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### **Women and Equality in India with Special Reference to the Northeast**

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#### **Abstract**

*The women in India continue to face discrimination and other social challenges and are often victims of abuse and violent crimes according to a global poll. Surprisingly while women in the west had to fight for over a century to get some of their basic rights like right to vote, the Constitution of India gave women equal rights with men from the beginning. Unfortunately, women in this country are mostly unaware of their rights because of illiteracy and oppressive tradition. This study is an attempt to discuss on women and equality with special reference to the Northeast.*

**Key Words - Women, equality, education, empowerment, national development.**

*"There is no chance for welfare of world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing"- Swami Vivekananda*

The genesis of the nature culture debate lies in scientific era that created a dualistic approach where nature was not only separated from culture but also made subordinate to it. But there was also a homology created between women with nature and man with culture. The women in India continue to face discrimination and other social challenges and are often victims of abuse and violent crimes according to a global poll. 2012 was celebrated as the international Year of the girl child and 24<sup>th</sup> of January is celebrated in India as the day for the Girl child but the fact continues that India is the 'fourth most dangerous country' in the world and the worst country for women among G20 countries. There can be no doubt that there has been an utter downfall in the position of women in India from what it once was. There is no doubt that they did occupy a very high position in the social political and intellectual life of our country.

We find the constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women equality (article 14), no discrimination by the State (article 15 (1), equality of opportunity (article 16), equal pay for equal work (article 39 (d). in addition, it allows special provisions to be made by the state in favors of women and children act (article 15 (3), and also allows for provisions to be made by the State for securing just and human conditions of work and for maternity relief (article 42). The Government of India declared 2001 as the year of Women's Empowerment (Swashakti). The National Policy for the Empowerment of women's bill was passed in 2001. In 2010 March 9, one day after International Women's day, Rajyasabha passed Women's Reservation Bill, ensuring 33% reservation for women in Parliament and state legislative bodies. So the question arises – are we prepared to accept it and translate it into reality in India and the Northeast in particular? No single item of achievement like education, profession, legal rights or even the mixture of all these will work out a solution – the only feasible solution is the change of mind, the change of attitude of the men towards women. Till is done, no amount of teaching, preaching or bargaining will help the girl child. The women who were earlier battered because she was considered a lesser being is now being battered because she was potential challenge to men's unquestioned supremacy through past several centuries.

At this juncture when we talk of attitude, I must add that even women have to change their attitude towards the girl child/women especially in the Northeast. At least partly women are themselves responsible for their position, as women it is they who pamper their son and husband and they believe

that they are really superior beings. It is high time that all men and women change their attitude in this regard.

In ancient India the birth of a girl child was hailed as auspicious. An old Indian proverb holds that a home without a daughter is like a body without a soul. The coming of a daughter in the house was compared with the advent of Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth and Sarasvati, the Goddess of Vidya. The usual blessing of a father at the time of his daughter's marriage was – 'May you excel in learning and public speaking'. No ceremony was considered complete without the presence of women. The belief was that no home is complete without a woman. According to Mahabhasya of Patanjali women were teachers and taught Vedas to girl students. The stories of public disputations between Janak and Sulabha, between Yajnavalkya and Gargi, between Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi and between Adi Shankarcharya and Bharati show that Indian women in the ancient time could rise to the high pinnacles of learning and education.

Surprisingly while women in the west had to fight for over a century to get some of their basic rights like right to vote, the Constitution of India gave women equal rights with men from the beginning. Unfortunately, women in this country are mostly unaware of their rights because of illiteracy and oppressive tradition.

Now if a change must be brought about where does one begin? In delivering a lecture in Cikago, Swami Vivekananda said, 'the thermometer to the progress of a nation is its treatment to its women'. Swamiji found education as the best and only device to all problems of women and thereby emancipate them. According to him, for women problems of can be many 'but none that cannot be solved by the magic for the society and the women.

Now researchers all over the world suggest that education happens to be the cheapest and the easiest support that the government can provide to its citizens. It is rightly recognized that education is the most important input for the development of an individual's, society and a nation. The educationist, sociologist, economists, scientist all over world insists that education is the best way to empower women as they become aware of their rights. So question arises, is Vivekanada's vision of humanism crystallized in education of the right order and discipline to be translated into reality? Are we ready for this? Are we prepared?

Education is the best way to empower women as they become aware of their rights. Education is the first step to progress and development of an individuals and the nation as a whole. Women are a part of our society and they too have the right to receive education. Education is an integral part of national development is thus linked in a variety of ways. But development cannot take place if the women in a society are underdeveloped, because women are a part of the society. It is said women are the part of society, and they too have the right to receive education. The community gains more from the educated than ignorant. Education is important for everyone, but it is especially significant for girls and women. Then when a women moves forward. The educational achievements of women not for only an entry point to other opportunities, but also can have ripples effect within the family and across generations. Investing in girls' education is one of the most effective ways to reduce poverty. An investment in secondary school education for girls yields especially high dividends.

Unfortunately, women's education seriously lags behind men's education, particularly in most states of India and particularly Assam. The most commonly cited reason is that in certain societies, many parents continue to envisage a strict gender division of labour. It is viewed that if for most of her adult life daughter will be a housewife, it seems pointless to educate her. The immense contribution that education can make to women's efficiency in child rearing and in domestic tasks is insufficient recognized.

In India, societal norms such as early age marriage or the dowry system militate against girls' education. But most importantly, when people live on low incomes – as in rural area of all states, it is the mismatch between the costs and benefits of girls' schooling that causes the gender gap in education to persist. In most states, where typically there is no social security or state pension, it is held in the Northeast that male children still provide old age support to their parents but female children do not, any benefits of a daughter's education is being reaped by her in-laws. Thus the expenditure on boy's schooling. In other words, there is an asymmetry in parental incentives to educate sons and daughters.

In tribal community, female education is not priority or a part of the tribal culture in the garden. Boys are given preferential treatment as they are sent to privately manage English medium schools

which are considered to be the guarantee to better education almost absence of education beyond school among the women. Girls are withdrawn before they complete primary education and are engaged in domestic chores. Some are even engaged as casual labourers in the garden. Most parents being illiterate or semi-literate the families and communities do not have the culture to motivate children to go for higher education. The tribal girls are the greater victims of the situation because they are withdrawn early to be engaged in domestic chores as probation for marriage or married out early.

The Naga women generally hold a high and honorable position in their society. They enjoy freedom and enjoy a leading part of their family and society. About the Naga, Furer-Haimendorf observes and says- Many women in most civilized parts of India may well envy the women of the Naga Hills, their high status and their free happy life and if you measure the cultural level of the people by the social position and personal freedom of its women you think twice before looking down on the Nagas as savages. (Furer- Haimendorf 1933:101, quoted in Xaxa 2004:347) In the same line, Hutton grants a higher social status to Sema Naga women on the ground that marriages among the Sema Nagas are choice-based and a girl is never married against her will. Such a woman occupies a high position in her husband's house and is treated well. (Hutton 1921: 183, cited in Xaxa 2004:347)

But, about 700 tribal communities are widely scattered in different parts of the country and the economic, social, political and cultural space are not same. There are wide variations in the social, economic and cultural standing of various tribes and as a result the social standing of the tribal women would vary from tribe to tribe. The western scholars who have referred here may have studied the tribal communities in which the status of women could be viewed as relatively higher compared to other tribes in other parts of country; the spread of education and the conversion to the Christianity and the economic mobility that followed may actually have helped the elevation of status of the women in some of these tribes in Northeast India. (Roy S.K, research paper entitled 'Areas of Freedom and subjugation in the life of Tribal Women')

The problem of girl child education of the tribal society appears to be rooted in their cultural value system. They have distinct conception of man and woman's role in the society and accordingly socialize their children. The female children are brought up mainly for the ideal housewife role not as one of the bread earner of the family. They feel that money spent on female education is wastage of their hard earned income. They feel that a girl child is particularly meant for some one's housewife after her marriage so education is not so important.

However, the situation in the region is slowly changing. Women activists, who generally come from the educated segments of society, are challenging the status quo, demanding equality in the family and society and calling for women's economic, political and social empowerment. The trend's intensity varies by each family but is visible even in relatively conservative families. In addition to facing political pressure for reform, Assam is dealing with economic changes that are creating an impetus for women to become more active outside the home. As the region's cost of living rises rapidly because Assam is industrially backward, families are increasingly forced to depend on the additional income that female family members can provide. Women in the Northeastern states are twice as likely to be illiterate as men are and make up two-thirds of the region's illiterate adults. The gender gaps in education vary greatly across the states in the region but are generally wider in districts where overall literacy and school enrollment are lower. Gender gaps in literacy and school enrolment generally persist regardless of rural or urban location. Closing gender gaps in education would benefit the state economy. But equal opportunity is not enough. Most now focus on equality of outcome, ensuring that all children boys and girls alike obtain the same high quality education. But there is nothing to lose heart. It is time for India to hold it on its advantage. In modern India, women had adorned high offices including that of the President, Prime minister, Speaker of the Lok Sabha and the Leader of the Opposition. World famous names like Citicorp, Oracle, Motorola, Cisco, Philips, Siemens, IBM, HP, Intel and Microsoft etc have more and more women employees in it.

But the competition is fierce. India has the higher edge over it. It has-

- A large human resources about 48% consisting of women resources of high intellectual caliber
- A large number of expert women faculty in almost every field
- A growing middle class with a high priority for education
- A number of world class institutions of learning & research with more and more of women in it.

- Technical and communication backbone to take their advantage in the field of knowledge empowerment.
- India has largest number of skilled, women English-speaking human resources which no other country in Asia has.

Thus, India has the key elements to begin and sustain the process and it is emerging as one of the leading countries in its manpower resource utilization.

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