical, empowerment, contradictory result

Introduction:

Assam has just traditionally a patriarchal society like most of the states of India. Assamese culture teaches to respect women. Therefore, we have enviable stories of women who were warriors, promoters of education, peace negotiators and freedom fighters. They were always visible in the field of education, literature and dance, whether came out by their own will or under compulsion. They were never shy. In recent times, we notice the presence and influence of Assamese women in national and international arena spreading from sports to fashion technology. Despite their growing presence, media often brings into light stories of deprivation and gender based violence they have to undergo. Govt. data also create doubt regarding their level of empowerment. They are still not able to make themselves free from gender–based violence.

Literature Review:

Several studies on women empowerment undertaken at the international, national and local level have arrived at contradictory or paradoxical results of women empowerment agenda. The World Bank published the Demographic and Health Survey in 2010 which was based on the data collected on the ownership of land as well as housing for adult women and this survey now covers 40 countries. Isis Gaddis, Rahul Lahoti and Hema Swaminathan analysed those data from the perspective of gender gaps in property ownership. Though variation is evident across countries, yet it is seen that men are more likely to own property than women. Data from most of the countries show that gender gap is more obvious in case of ownership of land than in case of ownership of housing. If we consider only sole ownership, gender gaps in property ownership are even stronger. This is because women are more likely than men to report joint ownership. Ownership in land and housing among married couples is seen in favour of men.
Analysing NFHS 5 data, Vinathi Gurijala has found that alarmingly fewer women now own land or property either on their own or jointly in India since the last survey in 2015-16. Women in more than half of 21 states and UTs report a decline in property rights. Among all the states, Tripura reported sharpest decline. Ajeet Kumar and Nalin Negis analysis of the NFHS 3 also examines the influence of age, occupation and education on women’s decision making power at home. NSSO surveys depict the real picture of female participation. A woman enrolled in education in 1983 fails to find gainful employment in 2011: this drop in female LFPR is seen across all age levels in both rural and urban sectors in every round of NSSO surveys and not just for the 15-24 age group (Rahul Menon, 2019). Paramita Gogoi and Bornali Bora studies gender inequality in Jorhat district of Assam. Considering the no. of women participation in public and private sector, they find a clear distinction between male and female workforce which is same with the condition if the state is considered as a whole, i.e., 499 male, 205 female. On the other side, women of the district has large number of female participation under the category of non-worker in comparison to male worker.

Objective:
The objective of our study is to examine the level of empowerment of women in Assam.

Methodology:
This study, based on secondary data, is analytical in nature. Data have been collected from Govt. Reports and CMIE Surveys.

Limitations of The Study:
The study suffers from following limitations:

a. The NSSO conducted quinquennial surveys on employment and unemployment. But NSO stopped conducting national level employment survey after 2011-12 and in its place a program of periodic surveys on employment was instituted from 2017-18. Due to the difference in methodology of quinquennial surveys with periodic labour force surveys, data of these two surveys are not comparable. So, we concentrate only on periodic labour force surveys.

b. For empowerment indicators we are to use data from National Family Health Survey (NFHS). Only NFHS 4 and NFHS 5 have same indicators of empowerment and gender based violence. From that point of view, NFHS 1 and NFHS 2 data are of no use.

c. CMIE Surveys on Unemployment data divides the year into three parts.

Period Covered:
The study covers the period from 2005-06 to 2021-22.

Analysis:
Women are considered as empowered when they have the power to take decision in social, political and economic spheres of life. Through the women empowerment policies, the Govt. wants to make women aware of the injustices prevailing in the society against them. In order to know the empowerment level of women in Assam we take the help of national family health survey data. NFHS 4 and NFHS 5 have same indicators of empowerment while NFHS 3 has only one indicator of empowerment and one of gender-based violence. The most positive fact that the surveys brought into light was that a high percentage of currently married women participated in the household decisions. In 2005-06, 60.9% of women (currently married) participated in the household decisions but in 2019-20, 92.1% of currently married women participated in household decisions depicting a 51.23% increase. But this has no bearing on spousal violence. In 2005-06 (NFHS3), 39.5% of women have ever experienced spousal violence, while in 2015-16 (NFHS4), 24.5% of women have experienced spousal violence. But this percentage increased to 32% in 2019-20 (NFHS5). In NFHS-5, 30% women in Assam reported spousal violence.
This showed a stark increase of 24.5% from NFHS-4. Again, for four consecutive years, Assam recorded the highest crime rate against women. Women who are the decision makers at home are victims of crime and cruelty outside their homes.

Table 1.1
Women's Empowerment Indicators NFHS 5, 2019-20

| Women's Empowerment (Women age 15-49 years) | Urban | Rural | Total |
|---------------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Currently married women who usually participate in three household decisions (%): | 93.9  | 91.8  | 92.1  |
| Women who worked in the last 12 months and were paid in cash (%): | 17.2  | 19.3  | 19.0  |
| Women owning a house and/or land (alone or jointly with others) (%): | 36.3  | 43.9  | 42.7  |
| Women having a bank or savings account that they themselves use (%): | 81.9  | 77.9  | 78.5  |
| Women having mobile phone that they themselves use (%): | 75.4  | 53.9  | 57.2  |
| Women age 15-24 years who use hygienic methods of protection during their menstrual period (%): | 82.9  | 63.8  | 66.3  |

Source: NFHS 5

Table 1.2
Gender based violence, NFHS 5

| Gender based violence (age 18-49 years) | Urban | Rural | Total |
|---------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Ever –married women age 18-49 years who have ever experienced spousal violence (%) | 26.6  | 32.9  | 32.0  |
| Ever –married women age 18-49 years who have experienced physical violence during any pregnancy (%) | 2.2   | 2.3   | 2.3   |
| Young women age 18-29 years who experienced sexual violence by age 18 (%) | 1.1   | 1.4   | 1.4   |

Source: NFHS 4

Table 1.3
Women's Empowerment Indicators, NFHS 4, 2015-16

| Women's empowerment (age 15-49 years) | Urban | Rural | Total |
|--------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Currently married women who usually participate in household decisions (%) | 93.7  | 86.2  | 87.4  |
| Women who worked in the last 12 months who were paid in cash (%) | 18.6  | 16.7  | 17.0  |
| Women owning a house and/or land (alone or jointly with others) % | 45.9  | 53.7  | 52.3  |
| Women having a bank or savings account that they themselves use (%) | 61.5  | 42.1  | 45.4  |
| Women having a mobile phone that they themselves use (%) | 71.4  | 40.7  | 46.0  |
| Women age 15-24 years who use hygienic methods of protection during their menstruation period (%) | 70.8  | 40.9  | 44.8  |

Source: NFHS 4

Table 1.4
Gender based violence, NFHS 4

| Gender based violence (age 18-49 years) | Urban | Rural | Total |
|----------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Ever married women who have ever experienced spousal violence (%) | 15.9  | 26.2  | 24.5  |
| Ever married women who have experienced violence during any pregnancy (%) | 1.8   | 2.1   | 2.1   |

Source: NFHS 4

Table 1.5
Women's Empowerment Indication, NFHS 3, 2005-06

| Women's Empowerment (age 15-49 years) | Urban | Rural | Total |
|---------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Currently married women who usually participate in household decision (%) | 60.9  | 67.9  | 59.4  |

Source: NFHS 3
Table 1.6
Gender based violence , NFHS 3

| Gender based violence (age 18-49 years) | Urban | Rural | Total |
|----------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Ever married women who have ever experienced spousal violence (%) | 39.5  | 24.9  | 42.6  |

Source: NFHS 3

Table 1.7
Crime Rate of Assam

| Year | Crime Rate |
|------|------------|
| 2016 | 126.8      |
| 2017 | 143.3      |
| 2018 | 166        |
| 2019 | 177        |
| 2020 | 154.3      |

Source: NCRB

In 2020, Assam’s crime rate against women is 154.3 which is almost thrice the national average of 56.5.

Note: the rate is calculated per one lakh population

If we consider Assam Police’s Statement of crime against women for the period from 2005 to 2020, it is really terrifying. In comparison to 2005, there is 270% increase in statement of crime against women in 2020.

Table 1.8
Statement of Crime Against Women for the year 2005 to 2020

| Head of Crime | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 |
|--------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Rape         |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
|              | 123  | 124  | 143  | 143  | 163  | 172  | 170  | 1716 | 1937 | 2047 | 1852 | 1779 | 1708 | 1909 | 1952 | 1736 |
| Trafficking  |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
|              | 25   | 29   | 21   | 27   | 25   | 30   | 18   | 29   | 47   | 65   | 79   | 70   | 49   | 53   |      |      |
| Dowry death  |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
|              | 99   | 105  | 100  | 103  | 170  | 175  | 121  | 140  | 170  | 188  | 216  | 157  | 150  | 166  | 165  | 124  |
| Cruelty by husband |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
|              | 220  | 254  | 300  | 347  | 439  | 5410 | 5246 | 6407 | 8636 | 9626 | 1122 | 9321 | 1058 | 1199 | 1332 | 1138 |
| Kidnapping of W/Girls |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
|              | 145  | 154  | 147  | 178  | 209  | 2767 | 3192 | 3360 | 4222 | 3895 | 5039 | 5339 | 5186 | 6269 | 6326 | 4792 |
| Molestatio n |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
|              | 899  | 129  | 789  | 789  | 127  | 134  | 1400 | 1193 | 1840 | 2409 | 2641 | 3794 | 2701 | 3595 | 4143 | 4359 |
| Total        | 592  | 676  | 681  | 810  | 967  | 1149 | 1149 | 1349 | 1739 | 1842 | 2217 | 1936 | 2129 | 2455 | 2617 | 2191 |

Source: Assam Police

Another paradoxical result comes out of the NFHS data. NFHS 5 shows Indian women have greater voice in household but they have less property rights. It is seen from the NFHS 4 data that 52.3% women have a house and/or land (in their name or in joint ownership). But this percentage fell to 42.7% in NFHS5. But at the same time % of women having a mobile phone increased from 46% to 57.2%. It is noteworthy that women are considered to participate in household decisions if they make decisions (alone or jointly with their husband) about their own health care, major household’s purchases and visits to women’s family or relatives. So, very limited role of women is considered here. Again the reasons for low property ownership of women can be found in the existing legal system and work environment of our country. Most of the activities of the women are unpaid activities so, most of the women have not sufficient money to purchase property. So, legal recognition of their nonmonetary contribution is needed. Then they will have access to a share of marital property. Though a daughter has the same right on father’s property as a son has over the property of his father, yet most of the families in our society do not equally distribute property between sons and daughters and most of the daughters do not claim it. Gender discrimination in pay is often seen, particularly in low profile jobs in India. Though not related to property.
right, yet it lessens women’s financial strength to purchase property. Financial empowerment as is seen in NFHS5 may be the result of Governmental schemes like Jan Dhan Yojana. Percentage of women who have a savings bank account which they can use freely at their own interest increase from 45.4% in 2015-16 to 81.9% in 2019-20.

It is generally expected that along with the increase in level of education unemployment rate will fall. In Assam, gender parity index of higher education obtained from All India Survey on Higher Education, does not show high disparity in case of higher education. Even in 2010-11, 2011-12, gender parity index in higher education was in favour of female (1.01). Of course, after that it started to decline. Despite this, unemployment rate remains high for females during these survey years. That is, attainment of higher education could not reduce the gender gap in unemployment. Even if we consider the labour force participation rate for the years for which PLFS data are available, then also large disparity becomes apparent. It is necessary to mention that while calculating labour force participation rate people who are searching work are also included along with the people who are actually employed at that time. Unemployment rate measures the percentage of unemployed in the labour force.

Table 1.9
Gender Parity Index in Higher Education during last five years

| State  | 2015-16 | 2016-17 | 2017-18 | 2018-19 | 2019-20 |
|--------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Assam  | 0.90    | 0.93    | 0.96    | 0.95    | 0.99    |

Source: AISHE2019-20

Table 1.10
Gender parity index during the period 2010-16

| State  | 2010-11 | 2011-12 | 2012-13 | 2013-14 | 2014-15 | 2015-16 |
|--------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Assam  | 1.01    | 1.01    | 0.97    | 0.92    | 0.93    | 0.90    |

Source: AISHE2015-16

Table 1.11
Labour Unemployment Rate in Assam

| Period              | 2016   | 2017   | 2018   | 2019   | 2020   |
|---------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| M       | F      | M      | F      | M      | F      |
| January-April       | 3.3    | 15.9   | 3.9    | 24.5   | 3.7    | 23.6   | 4.4    | 13.3   | 4.7    | 5.1    |
| May-August          | 5.6    | 33.7   | 6.5    | 19.7   | 4.4    | 22.3   | 4.2    | 9.9    |        |        |
| September-December | 5.0    | 34.1   | 6.5    | 24.4   | 6.0    | 20.6   | 4.0    | 8.8    |        |        |

Source: CMIE

Table 1.12
Labour force participation rate (%) according to usual status for Assam and India, Annual Report PLFS, 2017-18

| State   | Rural M | Urban M | Rural+Urban M | Rural F | Urban F | Rural+Urban F |
|---------|---------|---------|---------------|---------|---------|---------------|
| Assam   | 84.2    | 49.6    | 80.5          | 83.8    | 13.8    | 49.5          |
| All India| 80.2   | 53.6    | 80.1          | 51.6    | 25.3    | 53.0          |

Source: PLFS, 2017-18

Table 1.13
Labour Force Participation Rate (%) according to usual status for Assam and India, Annual Report, PLFS, 2018-19

| State   | Rural M | Urban M | Rural+Urban M | Rural F | Urban F | Rural+Urban F |
|---------|---------|---------|---------------|---------|---------|---------------|
| Assam   | 82.6    | 49.7    | 78.4          | 47.6    | 13.6    | 49.4          |
| All India| 80.6   | 54.5    | 79.6          | 51.6    | 26.3    | 53.6          |

Source: PLFS, 2018-19
Table 1.1
Labour Force Participation Rate (%) according to usual status for Assam and India, annual Report, PLFS,2019-20

| State   | Rural                  | Urban                  | Rural+Urban             |
|---------|------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
|         | M     | F     | Persons | M     | F     | Persons | M     | F     | Persons |
| Assam   | 81.8  | 16.9  | 49.4    | 81.6  | 20.5  | 50.3    | 81.8  | 17.4  | 49.5    |
| All India | 81.5  | 35.4  | 58.5    | 80.6  | 25.7  | 53.5    | 81.2  | 32.3  | 56.9    |

Source: PLFS,2019-20

If we consider female workforce participation rate along with literacy rate then we will get a paradoxical result.

Table 1.15
Female Literacy Rate and workforce Participation Rate, 2001

| State/Country | Literacy Rate(F) | Work participation Rate(%) (F) |
|---------------|-----------------|--------------------------------|
| India         | 54.16           | 25.63                          |
| Assam         | 56.03           | 20.71                          |

Source: Census of India, 2001

Table 1.16
Female Literacy Rate and workforce Participation Rate, 2011

| State/Country | Literacy Rate(F) | Work participation Rate(%) (F) |
|---------------|-----------------|--------------------------------|
| India         | 65.46           | 25.51                          |
| Assam         | 67.27           | 22.46                          |

Source: Census of India, 2011

Workforce participation rate in Assam is higher than the state with the highest literacy rate or major developed states. Both in 2001 and 2011, female workforce participation rate of Assam is more than the female WPR in Kerala where female literacy rate is the highest. In 2001, female work participation rate of Kerala was 15.38% with the highest literacy of the country at 87.86%. But with 56.03% literacy rate, WPR in Assam was 20.71%. In 2011, with the female literacy rate of 91.98%, Kerala had the WPR of 18.23% while with 67.27% female literacy rate Assam had the WPR of 22.46%. It belies the belief that literacy empowers women. In Assam, even the low gender disparity as reflected by the gender disparity index in higher education has failed to result in strong political representation of women in Assembly and Parliament constituencies. Let us take the data of Assembly Elections.

Table 1.17
Women MLAs in Assam Assembly

| Year | Percentage of women MLAs |
|------|--------------------------|
| 1951 | 0                        |
| 1957 | 5.31                     |
| 1962 | 4                        |
| 1967 | 3                        |
| 1972 | 1                        |
| 1978 | 1                        |
| 1983 | 2                        |
| 1985 | 4                        |
| 1991 | 4                        |
| 1996 | 5                        |
| 2000 | 1                        |
| 2001 | 8                        |
| 2006 | 11                       |
| 2011 | 11                       |
| 2016 | 6                        |
| 2021 | 5                        |

Source: Election Commission
Table 1.18
Percentage of tickets given to Women by Political parties in last five Assembly Elections

| Year | AGP | BJP | INC |
|------|-----|-----|-----|
| 2001 | 5   | 2   | 12  |
| 2006 | 6   | 12  | 13  |
| 2011 | 7   | 10  | 16  |
| 2016 | 7   | 7   | 14  |
| 2021 | 7   | 8   | 10  |

Source: Election Commission

Gender disparity in candidate distribution becomes more prominent if we compare 2016 data with 2021.

Table 1.19
Gender Disparity in Candidate Distribution (2016 and 2021)

| Name of the party | 2016 Female | 2016 Male | 2021 Female | 2021 Male |
|-------------------|-------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|
| UPPL              | 0           | 100       |             |           |
| AGP               | 6.7         | 93.3      | 6.9         | 93.1      |
| BJP               | 6.7         | 93.3      | 7.5         | 92.5      |
| BOPF              |             | 8.3       | 91.7        |           |
| AIUDF             | 6.8         | 93.2      | 5           | 95        |
| INC               | 13.9        | 86.1      | 8.4         | 91.6      |

Source: TCPD-SPINPER India Legislators Data sheet

Assam reserves 50% seats for women in rural and urban local bodies. Women in local bodies have proved themselves as capable leaders but political parties have failed to recognize them. Since 1951, only 77 women have been elected to the Assam Assembly. As is evident from the tables, female participation in politics remains stubbornly low. So, gender disparity is more prominent in politics. Though Assamese women are vehemently present in all the arenas such as culture, sports, fashion designing, journalism and IT yet they have failed to stand in line with men in case of political representation. Despite their achievement in other fields, Assamese women have failed to convince the political parties to think them as eligible candidates to be people’s representatives. Women here are just voters, not fit to be policy makers. The Women’s Reservation Bill mandates 33% seats for women and was passed in Rajya Sabha in 2010 but failed to gather enough support in Lok Sabha. So, the Bill has lapsed since then.

Conclusion:

Women in Assam still have large ground to grow in order to break grass ceiling as they have failed to assert their presence in all fields and proceed equally with male. India has to do a lot more for promoting female employment in terms of better policies, a work environment that recognises additional care giving responsibilities of women which fall naturally on women. From Samgra Siksha Abhiyaan to MGNREGA, the Government is running several policies to increase the participation of women in the economy. But all the above mentioned paradoxes actually point towards the loopholes present in those policies. However, following conclusions can be made from our study-

(i) Empowerment of women is seen only in case of household decision making.
(ii) Women, though, strong enough to take household decisions, can not save themselves from deprivation and gender-based violence.
(iii) Their low political representation indicates that they have no role in formulating policies, even for themselves.
(iv) Political parties shows patriarchal mindset while giving tickets to candidates.
(iii) Gender parity in higher education has failed to bring parity in employment rate and political representation.
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