

WOMEN AND ASSAM



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A NOTE FROM THE PRINCIPAL

The progress of any society remains incomplete without recognizing the vital role of women in shaping its economic and social foundations. In Assam, women have long sustained families, communities, and cultural traditions through their labour, creativity, and resilience even as their contributions have often remained invisible.

It is, therefore, heartening to see the Women Cell of Dispur College publishing a volume titled “*Women and Assam*,” which seeks to highlight these contributions in both historical and contemporary contexts.

Women in Assam have been at the heart of family, community, and economic life as workers, entrepreneurs, educators, writers, and cultural custodians. Yet, mainstream narratives of development have frequently overlooked their invaluable efforts. By blending academic perspectives with lived experiences, this publication offers a rich and timely resource for students, researchers, and policymakers engaged in the fields of gender and development.

I extend my warm congratulations to the editors, contributors, and the Women Cell of Dispur College for their dedication and vision. I am confident that this volume will inspire meaningful dialogue and further research into the transformative role of women in Assam’s society and economy.



(Dr. Navajyoti Borah)
Principal, Dispur College

FOREWORD

It gives me immense pleasure to know that women cell of Dispur College, a premier educational institution of Assam prepare to publish a book on the title "Women and Assam", including various aspects such as - Contribution of Women in Sericulture, Art & Printings, Government Schemes in favour of Women, Feminist Movement etc.

The publication is most timely and significant. I feel, the book will open up fresh avenues of understanding as a valuable references for students and teachers. It acknowledges not only the challenges but also the transformative potential that woman embody in Assam's ongoing journey of development.

I also confident that this publication will not only benefit the academic communities within the college, but also reach a wider audience in this field of study.

I extend my heartfelt congratulations and best wishes to the editor Dr. Manalisha Bhattacharyya, and all the faculty members of Dispur College with the researchers who contribute to the book.

Dr. Swadhinota Mahanta

Writer & Litterateur

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FROM THE DESK OF THE EDITOR

Dispur College Publishing Cell has been publishing research books from time to time. The chief objective of publishing this book entitled "Women and Assam" is to explore the diverse and significant contribution of women in shaping the economic, social and culture landscape of Assam. The journey of this book began with a simple but powerful intent, which is to explore and honour the many ways in which women shape the heartbeat of Assam's economy and community. The topics covered by various writers in this book reflect critical perspectives on women's roles as writers, care-givers, entrepreneurs, and agents of change, while also addressing systemic issues such as healthcare, government support and feminist movements. Assam, with its rich cultural identity and regional complexities, offers a compelling context to examine how women navigate family, community and the economy. This book aims to foster a deeper understanding of the structural challenges and transformative potentials embedded in women's every day experiences.

At this point, I would like to thank all the contributors who have taken active participation by contributing their valuable writings on women of Assam. I am immensely grateful to the President of the governing Body, Dr. Balendra Kumar Das, Principal of Dispur College Dr. Navajyoti Borah, Convenor of publishing Cell, Dr Sanjib Kr. Sarma, and Dr. Sikha Joyti Deka, Convenor, Research and Development Cell, Dispur College.

This book "Women and Assam" includes nineteen research papers contributed by teachers, researchers and writers across various fields. The first article has been contributed by Dr Pallavi Goswami on "Voices of change: The role of contemporary Assamese

Writers in shaping society." The author provides an insight about how the women writers across the world have long stood at the forefront of important social changes. In her article, she has depicted the female voices in Assamese literature by mentioning the work of Padmavati Devi Phukanani, Chandraprabha Saikiani, Sneh Devi, Indira Goswami, Nirupama Borgohain, Rita Choudhury, Anamika Bora and Rashmi Rekha Bora. She is of the view that their work opens up space for important conversations about human right and social reform.

Dr Sanjib Kumar Sarma's paper titled "Prowess of Women through Art: Unveiling the Untold Stories and Contributions to The Art and Paintings - endeavors to explore the history and role of women in Art and Paintings of Assam and their contributions need to be revealed to empower modern society. The paper focuses a detailed analysis of the discipline of Art and unsung women voices significant but frequently marginalized roles in shaping Art history. The paper beautifully portrays the recognition of women's diverse contributions across cultures and periods.

The paper by Sabiba Ahmed has examined the impact of feminist movement on Assamese society. She argues that Assamese feminist groups have developed from both grass roots activity by indigenous people and reform initiatives from the colonial era. She emphasizes the relevance of Assamese feminism in creating a more equal and inclusive society in North East India by showcasing its own history.

Alaka Hujuri in her paper has attempted to explore an overview of sericulture industry of Assam along with the multifaceted contribution of women to sericulture- ranging from host plant cultivation and silkworm rearing to reeling, spinning, and weaving- highlighting their integral role in each stage of production.

Upasana Bhuyan, in her paper has made an analysis of government schemes in favour of women. The author has examined several programs including Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojna,

Orunodoi, Beti Bachao-Beti Padhao and Swanirbhar Naari. She is of the view that such initiatives have provided financial stability and improved health outcome and redefining women's role in the economic landscape.

Rompi Deb, in her paper has attempted to provide a descriptive analysis of the socio- economic status of women in Guwahati with special reference to adult women in terms of socio- economic parameters such as age, education, caste, occupational status, income level, saving and borrowing sources etc. The author is of the view that there is a need for policy intervention as well as collaboration with the social organizations for uplifting the socio-economic status of women in Guwahati.

The paper by Dr. Jonali Nath on "Health care provisions for vulnerable women in Assam" has made an analysis of health care schemes of Assam like Majoni, Morom, Mamoni, Adoroni etc. She is of the view that health status of vulnerable women in Assam is poor than other states of the country.

The paper by Payel Priya Kashyap and Jitu Tamuli discusses the critical role of gender equality in fostering women's development, by investigating gender inequality within families in Assam compared to India through insights derived from the NFHS-V.

The paper by Minakshi Boro explores the relationship between Violence against women and Reproductive and child Health (RCH) outcomes in Assam. In her paper, she has examined the multi-dimensional impact of violence and highlighted the role institutional mechanisms, public health policy and community intervention in addressing the violence and poor health among women in Assam.

Leena Bhagawati and Barnali Saikia in their paper highlighted the gender inequalities in workforce participation and try to analyze the inter-state differences in workforce participation of women and also discuss the probable economic, social and demographic factors responsible for it. Their findings reveal that NER is in better condition regarding labour market participation of female as compared to the

all-India average.

Smita Choudhury in her paper has attempted to look at the factors influencing the age at first birth among women in Assam by using unit level data from National family Health Survey-5. Her findings reveal that Muslim women have higher prevalence of first birth by age 18 while tribal women in Assam have lower rate of early of first birth than their non tribal counterparts.

The paper by Pranita Sarma on "Value Awareness" discusses the need of value awareness of rural women. The author expresses that Assamese women are very much aware about their value, status and also able to focus on their talents, potentialities in the society.

The paper by Anjana Moyee Saikia on "Women in the changing society of Assam", tries to analyze the work of some of the struggling women in Assam, who has set an example for the society through their works and achievements.

Mrinmoyee Bhattacharyya in her paper highlighted the rural women entrepreneurship through traditional Hira Pottery of Assam. She has explored the sustainability of Hira Pottery as rural women entrepreneurship and examined the factors that influence their success and the obstacles they faced.

Jayashree Chowdhury in her paper examines the pivotal contribution of women in sericulture, weaving and market engagement, highlighting their role as artisans, entrepreneurs and custodians of traditions through a blend of historical analysis and contemporary data, she explores how women sustain this heritage industry while navigating economic, social and structural challenges.

Pranja Borah in her paper "Gender Scarsof land loss" attempts to explain the women's relationship to land. She has examined how the implementation of Azure Power project in Mikir Bamuni grant village of Assam has imposed severe and multi- faceted detriments on Karbi and adivasi women through land dispossession, gendered violence, indirect environmental burdens and a systematic exclusion from governance.

The paper by Ananya Sharma on "Epistemic injustice and gendered Credibility" has drawn on Miranda Fricker's work to explore how gendered credibility functions across science, publishing, and everyday life, also highlighting the context of Assam and North-East India. Through examples from both global and Indian feminist thought, it highlights how marginalized women resist silencing and re-imagine knowledge from the margins.

The paper by Ajoy Mitra explores the role of commerce education in empowering women in Assam. He tries to examine government initiatives to make commerce education more inclusive and impactful for women in Assam.

The last article written by Tulika Chowdhury tries to focus on the past and present scenario of Female Literacy Rate in India as well as in Assam. She highlights the importance of female's education, analyze the causes of low Female Literacy Rate and provides suggestive measures to increase the Female Literacy Rate in Assam.



(Dr. Manalisha Bhattacharyya)

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Voices of Change: The Role of Contemporary Assamese Women Writers in Shaping Society

DR. PALLABI GOSWAMI

Even though we deeply hope for a society free from gender bias, the reality often disappoints us. It becomes especially painful when the sincere efforts and achievements of women—who have proved their worth through dedication and talent—are not truly acknowledged. Moments like these compel us to reflect on our society and cultural space, both of which have been richly shaped by the work and presence of women. This reflection often turns into a personal journey, driven by individual curiosity and inspiration.

Across the world, women writers have long stood at the forefront of important social changes. Drawing from their own life stories, they have used literature as a powerful tool to question injustice and challenge different forms of social, psychological, and economic inequality. Their writings have redefined gender roles and strongly advocated for justice. Through literature, women have found a platform to express their experiences, criticise patriarchal systems, and encourage others to think and act for change.

From the pioneering Mary Wollstonecraft, whose *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) laid the foundation for the idea of gender equality, to contemporary voices like Chimamanda Ngozi

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Adichie, who continues to explore the meaning of identity and dignity for women, female authors have challenged the boundaries society has drawn around them. Through novels, poems, essays, and memoirs, they have not only documented real life but also inspired readers to imagine a better, more just world.

Writers like Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison further enriched this tradition. Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own*, questioned the limitations society places on women, while Morrison's work highlighted the layered realities of race, gender, and trauma. In many parts of the world where inequality is deeply rooted, women writers have spoken out with courage, drawing attention to urgent issues like domestic violence, lack of education, and women's rights in politics. Their words have not only reflected what is but also what could be—planting the seeds of hope and progress.

In Assam too, women writers have played a crucial role in reshaping literature and society. Through their poetry, fiction, essays, and journalism, they have voiced the stories of the marginalised, spoken out for gender equality, and addressed the struggles of ordinary people. Their contributions have not only enriched Assamese literature but have also helped bring about social awareness and reform.

Padmavati Devi Phukanani, the first recorded female voice in Assamese literature during the sixteenth century, began this legacy. In the late nineteenth century, she created her own literary identity, distinct from established traditions. Following her path were strong voices like Chandraprava Saikiani, Sneh Devi, and Nalini Bala Devi, who wrote about women's struggles, culture, and the nation's political journey. Their works provided fresh perspectives and invited readers to rethink age-old beliefs.

The works of Nirupama Borgohain, Indira Goswami, Rita Chowdhury, Arupa Patangia Kalita, and Anuradha Sharma Pujari

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further deepened the conversation around gender, class, and politics in Assam. Indira Goswami's *Dontal Haatir Une Khowa Howda* (The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker) powerfully portrayed the lives of widows in a rigid Vaishnavite society. This novel boldly addressed gender-based oppression, religious orthodoxy, Marxist thought, land reforms, and the breakdown of feudal norms. The protagonist Giribala's tragic end—suicide as a form of protest—stands as a piercing comment on the suffocating rules that have long dictated women's lives. Grounded in Assamese customs and realities, the novel speaks of universal truths about patriarchy and resistance.

Rita Chowdhury's *No Men's Land* speaks of the often-overlooked stories of Assamese people of Chinese origin. Her other novels, like *Popiya Tora* and *Makam*, narrate the tragic journey of around 1,500 Chinese-Indians who were forcibly taken to Rajasthan during the 1962 Sino-Indian war. These works bring alive untold histories, adding depth to the social understanding of Assam.

In the writings of Arupa Patangia Kalita, the pain, strength, and endurance of women during times of conflict come through vividly. Her stories highlight how women experience violence and trauma, while also showing their courage and resilience. Assamese women writers have also made valuable efforts to preserve cultural memory. By recording folk stories, local histories, and social changes, they have helped safeguard the voices of Assam's diverse communities. At the same time, they've examined the clash between tradition and modernity, encouraging readers to reflect on social customs and embrace change.

These writers have addressed a wide range of issues—from domestic violence and political unrest to ethnic discrimination and environmental concerns. Their work opens up space for important conversations about human rights and social reform. Through essays,

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novels, and journalistic pieces, they have recorded the lives of the oppressed while inspiring change.

The impact of these pioneering women writers in Assam is lasting. By challenging social injustice, giving a voice to the unheard, and imagining a fairer world, they have shown that literature is not just a form of art, but also a tool for activism and awareness. Their words continue to shape minds and awaken collective thought.

Carrying forward this rich tradition are two writers whose works have deeply moved readers and left a lasting impression: *Samudrik Ghora* by Anamika Bora, published by Paperas Publications, and *Kranti Jari So* by Rashmi Rekha Bora, brought out by Prayas Adhyayan Chakra in Bokakhat.

A novel or a story is not just an arrangement of words—it is a space where reality and imagination meet, where the untold becomes visible. Literature has the power to not only mirror life but to transform it, offering a platform for silenced voices and opening up hidden truths.

In *Kranti Jari So*, Rashmi Rekha Bora brings alive many unheard stories—those of dreams, war, resistance and identity. Her writing makes us stop and think deeply. Why do the same mistakes repeat? Why do struggles persist for so long? Because many women are still denied the simple joys and freedoms they deserve by birth. Her stories take us beyond surface-level understanding, touching raw realities with honesty.

On the other hand, *Samudrik Ghora* by Anamika Bora captures slices of everyday life, filled with forgotten emotions and social truths. Her storytelling is poetic, at times gentle and still, yet full of quiet power. Her characters, settings, and themes reflect the challenges faced by families dealing with poverty, generational gaps, and systemic failure. In households where education is not accessible and economic hardship breaks emotional bonds, her stories bring to

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light the struggles that unfold silently

Over the past three decades, scholars from different fields have tried to understand women's roles in revolutions. Sadly, many traditional accounts have ignored them, focusing only on male leaders and fighters. But new research is slowly changing this picture.

For example, in the American Revolution. Initially, the spotlight was only on men like George Washington. But today, we know that women also played key roles— they served as nurses, couriers, and even soldiers in disguise. They were not passive supporters, but active agents of change.

Similarly, in Nepal's People's War (1996–2006), women formed about 40% of the fighting force. They were combatants, political teachers, medics, and leaders. Many joined the revolution to escape a deeply patriarchal society, hoping for equality and justice. Yet, after the war, they were pushed back into traditional roles. Their contributions were forgotten or barely acknowledged.

Rashmi Rekha Bora's *Kranti Jari So* gives voice to these very women—those whose courage has long been ignored. Her storytelling does not offer easy comfort; it holds a mirror to painful truths and asks hard questions. The stories reflect the raw struggle of women who dared to dream, resisted oppression, and demanded a life of dignity.

Together, the works of Anamika Bora and Rashmi Rekha Bora serve as essential reading. They go beyond artistic expression and become a call to action—a reminder that literature can carry the pulse of society, awaken awareness, and inspire transformation.

Prowess of Women through Art : Unveiling the Untold Stories and Contributions to the Art and Paintings of Assam

DR. SANJIB KUMAR SARMA

ABSTRACT :

The paper attempts to explore the role of women in Art and Paintings of Assam and how their contributions, often overlooked or hidden, can be revealed to empower contemporary society. The study examines how discipline of Art has traditionally presented or ignored women's voices and seeks to rectify the imbalance by highlighting women's significant yet frequently marginalized roles in shaping Art history. By critically reviewing existing literature and analyzing how women's contributions in the field of art and paintings have been documented, the paper aims to emphasize the importance of empowering women through a more inclusive narrative on Art. It further discusses the potential for this discipline to encourage gender equity through curriculum reforms across cultures and periods. The analysis focuses on secondary data sources such as historical text, books on art history, academic journals, souvenirs, and case studies of gender focused project related to Art and Artists.

(Keywords : *Women in Art, gender equality, women's contributions, art history, history of education, women empowerment.*)

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Sonitpur is one of the state's oldest cultural history linked to the myth of Banasura from Puranas who ruled here and as defeated by Lord Krishna. The mythological heritage deeply influenced local art especially culture and temple architecture, king Banasura "Bana's" daughter Usha and her closest companion Chitralkha whose painting still glorify the mythical background of Art history of Assam. Considering the legend, Chitralkha can be considered as the first known portrait painter of Assam. Several Indian art historian including Anand K. Kumarswami illustrates Chitralkha as "First Indian Artist with a brush". There was no royal evidence of history of visual arts since the hoary past of the days of Mahabharata to the 6th century. The Da-Parbatia temple runis at Tejpur are among the earliest stone temple remains in Assam dating back to the 6th century EC (Gupta period influence). This sculptural artists famous for its exquisite doorframe with floral and figurative carvings proving crystal clear Gupta style ornamentation. Stone sculptures from this era often depicted Hindu deities namely Vishnu Shiva and Durga with decorative iconographic detailing.'

The folk Art of Assam is rich in its tapestry and it was popular during Ahom period (13th-19th century) and Koch kingdom patronage also led to temple sculpture and embellishment with terracotta plaques and painted panels. Visual art of medieval period dedicated to Vaishnavism inspired by Srimanta Sankardev's Neo-Vaishnavite movement. Unlike the tribal people of India tatoo art work on human body, wall painting on the wall of the household, painting on the floor entrance of the door during festival is rare in Assam. On the other hand the image of tree leaves had been depicted since past which was not available in the paintings of the other states of the country. The ancient text 'Chitra Bhagabatam' that found Balisatra of Nogaon district is considered as the most precious item of the state of Assam. The paintings of unknown artists bear true testimony in the religious texts 'Dasham Skandha Bhagavata',

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'Kumar Haran', Sankhachura Badh', 'Battle of Lav-Kush', 'Gita-Gobinda', 'Lanka-Kanda and Sundar-Kanda', 'Ramayan', 'Kalki Puran', 'Mahabharat', 'Dharma Puran', 'Ananda Lahari', 'Matshya Charit', 'Sammudra Manthan', 'Ajamil Upakhyan' and 'Naam Ghosa' for several hundred years of its existence. Among these the paintings of 'Banamalidev' by Bijay Khanikar, 'Dharmapuran' by Bodh Ligira and Hastividyanarb' by Dilbar and Doshye is known to all. Banbhatta's Harshacharit and Huenchang's note rightly establishes the art and paintings of Assam is ancient but great saint Srimanta Sankardev has drawn the paintings of 'Sapta Baikuntha' and the golden era of painting has started none other than the great Vaishnavite saint Sri Sri Sankardeva's era. The satra institutions have become the training centre of art work. Under the patronization Koch king, 'Darrang Raj-bonshabali' (The legacy of Darrang king), 'Aanda Lahari', 'Gita-Gobinda', 'Sankhachura Badh' and 'Hastibdyanarb are most notable among the few art of painting anthology. The 'Sanchi' tree leaves are prepared for writing with the help of Silikha, Kajal (eye liner), ash, blue, (Hengul, Haital and Kharimati preparing a peculiar ink painted the plot. Two three paintings was done on muga silk cloth also. Mostly religious stories and fables have got importance in these paintings. The beliefs in Hindu faith like curse, sin, and rebirth are also portrayed. Moreover, Procession, Kings and Queen, Singing and Dancing were also painted.

The characteristics features of these portraits are at first the whole hearted feelings of the artists, secondly discipline and moving spirit of the paintings. Part of profile was drawn specially Gods and Goddesses, human being, animals and demons. On the idol of Gods and Human being Muglai Hat called 'Pagia', garments on the body and decorative jewellery is visible. Deep colour is used in the paintings. Red, Yellow, and Blue colour was used very much in the paintings which have tried to capture the essence of the story and spirit beautifully.

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Considering the characteristics features of the paintings, the scholars pointed out the influence of Rajput and Mogal paintings on the paintings of Assam. 'Namghosa' and 'Ahom Jyotish' pictures are drawn on Muga Silk cloth and pointing the dragon like winged lion portrait also indicate the influence of China and Tibetan Art.

More than the portrait painting, books, and the wooden slate hangings on the walls of Satra Namghar bears true testimony of folk art of Assam. The wooden doors, wooden pillars, book self wooden 'Sarai', Wooden playing items were painted with beautiful design. Moreover, in Goalpara region, the religious story or popular folk stories are drawn on Kuhila is called 'Kuhila pat' bears beautiful imagination of a folk artist.

The Concept of women's art and artists was not workable or strait forward hundred years back. In relation to women's art in modern days the relentless effort of numerous remarkable women figures namely Elsa Baroness von Freytag Loringhoven, Gentileschi, Krasner, Frida Kahlo and Linda Nochlin are the reality. The absence of women in the field of Art and their poor role or may be the absence of women acknowledged as distinguished artists has been a hot topic of discussion since late 1970s. The second wave of feminist movement created sensation when Linda Nochlin's pioneering essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" was released. Feminism as we know that it's a belief and objective that women should have the similar rights and opportunities as men rather than busy with reproduction and house hold works which is reflected in all kinds of Art. Modern women artists of Pre-Independence India, Sunayani Devi, Amrita Sher Gill in 1970, Mrinalini Mukharjee, Shila Gowda, Surekha, Arpana Kar, Nilima Sheikh, Arpita Singh, Amita Dube, Pushmamala N., Archana Hande, Mithu Sen was a dozen artist whose works of art create an unconventional tradition in the field of pictorial language and visual allegories.

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When we come to our motherland Assam, the field is barren for women. According to Nilamoni Phukan, the Jnanapeeth awardee said renowned artist Pratap Baruah's sister Pragya Baruah Das (1921-1972) was perhaps the first female modern painter of Assam. Over the last 50 years, contemporary women artists in Assam have been relentlessly pursuing their artistic endeavours, characterised by a distinct individualistic approach that emphasizes female and feminist the men, individual identity, and nationalism throughout their creative journey. Notable female artists of modern day Assam are Hemangini Bordoloi of North Guwahati, Merina Choudhury of Tejpur, Marjina Begum of Nagaon, Niru Kataki of Lakhimpur, Saleha Ahmed, Chapala Baruah Bhuyan, Sati Sen, Malati Barua, Lutfa Akhtar, Santana Gohain, Sudipta Das, Rashmimala and many others are recognised for their unique perspectives in decorative pictorial language and metaphors, established among the significant number of male counter parts. The article will provide an over view of at least a portion of the work of women artists and art and their journey into the field.

Hemangini Bordoloi was the elder daughter of the path finder of modern Art in Assam, Surendra Nath Bordoloi. Observing her passion for Art since childhood days, her artist father provide her required materials for art work and started her art education it her home itself. Her regular study at school was stopped when she promoted from class six to seven due to the societal norms prevalent those days in the society. At the age of twelve and half she got married to Upendra Nath Bordoloi, one of the member of royal family of Guwahati. Growing up in a time when women in India were rarely seen pursuing careers in art and painting, she defied societal norms to follow her artistic calling. She joined a teacher at North Guwahati High School at M.E. Section to teach art and drawings. Inspired by the profession, she decided to move to Biswabharati (Santiniketan) at Kolkata to get formal education in

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art with a scholarship of Rs. 60 as deputation by the then Inspector of school and DPI on recommendation of then Chief Minister Bishnuram Medhi. She stood first in the entrance examination for admission into Santiniketan. Her classmate was famous artists of modern Indian art A. Ramchandran, Dharmanarayan Dasgupta, Benu Mishra and others. The renowned faculties of Santiniketan Dharendra Krishna Deb Barman, Radha Charan Bagchi, Sukhamay Mitra, Sukhen Ganguli, Ram Kingkar Bez, Vinod Bihari were offering art education in Santiniketan. Pencil, Water colour, Tempora, Ink Pen, Wash, Wood, Linocut were used for natural exercise of art and the replica of Ajanta, Ilora, Rajasthani, Pahari, Mogal art was taken as sample. Hemangini did painting on art at Biswabharati and gained scholarship of Santiniketan as a distinguished student of Kalabhawan. Thus she completed her year successfully at Kalabhawan. Afterwards the expenditure was increasing everyday and due to financial crisis as well as her husband's serious illness compel her to come back home.

Returning from Santiniketan, she joined her previous job of the school teacher. But her exposure to art both, traditional and modern eastern and western considerably depicted when she took drawing lessons, paintings as was expected from anyone of his kind of family background that was alert to cultural developments. Art was very much a part and parcel of the Bordoloi household and Hemagini was a leading light. She drawn portrait of Amingaon Railway Station, Bihu Dance that are the ones of lasting value of which some are still our favourites preserved in the Guwahati Artist Guild. The portraits too were drawn directly from life like the portrait of Srimanta Sankardev, Sri Madhabdev and her teacher famous artist Ramkingkar Bez. Several art work preserve in the Guwahati Artist Guild on legendary character 'Sita', 'Krishna', 'Royal Court' are some paintings along with creative paintings proves her worthiness and natural talent. Under Hemagini's patronage and her husband's

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inspiration she established the 'Assam Art and Craft Training Centre at their home. The centre offered training on handicraft and art specially to the women and children. At present the school is named after Hemangini Bordoloi art school. The centre got government registration in 1984. She was awarded several awards and felicitation by various social organisation. She got artist pension from Govt. of Assam in the year 2005 and awarded 'Bishnu Rabha Bota' on 20th June, 2006. She died on 5th June, 2007 at Madhyam Khanda of North Guwahati. The birth centenary of Hemangini Bordoloi's is over on 3rd April of 2025. This is now the time to pay respect to the great soul of art of Assam delving into the specific nature of her innovative work, shedding light on her unique artistic approach.

Among the women artist in modern days Marjina Begum was associate with art and sculpture institute 'Kallol' of Nagaon, Chapala Barua and Malati Bora also went to Santiniketan for learning art. Artist and founder president of Guwahati Artist Guild, Benu Mishra was the contemporary of these women artist. Under the slow going market, discouragement of art in the society, lack of proper place for exhibition of art work, financial hardship these trained women artists covered under the creative field and lost their creativity in a discouraging environment of the state. For them it was a most challenging and revolutionary decision to go for higher studies in art and sculpture in the place like Santiniketan and Baroda. Many of the contributions of women artist are lost because their paintings were not documented or preserved. To ensure their art is remembered, it's important to prioritize the collection, archiving and preserving of portraits that highlights artists roles in modern art of Assam.

Following the path of the Hemangini Bordoloi, Hela Das who trained at Kala Bhawan and M.S.U Baroda returned to Guwahati known for the expressive wood sculpture and established in field of art in state's art and craft scenario.

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Saleha Ahmed studied at Kala Bharana (in early 1970s) stood as a pioneering figure in art landscapes of the state. She is known not only for excellence in sculpture and painting but also her redefined traditional crafts with her bold and innovative approach of terracotta as her primary material. Viewing from the cultural content of the state of Assam terracotta carries various implication. It is the medium of everyday utility, seasonal rituals done for votive offerings ancestral knowledge, but in the works of Saleha Ahmed it was drawn from votive and craft traditions of rural custom infused with matrilineal sensitivity to form and process. Her work is local re-imagined through the lens of modernist abstractions and formal experimentation. Saleha has played a vital role in inspiring younger generations to our Assam's rich cultural traditions especially terracotta heritage Asharikandi indigenous art forms engaging with traditional materials and techniques in artistic outputs.

Private galleries and collectors are limited many women artists rely on state venues and short period shows exhibitions, which constrains pricing index and long term career planning. Even though, after the establishment of state Art Gallery in 1970's several women artists went to outside state and some of them took admission in Govt. Art and Craft College which was established in 70's. It is a matter of proud for us that Jabin Ghosh Dastidar who became the Principal of Govt. Art and Craft College of Assam at Guwahati.

Under the prevalent circumstances, the women artists and their figurative art work with bold and innovative approach are still continued baring all boundaries. Some of the them are – Parانبanti Devi, Sarnchita Gogoi, Niva Devi, Manika Devi, Minakshi Bargohain, Aditi Chakraborty, Santana Bordoloi, Dipati M. Kayal, Sushma Jain, Tulirekha Dhar, Susnata Goswami, Arundhati Choudhury, Upasana Bora, Sabita Pegu, Pali Kour Deka, Shyamali Chaliha Dutta, Madhri Bhattachary, Manisha Bora, Indrani Konwar Pathak, Manika Gogoi, Manideepa Das, Depali Medhi, Nilima Thakuriya Heque, Dhiramani

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Sarma, Deepanjali Das, Pllabi Jiten Sarma, Debashree Das, Tulika Goswami, Nijara Baishya, Sujata Biswas, Joya Bodo, Mouchmi Deka, Ditimani Das, Archana Rajguru, Sayeda Shamim, Binita Jakiya, Rita Khanikar and many more.

Beyond their achievement, currently women artists have made tremendous contribution in the print making and graphics medium too without high-level technical training.

Ultimately by reshaping narratives to reflect women's true contributions, we empower the contemporary generation to envision and work toward a more just and equal society for the development of visual art scenario of Assam.

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Impact of Feminist Movements on Assamese Society

SABIBA AHMED

ABSTRACT

The sociocultural and political backdrop of Assam, an area renowned for its ethnic variety and complicated history, is examined in this research along with the evolution and effects of feminist movements. Assamese feminist groups, in contrast to mainstream Indian feminism, have developed from both grassroots activity by indigenous people and reform initiatives from the colonial era. Despite frequently juggling the twin obstacles of patriarchy and regional strife, women in Assam have played crucial roles in politics, writing, education, and social reform. The chapter examines the ways in which these movements have addressed enduring problems including political under-representation, domestic abuse, and ethnic marginalization while simultaneously advancing women's empowerment, legislative reforms, and shifts in public perception. This chapter emphasizes the relevance of Assamese feminism in creating a more equal and inclusive society in Northeast India by showcasing its own history.

(Keywords: *Feminism, Women Education, Gender Equity, Assam Culture and Women's Empowerment.*)

1. INTRODUCTION

The distinctive socio-political, ethnic, and cultural circumstances of Assam have influenced the region's feminist movement, which is a powerful story of resistance, resiliency, and transformation. Assamese feminism originated in a complex environment characterised by colonial legacies, ethnic plurality, socioeconomic inequities and political turmoil, in contrast to feminist movements in other regions of India, which frequently arose within relatively homogeneous language and cultural landscapes. Assam, one of India's northeastern states, is home to a diverse range of tribal and indigenous groups, each with its own customs, gender roles, and social systems. A feminist praxis that was highly localised, intersectional and sensitive to the intricacies of Assamese society was required by these circumstances.

Patriarchal beliefs and customs have influenced Assam, a state in northeastern India, for many generations. However, Assam's cultural and social standards have changed significantly in recent decades and the feminist movement has been instrumental in bringing about these changes. The goal of feminism is to advance fairness and equality for people of all genders. In Assam, feminist movements have been fighting for women's rights and empowering them in a variety of fields, including politics, education and cultural standards. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the Assamese feminist movement, including its background, development, main areas of action, and difficulties encountered by regional feminist groups.

When reformers like Chandraprabha Saikiani started questioning patriarchal conventions and promoting women's rights to education, political engagement and the law in the early 20th century, Assamese feminist consciousness had its start. Since Saikiani spearheaded regional campaigns for gender equity, such as the founding of the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti, in addition to taking

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part in national movements like the Indian freedom fight, her contributions are sometimes seen as foundational. In the 1970s, the rise of women's groups such as the Sadou Asom Lekhika Samaroh Samiti brought attention to the literary and cultural aspects of the Assamese feminist movement. Through literature, art, and activism, these programs gave Assamese women a forum to express their experiences, challenge patriarchal systems, and claim their identities.

2. Feminism and its Historical Concept in Assam.

With more than 200 ethnic groups and subgroups residing in the state, Assam boasts a diversified population. The Assamese, Bodo, Karbi, Mishing, and Rabha are the state's principal ethnic groupings. Although Bengali, Bodo and English are all spoken in the state, Assamese is the official language. The main pillars of Assam's economy are the petroleum, tea, and agricultural sectors. With almost 52% of India's total tea output, Assam is the state that produces the most tea. Natural resources including coal, limestone and oil and gas deposits are abundant in the state.

With several festivals held all year long, Assam has a rich cultural legacy. The state celebrates several well-known holidays, like as Eid-ul-Fitr, Diwali, Durga Puja and Bihu.

Over the years, Assam has seen a number of difficulties, such as military battles, ethnic tensions, and natural calamities such as earthquakes and floods. But the state has also seen notable advancements in fields like infrastructure development, healthcare, and education.

Like in other regions of India, Assam's feminism emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when social reformers started opposing the discriminatory caste system and patriarchy. But when women activists started to band together around causes like women's economic empowerment, health, and education, feminist groups in Assam started to take shape in the 1970s.

A. Assamese feminist movements in their early years.

When women began banding together for their rights and empowerment in the early 20th century, Assamese feminist groups began to take shape. Kamalabari Satyabrata established the Assam Mahila Samiti in 1911, making it one of the first women's organisations in Assam. The Samiti fought against discrimination and promoted women's health and education. Another well-known member of Assam's early feminist movement was Renuka Devi Barkataki. She was a member of the Assam Women's Conference, a key organiser of the Tezpur Women's Club and a champion of women's rights and education.

B. Prominent Assamese feminist individuals

Feminist activism has a long history in Assam, where several well-known women have spearheaded the fight for women's rights and gender equality. The following are a few notable Assamese feminists:

1. **Kamalabari Satyabrata** : One of the first women's rights advocates in Assam, Kamalabari Satyabrata was a feminist and social reformer. In 1911, she established the Assam Mahila Samiti, which promoted women's health and education while opposing discriminatory practices.
2. **Renuka Devi Barkataki** : A writer, poet, and feminist, Renuka Devi Barkataki championed women's rights and education in Assam. She was a member of the Assam Women's Conference and was instrumental in starting the Tezpur Women's Club.
3. **Bina Barua** : Bina Barua was a social activist and feminist who championed the rights of under-represented groups, particularly women. She focused on topics including women's political empowerment, health and education and was one of the founding members of the All Assam Women's Federation.

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4. **Alaka Sarma** : Activist and feminist writer Alaka Sarma has been active in the Assamese women's movement since the 1980s. She has written a great deal about topics including sexual harassment, gender inequality and women's empowerment.
5. **Hasina Kharbhih** : From Assam, Hasina Kharbhih is a social entrepreneur and advocate for women's rights. She founded the Impulse NGO Network, which fights gender-based violence and human trafficking.
6. **Mamoni Raisom Goswami** : This writer and social activist wrote a great deal on Assamese women's difficulties. She was a fervent supporter of women's rights and empowerment, and identity, gender and culture were common topics in her work.

Together with several others, these women have been instrumental in forming the Assamese feminist movement and promoting women's rights and gender equality. Future generations of women will be able to carry on the struggle for a society that is more just and equal thanks to their efforts.

C. Feminist movements impacts on Assamese Society

Feminist movements have had a profound effect on Assamese society. The way society views and treats women has changed due to these movements. Here are a few examples of how feminist movements have impacted Assamese culture:

1. **Women's Education** : Assamese culture has been greatly impacted by the early feminist movements' support for women's education. Assamese women are actively seeking education nowadays and leaving their mark in a variety of sectors.
2. **Women's Health** : The significance of women's health has also been emphasised by feminist organisations in Assam.

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Women are now more conscious of their health concerns and have access to improved healthcare services.

3. **Women's Political Participation** : Assamese feminist groups have been instrumental in boosting women's political engagement. These days, women actively participate in decision-making processes and hold positions of authority.
4. **Women's Rights** : Assamese feminist movements have successfully changed laws and policies by fighting for women's rights. Today's women are more conscious of their rights and have more legal protection.
5. **Challenging Patriarchal Standards** : Assamese feminist groups have changed views towards women and challenged patriarchal conventions. Women are shattering preconceptions and are no longer restricted to conventional gender roles.

To conclude up, Assamese society has been greatly impacted by feminist movements. A more gender-equal society has been made possible by them, and they have altered how women are viewed and treated. But much work remains, and sustained efforts are required to guarantee the protection of women's rights and the attainment of gender equality. In conclusion, feminist movements have significantly influenced Assamese society. They have contributed to creating a more gender-equal society and have changed the way women are perceived and treated. However, there is still much work to be done and ongoing efforts are necessary to ensure the protection of women's rights and to achieve true gender equality.

3. FEMINIST MOVEMENTS IN ASSAM

Since women's organizations first appeared in the area in the early 1900s, Assamese feminist groups have had a lengthy and rich history. Domestic abuse, dowries, gender inequality and women's health are just a few of the many concerns that Assamese feminist organisations have attempted to address throughout the years. An

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outline of the feminist movements in Assam is given in this essay, along with a discussion of some of their major successes, difficulties, and current initiatives.

A. Assamese Early Feminist Movements

The Axam Nari Sanstha was founded in 1911 and was one of the first women's organizations in Assam. A group of educated women who were worried about the social and economic standing of women in Assam created the organisation. A refuge for women was founded in Guwahati by the Axam Nari Sanstha, offering lodging and assistance to women in challenging situations, including as domestic abuse and desertion.

The Assam Women's Federation, founded in 1946, was another early Assamese women's organisation. The group was established with the goal of empowering women in Assam and advancing their rights. The Assam Women's Federation fought to promote women's rights and increase public knowledge of women's concerns.

The All Assam Women's Association became a prominent feminist organisation in the 1960s. A group of women who were worried about how the Assam Agitation affected women's rights created the organisation. A well-liked campaign called the Assam Agitation sought to drive out illegal immigrants from the state. In the framework of the Assam Agitation, the All Assam Women's Association sought to address issues including domestic abuse, dowries, and gender inequality while also making sure that women's opinions were heard.

B. Challenges and Achievements

Feminist movements in Assam have faced many challenges over the years, including social and cultural barriers, political opposition, and resource constraints. However, despite these challenges, feminist movements in Assam have achieved significant

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success in advancing women's rights and promoting gender equality. One of the most significant achievements of feminist movements in Assam has been the establishment of legal protections for women. The Indian government passed several laws in the 1980s and 1990s that aimed to protect women from domestic violence and discrimination. These laws provided a framework for feminist movements in Assam to advocate for women's rights and to hold perpetrators of gender-based violence accountable.

In Assam, feminist groups have also played a significant role in advancing gender equality and increasing public awareness of women's problems. To increase public awareness of issues including discrimination, dowries, and domestic abuse, they have planned public rallies, protests, and campaigns. These initiatives have raised public awareness of gender-based violence and contributed to the development of a more favorable atmosphere for women's rights. Along with these successes, Assamese feminist groups have significantly improved women's education and health. They have created a variety of programs and services to enhance women's health and wellness and have worked to increase rural women's access to healthcare and education.

C. Constant Work

There are still a lot of issues to be resolved in the struggle for gender equality, even with the notable successes of feminist groups in Assam. The high rate of domestic abuse is one of the most urgent problems Assamese women face. Despite the existence of legal safeguards, many women nevertheless encounter major obstacles when trying to obtain assistance and services.

In Assam, feminist groups are still working to address this problem by promoting more legal safeguards for women, educating the public about domestic abuse, and offering assistance and support to survivors.

4. Education and Economic Empowerment

In Assam, feminist groups have been instrumental in advancing women's economic and educational emancipation. In addition to breaking down long-standing gender barriers, these initiatives have aided in the region's overall socioeconomic growth.

1. Education Access: A Spark for Transformation

One of the main objectives of feminist action in Assam has been to provide access to education. In the past, the state's female literacy rates have fallen well short of its male literacy rates. Early reformers who opposed social taboos that prevented females from attending school, such as Chandraprabha Saikiani, were outspoken supporters of women's education. She put out the endless effort to get girls enrolled in school, frequently opposing restricted family customs and child marriage.

The Assamese government implemented a number of programs to encourage girls' education in the years following independence. These consist of:

- Free uniforms and textbooks for girls from underprivileged backgrounds.
- The reservation of places for female students at institutes of higher learning.
- Scholarships for female students who want to go to college, especially in STEM professions.

The Assam government's Dr. Banikanta Kakati Merit Award was one of the noteworthy contemporary efforts. Under this program, female students who achieved a score of 60% or above on their Secondary exams were given free scooters. The goal was to encourage academic achievement and facilitate college enrolment for girls, particularly in rural regions where transportation is sometimes a barrier.

However, because it left out many worthy students from lower-

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income families, the 2024 policy change that increased the limit to 75% provoked massive protests. The demonstrations in Sivasagar and other locations demonstrated how ingrained these initiatives had become in Assamese girls' dreams. Student unions and feminist groups called for the reinstatement of the old standards, claiming that these programs had a direct impact on females' capacity to pursue higher education and achieve economic independence.

2. The function of grassroots movements and NGOs

By emphasizing education and career training for women and girls, a large number of NGOs and grassroots groups have supplemented government programs. In rural and tribal regions, the Assam Mahila Samata Society and Mission Birubala have fought to guarantee that women have access to adult literacy programs, skill development, and elementary education, but with a major focus on social justice. These organisations provide instruction in computer literacy and fundamental IT, financial literacy, tailoring, embroidery, and weaving (particularly handloom weaving, a traditional Assamese craft), as well as entrepreneurship development.

3. Economic Empowerment: Establishing Self-Sufficiency

Economic empowerment and education are closely related. Women are more likely to create enterprises, enter the labour and support the economy if they have higher levels of education.

Modern Opportunities and Traditional Industries: Assam has a long history of handicrafts and handlooms, with women having a significant role in weaving, particularly in the production of mekhela chador. This cultural talent has been emphasised as an economic asset by feminist groups. Numerous self-help groups (SHGs) and cooperatives have been set up to assist women in marketing their goods both domestically and abroad. Rural women now have a source of money as well as a feeling of pride and identity thanks to their initiatives.

GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS:

Thousands of women in Assam have been given the opportunity to start small companies, obtain microcredit, and become entrepreneurs thanks to the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) and the Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY). SHG women are currently working in a variety of industries, including retail, digital services, and poultry farming.

Digital Literacy and Financial Inclusion:

Additionally, NGOs and feminist groups have promoted financial education and computer literacy. These initiatives have made great progress in enabling women to make their own financial decisions by teaching them how to manage savings accounts, utilise mobile banking, and comprehend basic financial instruments.

4. Obstacles and Ongoing Issues

Notwithstanding these advancements, there are still issues:

- **Dropout Rates:** Many females continue to leave school after completing secondary education due to poverty, early marriage, and household duties.
- **Cultural Barriers:** Families in certain conservative or rural communities continue to place a higher value on their sons' education than their daughters'.
- **Lack of Infrastructure:** Many females are discouraged from pursuing higher education due to inadequate transportation, hazardous classroom conditions, and a shortage of female teachers.
- **Gender Pay Gap:** In both the public and commercial sectors, even highly educated women experience compensation discrepancies and little prospects for advancement.

5. Cultural Representation in Cinema

As a potent medium for public communication, cinema has a big influence on how society views and values certain topics. Even

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though Assam's film industry is little compared to Bollywood, it has grown to be a powerful forum for raising awareness of gender problems, challenging patriarchal conventions, and elevating feminist voices. Assamese cinema has changed over the years from showing women in stereotypically subservient positions to presenting them as strong, independent, and multifaceted people. This change adds to the conversation on gender equality and reflects the larger trends of feminist movements in the area.

1. The First Representations: Typical and Stereotypical Elements

Women were mostly depicted in roles that were restricted to the home in the early decades of Assamese cinema, from the 1930s to the 1980s. As moms, wives, or daughters, sacrifice, accountability, and family were their top objectives. In films like *Indramalati* (1939), Assamese film pioneer Jyotiprasad Agarwala portrayed women as idealized figures who often lacked agency.

Despite speaking to the cultural expectations of the time, these representations reinforced the gender stereotypes that feminist movements sought to challenge. Female characters seldom had distinct identities aside from their relationships with men, and their stories rarely dealt with issues like as education, autonomy, or societal injustice.

2. The Transition to Social Commentary and Realism

The late 20th-century feminist movement in Assamese and Indian intellectual circles also had a slow impact on the film industry.

Movies such as Bhabendra Nath Saikia's *Sandhyaraag* (1977),
A watershed in Assamese film was reached with Jahnu Barua's *Papori* (1986) and Halodhia Choraye Baodhan Khai (1987). These films explored issues such as poverty, corruption, and the suffering of women in patriarchal societies. The titular female heroine in *Papori* experiences social rejection and injustice, underscoring

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the inadequacy of the political and judicial structures in defending women. Despite not being explicitly feminist by today's standards, these films created a forum for critical discussion of women's concerns.

3. The Development of Feminist Film and Women Filmmakers

The rise of indie director Rima Das, who won praise both domestically and abroad for her subtle depictions of female leads, was a real breakthrough. Her films are renowned for their strong female undertone, realistic aesthetic and subdued realism.

In the 2017 movie *Village Rockstars*, a 10-year-old girl from a remote Assamese hamlet aspires to acquire a guitar and form a rock band. It is an in-depth examination of poverty, resilience, and gender norms. The movie was India's official Oscar submission and took home the National Film Award for Best Feature Film.

The 2018 movie *Bulbul Can Sing* centres on three teens figuring out who they are in a traditional culture. *Bulbul*, the main character, struggles with love, grief, and rebellion while feeling pressured to fit into stereotypical gender stereotypes. The movie talks on sexual expression, gender nonconformity, and the severe societal scrutiny that females frequently experience.

In addition to their subject matter, these films are significant because they were filmed, produced, and directed outside of the traditional studio structure, employing non-professional performers and real-world locations. In addition to gender stereotypes, Rima Das's work questions the conventions of filmmaking and narrative.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there is a long history of struggle and resistance within the Assamese feminist movement. Numerous strong feminist voices have emerged in Assam, challenging patriarchal norms and practices since the early days of the Brahmo Samaj and continuing into modern women's organizations. Among other things, the

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movement has raised awareness of problems including political representation, domestic abuse, and dowries. Feminists have made great strides via persistent agitation, including affirmative action laws, legislative changes, and heightened public awareness of gender-based discrimination. Nonetheless, gender inequality still exists in many facets of Assamese society, thus more effort has to be done.

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Women in the Sericulture Industry in Assam: A Pathway to Economic Independence and Social Empowerment

DR. ALAKA HAJURI

ABSTRACT

Sericulture is one of the most significant agro-based industries in Assam, deeply rooted to culture and economy of Assam from the time immemorial. The sericulture industry in Assam plays a pivotal role not only in sustaining traditional livelihoods but also in fostering economic independence and social empowerment among women. Assam is renowned for producing all three major varieties of silk—Muga, Eri, and Mulberry—making it a unique and vital hub of India’s silk economy. The state is the exclusive producer of Muga silk (the golden silk) and a major contributor to Eri silk production. Sericulture in Assam is largely rural-based, labor-intensive, and eco-friendly, involving small and marginal farmers, many of whom are women. This paper explores an overview of sericulture industry of Assam along with the multifaceted contributions of women to sericulture—ranging from host-plant cultivation and silkworm rearing to reeling, spinning, and weaving—highlighting their integral role in each stage of production. Drawn from secondary data, the study reveals that women constitute over 60% of the workforce in Assam’s sericulture sector. Their active engagement has translated into

increased household incomes, greater decision-making power, and improved social standing, especially in rural communities.

(Keywords: *Sericulture, Women Empowerment, Economic Independence, Muga silk, Eri Silk.*)

1. INTRODUCTION

Sericulture is an agro-based industry that involves the cultivation of food plants for silkworms, rearing of silkworms, and extraction of silk fibers from their cocoons. That is, Sericulture is the process of rearing of silkworms to produce silk. It involves cultivating host plants (like mulberry, castor), nurturing silkworms that feed on these leaves, and harvesting their cocoons to extract silk threads.

Sericulture is very much intricate in the life of rural women in Assam from time immemorial. Earlier though it was not practice in commercial basis, but these activities were genuinely rooted in their daily life. Each lady by birth had their proficiency in every weaving related activity. In the time of Independence, when Gandhiji visited Assam, he was deeply impressed by the intricate handloom traditions of Assam, where each thread reflects stories, dreams, and the spirit of the Assamese people and therefore once he said “The Assamese weaver weaves not only cloth but also dreams into it.” This was a veritable recognition of the expertise and artistry of Assamese weaver. Though in bygone days, it was done only for domestic purposes, but now people take it a way of their livelihood, introducing innovation and modernization in Mug and Eri silk. Silk is highly valued across the globe for its exceptional quality, natural sheen, and cultural significance.

This sector is highly labor-intensive and due to possibility of in-house productivity, it could bring an additional convenience for women, who side by side can take the responsibility of their household chores. That is why, this sector is predominantly practice by mostly

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women and it provides a transformative way to empower rural women.

Assam is one of the states where commercial exploitation of all four types of sericulture viz. eri, muga and mulberry is enduring since ages past. Muga, silk and eri have a well reputed market nationally and internationally. Therefore, rearing of Eri, Muga and Mulberry silkworm are playing an important role in the economic development of large part of rural people. Non-mulberry silk in general and Muga silk in particular has been closely associated with the rituals and traditions of Assam. Silk is the most elegant textile in the world with unparalleled grandeur, soft glow, and inherent affinity for dyes, high absorbance, light weight, soft touch and high durability and known as the “Queen of Textiles” in the world over.

According to the Central Silk Board, Government of India (2021), the sericulture industry provides employment to approximately 9.76 million people across the country, most of whom are small and marginal farmers, artisans, and women in rural areas. (Central Silk Board, Govt. of India, 2021). Assam accounts for highest production of non-mulberry silk, muga and eri in the country. Assam has the monopoly in the world in the production of Muga, the “Golden Silk” as more than 95 percent of Muga Silk is produced in Assam. According to the Economic Survey of Assam, 2023–24, the state produced about 5,527 metric tonnes of Eri silk and 203 metric tonnes of Muga silk, cultivated over nearly 29,581 hectares and 13,059 hectares respectively. Assam remains the leading producer of both Eri and Muga silk in India, playing a key role in rural employment and traditional livelihoods. The sector has enormous potential of export with a wide domestic market. Export earnings (2023-24) from silk goods observed to Rs.2027.56 cr (US\$ 244.27 million) (Annual Report, Central Silk Board, 2023-24)

In Assam, of the total sericulture farmers engaged, 65% are

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women which fruitfully contributed the country's goal to women empowerment (Economic Survey, Assam, 2023-24).

This paper seeks to explore an overview of sericulture industry of Assam and the economic and social dimensions of women's participation in Assam's sericulture industry. It aims to assess how involvement in sericulture contributes to income generation, financial independence and social empowerment of women.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sericulture has long been acknowledged as a rural, agro-based, and labour-intensive industry with significant potential for poverty alleviation and women's empowerment. Various studies have highlighted the sector's capacity to generate employment, particularly in marginalized and remote regions of India such as Assam.

In another study by De and Das (2007) stated that among all the major silk varieties, eri culture occupies the prime position in the sericulture sector of Assam. Though it generates substantial income and employment each year especially for the rural poor masses, its growth has not been noticeably high as the potential. The existence of substantial scope for enhancing the ericulture activities even at the existing level of technology and with little effort in the food leaves production and financial assistance, it may be expanded significantly that would generate further income and employment in rural Assam (De & Das, 2010).

Chakraborty, Dutta, & Gosh, (2010) discussed elaborately the process and overall activities of sericulture industry and stressed on the importance and involvement of rural people in this industry in Assam. Some studies found that the traditional method of silk production is organic, eco-friendly, viable, sustainable, and cost effective. But it needs scientific exploration, verification, and modification to increase the production to compete with the global market (Chakravorty, et al. 2010).

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Anitha (2011) studied the global scenario of silk industry in India where she focuses on the position of India in regards of production, export and import of silk. Efficient raw material, manufacturing capacity, large pool of skilled and cheap labour, entrepreneurial skills, enormous export potential, large domestic market and enormous production capacity were regarded as the main strength of the industry where price fluctuation, absence of proper market, long distance to market, lack of transport facilities, absence of storage facilities, poor information on market trend and lack of finance were identified as the prime problems of the Indian silk industry.

Goswami and Bhattacharyya (2013) in their study tried to assess the income generating activities women participate in sericulture in the Goalpara district of Assam and found that agriculture contributes the highest percentage (37.40) of the income of the households, followed by sericulture contributing 23.24 per livestock rearing, which is also a household activity. It is to be noted that the manufacturing sector is almost non-existent.

In another study by Bukhari, Kour & Aziz (2019) relates Sericulture to women empowerment states that as the woman contribute significantly in socio-economic development of rural sector through sericulture, they need to be financially and technologically supported and established that the development of the sericulture industry and the empowerment of the rural women in India are correlated.

According to a study by Hussain, Rasid et al. (2024), Assam's raw silk output has not grown steadily, but rather in irregular steps. Comparatively speaking, Assam's contribution to the production of mulberry silk lags below that of Muga and Eri silk. Assam's endemic Muga silkworm population makes it evident that the state dominates the production of raw Muga silk, and the state is also seeing an

increase in Eri silk production annually both of which is positive signs for the state and could propel it to the top of the Indian sericulture sector.

The studies on the different aspects of sericulture industry are most important because it raises the major issues of the industry which is necessary for the promotion of this industry in Assam along with the economic impact of this industry on the marginalized section of the society.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Following are the Objectives of this study:

- i. To present an overview of Sericulture Industry of Assam.
- ii. To examine the nature and extent of women's participation in various stages of sericulture activities in Assam.
- iii. To evaluate how participation in sericulture activities contributes to women's Financial Independence and Social Empowerment.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study includes an exhaustive review of secondary data from numerous sources, as specified in the references. Reports from the Directorate of Sericulture, Government of Assam; Central Silk Board, Ministry of Textiles, Government of India; and Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam, Economic Survey of Assam publications served as the sources of secondary data for the study, which was carried out using the descriptive method. The analysis is based on the findings of numerous researchers work that were done on different aspects of sericulture and served as a springboard for this present study and to make conclusion.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Sericulture Industry in Assam: An Overview

The sector of Sericulture not only preserves traditional crafts

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but also serves as a crucial source of livelihood, particularly for rural women. The state holds a unique position in India’s sericulture map as the only state that produces all four varieties of silk — Muga, Eri, Mulberry, and Tasar (limited). This industry is deeply embedded in Assam’s culture and rural economy. Following table 1 shows the sericulture activities in Assam from 2015-16 to 2023-24.

**Table 1: Sericulture Activities in Assam,
2015-16 to 2023-24**

Items	Unit	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Sericulture Villages	Nos.	11281	9935	8726	8726	8642	8640	8627	8722	8722
No. of Families Engaged	Nos.	495901	319405	310582	307877	309530	331857	299936	301176	301176
Area Under Silk worm Food Plants	Hect.	11434	15983	11585	11537	43608	47113.6	44278.5	44412.154	45288.862
Eri	Hect.	5510	7176	5936	27000	30319.5	33252.7	29096	29126.034	29581.422
Muga	Hect.	4383	5931.58	4369	8600	10762.5	12891	12557	12661.64	13059.02
Mulberry	Hect.	1541	2875	1280	2370	2526.34	2569.9	2624	2634.48	2648.42
Production of Silk Yarn	MT.	2712.8	3647.5	4866.5	5009.8	5314.8	5549.6	5655.95	5721.199	5745.362
Eri Raw Silk	MT.	2555	3468.25	4650	4733	5048.8	5275.74	5420	5487.815	5527.121
Muga Raw Silk	MT.	127	129.5	156.96	193.22	197.29	240.46	210.495	211.27	202.837
Mulberry Raw Silk	MT.	31.02	49.64	59.5	52	68.7	33.4	24.6	22.114	15.404

Source: Economic Survey Assam 2024-25

5.1.1. Number of Sericulture Villages

Table 1 indicates a consistent and notable decline in the number of sericulture villages in Assam over the nine-year period. In 2015–16, there were 11,281 villages actively engaged in sericulture. However, by 2023–24, this number had reduced to 8,722 villages, reflecting a loss of 2,559 villages — a decrease of about 22.7%. The most significant drop occurred between 2015–16 and 2017–18, when the number of sericulture villages fell from 11,281 to 8,726, a reduction of over 2,500 villages in just two years. After

2017–18, the number of villages plateaued and remained relatively stable, hovering around 8,600 to 8,700 through to 2023–24. This trend reflects a contraction in the geographical spread of sericulture in Assam, despite certain growth indicators like an increase in the area under silkworm host plants and raw silk production.

5.1.2. Family Engagement

Again, in case of family engagement, the table shows that the number of families engaged in sericulture in Assam has declined significantly over the past nine years. In 2015–16, nearly 4.96 lakh families were involved in sericulture-related activities across the state. However, by 2023–24, this number dropped to just over 3.01 lakh families, marking a decline of around 1.95 lakh families, or approximately 39%. Between 2015–16 and 2017–18, there was a sharp drop—almost 1.8 lakh families exited the sector within just two years. This steep decline suggests a major shift in livelihood patterns during that period. From 2017–18 onward, the number of families remained relatively stable, fluctuating slightly but staying around the 3-lakh mark. One notable observation is that 2020–21 saw a temporary increase in family participation (3.31 lakh), possibly due to the COVID-19 pandemic when many urban workers returned to villages and took up traditional activities like sericulture. However, this increase was not sustained, and by 2021–22, the numbers declined again.

5.1.3. Area under Silkworm Food Plants Production

The total area under silkworm food plants in Assam— Eri, Muga, and Mulberry— has increased significantly over the last nine years, but the growth pattern differs for each silk type. Eri host plant cultivation (such as castor and kesseru) has seen a dramatic increase, rising from 5,510 hectares in 2015–16 to 29,581 hectares in 2023–24. A major jump occurred between 2017–18 and 2018–19, when the area expanded almost fivefold in just one year.

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This sharp growth reflects the growing popularity of Eri silk in Assam due to its adaptability to local climate and terrain, low maintenance cost and shorter cultivation cycle, extensive participation of rural women and self-help groups, Government support through schemes like NERTPS and MGNREGA-linked plantation drives.

The area under Muga host plants (primarily som and soalu) has tripled over the period, from 4,383 hectares in 2015–16 to 13,059 hectares in 2023–24. The growth has been steady and consistent, without sudden spikes. Muga's expansion may be linked to its status as Assam's exclusive golden silk, highly valued in handloom and export markets or support from government and silk development boards.

In contrast, the area under Mulberry host plants has remained low and relatively unchanged, increasing only slightly from 1,541 hectares in 2015–16 to 2,648 hectares in 2023–24. This limited growth may be due to several factors such as mulberry requires more care, irrigation, and fertile soil— conditions not easily available in much of Assam, it is less profitable and more labour-intensive compared to Eri. Farmers are less interested in Mulberry-based sericulture due to low market demand and poor price realization. Mulberry host plant area is stagnant, and interest in its cultivation is gradually declining.

The total area under silkworm food plants has increased significantly, mainly due to the massive expansion of Eri host plant cultivation.

5.1.4. Silk Yarn Production

Silk yarn production in Assam includes three main varieties— Eri, Muga and Mulberry— each contributing differently to the state's sericulture output. The trends over the nine-year period indicate strong overall growth, mainly driven by Eri silk, while Muga grew moderately and Mulberry declined. Eri silk has emerged as the most

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prominent and fastest-growing segment of Assam's sericulture. Its production increased from 2,555 metric tonnes in 2015–16 to 5,527.12 metric tonnes in 2023–24, which means it more than doubled in less than a decade. This strong growth can be attributed to ease of cultivation and the ability of Eri silkworms to thrive in Assam's climatic conditions, extensive involvement of women and self-help groups, especially in spinning and weaving, consistent government support and rising domestic demand.

Muga silk production also increased—from 127 metric tonnes in 2015–16 to 202.84 metric tonnes in 2023–24. Though the overall trend is positive, the growth has not been linear. It peaked in 2020–21 (240.46 MT) and then slightly declined in subsequent years. Factors supporting its growth include Muga's exclusive identity—Assam is the only place in the world that produces it, strong traditional and cultural importance and rising demand for premium golden silk in both national and international markets. However, Muga production is affected by climate sensitivity, especially to heavy rains, floods, and pest attacks. Limited expansion of host plants due to environmental constraints. Thus, while Muga remains economically and culturally important, its production growth is moderate and unstable.

In contrast, Mulberry silk production has steadily declined. It was 31.02 metric tonnes in 2015–16 and after a short rise until 2019–20 (68.7 MT), it drastically fell to just 15.40 metric tonnes in 2023–24. Reasons for the decline include mulberry plants need irrigated and fertile land, which is scarce in Assam, high maintenance cost, labour intensity and low profitability, farmers' growing preference for Eri and Muga, which are more sustainable and yield better returns. As a result, Mulberry silk now contributes negligibly to Assam's silk yarn output and is on the verge of marginalization.

5.2. Women's Participation in Sericulture Activities

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Women play a central and indispensable role in sericulture activities across Assam, contributing significantly to both pre-cocoon and post-cocoon stages of silk production. This sector is widely recognized as women-intensive, with their participation being crucial for its success and sustainability. Specifically, within Assam, women's involvement in sericulture is notably high, with some reports indicating that Assam boasts the highest women's participation rate among various states, reaching 65%. The varying percentages of women's participation, such as the 65% overall rate for Assam compared to the 54.7% for eri culture and 44% for mulberry sericulture, suggest a nuanced distribution of women's labor across different types of silk production and potentially different regions within the state. This indicates that while women are broadly dominant in the sector, their specific engagement levels are influenced by the type of silk being produced (mulberry, eri or muga) and the local context of the sericulture practices. This understanding underscores that a detailed breakdown by silk type and specific activity is crucial for designing targeted interventions, as a uniform approach might overlook specific needs or opportunities within different sericulture sub-sectors.

A study conducted in Kamrup District (Rabha & Saikia, 2021) focusing specifically on eri culture activities provides a detailed quantitative breakdown of women's participation in sericulture activities in Assam in table 2.

Table 2: Women's Participation in Sericulture Activities

Activity	Percentage of Women's Participation
Rearing of silkworm	100.00%
Feeding, bed cleaning, and moulting care	95.83%
Leaf harvesting	91.67%

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Activity	Percentage of Women's Participation
Cooking of cocoon and spinning	88.33%
Disinfection	85.00%
Collection of matured worms and mounting	78.33%
Harvesting of cocoons	75.83%
Seed production	65.00%
Marketing of cocoon and silk	59.17%
Pit digging	55.83%
Seed sowing	49.17%
Irrigation	40.83%
Plant protection	37.50%
Manuring at pit	36.67%
Land preparation	34.17%
Cultural operation	29.17%

Source: Survey Data, Rabha, P. & Saikia, M. 2021

The data (Table 2) reveals a clear gendered division of labor where women predominantly undertake the most labor-intensive, continuous, and delicate tasks. This is particularly evident in core silkworm rearing activities, where 100% of women surveyed in Kamrup District were involved, along with very high participation in feeding, bed cleaning and moulting care (95.83%). In post-cocoon activities, women's engagement remains significant, with 88.33% involved in cooking cocoons and spinning silk. Across the broader post-cocoon process, including silk reeling, twisting, weaving, dyeing, and printing, women constitute 65% of the workforce. They also play a substantial role in seed production (65%) and marketing of cocoon and silk (59.17%). Conversely, women's participation is lower in initial land preparation (34.17%), manuring at pits (36.67%), and plant protection (37.50%). This pattern suggests that heavier,

outdoor agricultural tasks might still be male-dominated, while the core, daily care-intensive aspects of sericulture, often performed within or close to the household, are primarily managed by women. This concentration of effort in critical stages means that the quality and quantity of silk production are heavily reliant on women's skills, dedication and continuous oversight. Therefore, any interventions aimed at improving silk quality or increasing overall production must explicitly target women's training and support in these specific, high-participation areas.

Their involvement in general silkworm rearing is also high (61%) in some other studies at Sivasagar district indicating up to 94.67% participation in indoor silkworm rearing activities. In grainage practices in, women show high participation in cleaning grainage rooms (90%), preserving seed cocoons (82.5%) and moth emergence/coupling/decoupling (90%)(Gogoi, R. and Barman, S., 2020).

5.3. Women's Financial Independence and Decision-Making Authority

The active involvement of women in sericulture has opened significant employment avenues and has been instrumental in helping them become important players in the decision-making process, both within their households and in the broader community. The increased income generated through sericulture is directly linked to an improvement in women's decision-making ability.

Here's how sericulture contributes to women's empowerment:

5.3.1. Income Generation and Economic Independence

Sericulture presents a significant pathway for women in Assam to achieve economic independence, offering consistent income, financial stability and opportunities for entrepreneurship with relatively low investment. Women engaged in various sericulture activities—from mulberry farming and silkworm rearing to cocoon

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harvesting and silk manufacturing— can generate income at various stages of sericulture productivity. Here, in table 3 shows about the income earned by women in different activities (from secondary sources).

Table 3: Generation of Income through Sericulture Activities

Sericulture Activity	Estimated Income Per person (Per Year)
Eri Silkworm Rearing (5 crops/year)	₹ 40,000 – ₹ 60,000
Muga Silkworm Rearing (2 crops/year)	₹ 30,000 – ₹ 50,000
Spinning & Reeling (part-time)	₹ 20,000 – ₹ 40,000
Weaving (full-time)	₹ 50,000 – ₹ 1,00,000
Mixed Farming with Sericulture	₹ 30,000– ₹ 50,000 (additional income)

Source: Assam State Sericulture department and Livelihood Mission, (2021), Brahma, K. & Brahma, B.(2024),

A study in Kokrajhar district, (Nath, R., & Sarma, D., 2023). Assam, show substantial increases in annual income for participants post-intervention, including INR 111,600 from pupa sales, INR 32,400 from cut cocoon sales and INR 38,000 from mixed planting activities, demonstrating a commendable benefit-cost ratio of 3.03 of the women related to sericulture activities.

The income generated helps families meet basic needs, access healthcare and education and reduces vulnerability to economic and seasonal income fluctuations, leading to improved lifestyles in rural households. Active involvement in sericulture has been instrumental in helping women become important players in decision-making processes within their households and communities. While women show high participation in decisions related to the

procurement of disease-free laying (85.83%), their involvement in decisions concerning nutrient management is lower (27.50%). This indicates that empowerment in decision-making is stronger in areas where they have direct operational involvement and practical knowledge (Rabha, M., & Barman, S. K.2021).

5.3.2. Enhanced Decision-Making Power within Households and Communities

The increased economic contribution of women through sericulture directly translates into greater influence and decision-making power within their households and communities. As women become financial contributors, their opinions and choices gain more weight in family matters, ranging from household expenditures and investments to the education and healthcare of their children. This shift challenges traditional gender roles where women might have been confined to domestic spheres with limited financial agency (Bukhari, R. Kour, H. & Aziz, A. 2019).

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have emerged as a powerful mechanism for empowering women in sericulture, acting as catalysts for collective action, skill development, and improved market access. These groups facilitate resource mobilization among the poor, especially women, enabling them to overcome constraints such as exploitation, poverty and debt, thus providing a pathway to sustainable living.

Sericulture in Assam is not merely an economic activity but a comprehensive tool for women's empowerment, fostering financial independence, enhancing decision-making capabilities, promoting skill development and entrepreneurship, preserving cultural heritage and strengthening community bonds, all supported by various governmental and institutional frameworks.

6. CONCLUSION

The sericulture industry in Assam stands as a vital component

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of the state's rural economy. The industry is largely decentralized and labor-intensive, offering sustainable livelihood opportunities to thousands, especially women and marginalized rural communities. Again, Sericulture in Assam stands as a powerful testament to women's resilience and their pivotal role in both economic development and cultural preservation. Women are not merely participants but are the indispensable backbone of this agro-based cottage industry, particularly within eri culture, where their involvement in core activities like silkworm rearing often reaches 100%. This deep engagement translates directly into significant contributions to household incomes, fostering financial stability and enhancing their decision-making authority within their families and communities.

However, despite their crucial contributions, women in sericulture navigate a complex landscape of persistent challenges. These include critical operational hurdles such as a severe leaf crisis during winter, prevalent disease and pest attacks and a notable lack of dedicated rearing infrastructure and modern machinery. Significant knowledge and skill gaps, particularly concerning raw silk quality maintenance, cocoon grading and machinery operation, further limit their economic potential. Moreover, restricted access to essential resources like land, funds and effective marketing channels, coupled with external pressures from inexpensive power loom products, create substantial barriers to their full economic empowerment.

Truly unlock the full potential of women in this vital sector, a multi-faceted approach is essential. This includes targeted skill development programs addressing specific gaps in quality control and modern technology, improved access to resources and infrastructure and strengthening market linkages to ensure fair prices and value addition. Robust policy protection for traditional crafts

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against external competition and a focused approach to research and development tailored to the specific needs of women sericulturists are also paramount. By addressing these challenges comprehensively, sericulture can continue to be a powerful engine for women's empowerment, driving not only economic prosperity but also fostering greater social equity and preserving Assam's unique cultural heritage.

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Government Schemes in Favour of Women

UPASHANA BHUYAN

ABSTRACT

In the state of Assam, which is characterized by ethnic diversity and rural-urban inequality, women's empowerment is a fundamental component of societal progress. Both federal and state-level government programs have played a significant role in advancing gender equality through programs centered on financial inclusion, health care, education, and violence prevention. This chapter examines several programs, including Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana, Orunodoi, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and Swanirbhar Naari, examining their goals, methods, and effects on Assamese women. By assessing these initiatives, the chapter draws attention to the advancements as well as the ongoing difficulties in guaranteeing the holistic development of women. It is also underlined how crucial community involvement, accessibility and awareness are to the success of these programs.

(Keywords : *PMMVY, Orunodoi, SHGs, Gender Equity, Government Programs, Assam and Women's Empowerment.*)

1. INTRODUCTION

Any society's progress is directly related to how empowered and involved its women are. As farmers, weavers, educators and keepers of family and community customs, women have long played

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important roles in Assam, a state renowned for its ethnic variety, rich cultural legacy and agrarian economy. But beyond this colorful tapestry is a more complicated reality where women's full involvement in public life is still restricted by institutional injustices, cultural taboos, and financial limitations.

The socioeconomic and demographic makeup of Assam offers opportunities as well as obstacles for gender equity. Even though women's literacy rates have increased recently, there is still a significant disparity in their access to leadership positions, higher education, and skilled jobs. Large segments of the female population are still impacted by problems like child marriage, domestic abuse, human trafficking, low pay, and limited access to reproductive healthcare, particularly in rural and tribal areas.

Both the Indian and Assamese governments have implemented a number of social programs to improve the socioeconomic standing of women in recognition of these issues. These programs cover a wide range of topics, including social welfare, legal protection, entrepreneurship, health, and education. They are proactive attempts to empower women as change agents in their homes and communities, in addition to corrective actions addressing past obstacles.

While central government programs like Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana, Mahila Shakti Kendra and Beti Bachao Beti Padhao are undertaken with a national vision, they are regionally modified in Assam to accommodate regional demands. At the same time, Assam has led the way in the development of state-level programs like Orunodoi and Swanirbhar Naari, which are designed to give Assamese women economic and social empowerment through direct financial assistance, possibilities for self-employment and the encouragement of traditional skills.

Crucially, these programs show a change in policy thinking from considering women as passive recipients to acknowledging

them as important development players. Through funding women's health, education, and financial security, these initiatives aim to have a positive knock-on impact that helps not just the women themselves but also their families, communities and the economy as a whole.

However, the implementation of these efforts is just as important to their success as their design. Their effectiveness and reach are frequently constrained by obstacles like insufficient infrastructure, sociocultural resistance, lack of awareness and bureaucratic delays. To determine how well these programs benefit Assamese women, a thorough examination of their objectives, methods of execution, results and difficulties is required.

The purpose of this chapter is to offer such an analysis. It looks at important government programs that have been implemented in Assam in order to determine how they affect women's lives and whether they have the capacity to result in long-term social change. The importance of awareness-raising, community involvement and institutional support in boosting these initiatives' efficacy is also covered in this chapter.

2. CENTRAL GOVERNMENT SCHEMES IN ASSAM

To empower women nationwide, the Indian government has introduced a number of flagship programs. These programs are carried out in Assam in collaboration with local government organizations and state departments. These programs' ability to adapt and reach both rural and urban areas is crucial to their success given the state's distinct socioeconomic issues and geographic diversity. The main federal government programs that are in place in Assam and have had a big influence on women's lives are listed below.

a) Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP)

The Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child) program was started in 2015 by the Ministry of Women and Child Development in collaboration with the Ministries of Health

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and Education. Its goals are to address the issue of the dropping child sex ratio and advance gender equality.

This program has been put into place in a few Assamese districts, including Kamrup, Dibrugarh and Dhubri, that have low gender indicators. The initiative places a lot of emphasis on raising awareness through media, educators and community leaders in an effort to alter ingrained patriarchal beliefs. Among the main initiatives under this plan are health check-up camps, school enrollment drives, and girl child scholarship programs.

Notwithstanding advancements, the initiative has encountered obstacles like irregular funding distribution and low public awareness in rural regions. However, it has contributed to the mainstreaming of talks about gender equality, particularly in community-level discussions and school curriculum.

b) Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY)

Launched in 2016, the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana seeks to give women from Below Poverty Line (BPL) families free LPG connections. The program has changed how much energy households in Assam use, particularly in rural regions where firewood and biomass were previously the main sources of energy.

This program has helped thousands of women, especially in the historically low-LPG penetration districts of Barpeta, Nagaon and Goalpara. The program has improved women's quality of life and allowed them to spend more time on education or income-generating activities by lowering the health risks and drudgery associated with indoor air pollution.

However, many users cannot afford routine refills without extra subsidies, therefore the ongoing costs of LPG refills continue to be a worry.

c) Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY)

A conditional cash transfer of ¹ 5,000 is provided to pregnant and lactating mothers for their first live birth under the Pradhan

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Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana, a maternity benefit program. The program encourages early childhood care, better mother nutrition, and safe delivery methods.

PMMVY is essential in promoting women's access to prenatal and postnatal care in Assam, where rates of maternal and infant mortality are higher than the national norm. After reaching certain milestones for vaccinations and health examinations, the monetary incentive is paid out in three payments.

The main facilitators are Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), Anganwadi workers and district health clinics. Despite its advantages, full coverage in distant places like Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao has been impeded by obstacles like bureaucratic delays, problems with biometric authentication and tribal women's ignorance.

d) Mahila Shakti Kendra (MSK)

Under a centrally sponsored program, Mahila Shakti Kendras were established to empower rural women via community involvement and to support convergence. These Kendras are one-stop facilitation hubs that provide social support, health counseling, legal assistance and training for skill development.

District-level MSKs have been established in Assam in partnership with regional NGOs and Self-Help Groups (SHGs). They are essential in helping women access programs like the Janani Suraksha Yojana, PMMVY and PMUY. Additionally, MSKs organize seminars for vocational training, domestic abuse awareness programs, and legal literacy camps, especially for widows and economically disadvantaged women.

Despite their influence, these centers frequently struggle with a lack of staff and inadequate facilities in the more rural parts of the state.

e) One Stop Centre Scheme (OSC)

The One Stop Center Scheme is a centrally supported

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program that provides comprehensive help to women impacted by violence, albeit it is covered later in the chapter under women's safety. These clinics, which mostly operate in district hospitals in Assam, offer temporary housing, legal advice, police support and medical care.

Given the increase in domestic violence instances during lockdowns following COVID-19, their significance has grown. Women are increasingly using OSC services in districts like Guwahati, Jorhat and Silchar.

f) Women Helpline Scheme (181)

As part of a national effort to offer women in distress round-the-clock assistance, the 181 Women Helpline is open in Assam. Instant advice and referral services, such as access to shelter homes, legal help, or police protection, are provided to callers.

Although more outreach is needed in districts with low levels of digital literacy, awareness of this service is increasing.

3. ASSAM-SPECIFIC GOVERNMENT SCHEMES

Assam has implemented a number of state-specific programs that cater to regional requirements and cultural contexts, even while national programs offer a fundamental framework for women's empowerment. The Assamese government introduced several programs, which prioritize skill development, social welfare, economic independence and direct benefit transfers (DBT). These programs are designed to provide women with sustainable empowerment pathways, taking into account the realities of Assam's diverse population, which includes tribal groups, tea garden workers and rural craftsmen.

a) Orunodoi Scheme

The Orunodoi Scheme, one of Assam's most comprehensive DBT initiatives geared solely towards women, was introduced in December 2020. The program gives economically disadvantaged women¹ 1,250 in monthly financial support that is deposited straight

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into their bank accounts.

Features: Supporting women in managing household expenses is the main goal, with an emphasis on education, health care and nutrition.

Widows, unmarried women, people with disabilities and members of BPL households are given preference.

It is advised that recipients use the money for basic household necessities, medications and wholesome food.

Impact: As of early 2024, the program had more than 17 lakh women beneficiaries, strengthening women's financial authority over the home, increasing children's attendance at school and improving access to healthcare, particularly for elderly and ill family members.

Challenges:

Particularly in regions that are prone to flooding and are inhabited by tribes, there are still problems with inclusion errors, bank linking delays and a lack of digital literacy.

In order to make sure the money is being spent efficiently and for the intended reasons, critics often point out the necessity of monitoring systems.

b) Swanirbhar Naari Scheme

In order to empower traditional weavers and craftspeople, particularly women from Assamese rural and semi-urban regions, Swanirbhar Naari which translates to "Self-reliant Woman" was established.

Features: By promoting handloom goods, one of Assam's most economically and culturally significant crafts, the program promotes women's self-employment.

Individual weavers, cooperative societies and women's self-help groups (SHGs) can sign up to sell goods via the state's government-backed online e-commerce platform.

For traditional goods like Mekhela Chador, Gamusa and Eri Silk items, it offers equitable pricing, design assistance, market access

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and training.

Impact: This program has directly benefited over 4,000 women weavers by giving them access to marketplaces that were previously controlled by middlemen.

With a rising demand for genuine Assamese textiles both inside and beyond the state, it has not only increased revenues but also reinvigorated the local cultural legacy.

Challenges: Inconsistent logistics, low digital literacy, and restricted internet access are obstacles, particularly for craftspeople in isolated areas.

Some weavers say it's hard to compete with machine-made, mass-produced textiles, thus policy-level protection and subsidies are needed.

c) Mukhya Mantri Mahila Udyamita Abhiyan

This more recent program encourages women to launch their own businesses by providing funding and capacity building to startups and women-led enterprises.

Features: Seed money and subsidized loans are available to female entrepreneurs.

The program supports new businesses in the fields of agriculture, textiles, food processing and services by collaborating with banks, non-governmental organizations, and skill training facilities.

Impact : The program has allowed women farmers and craftspeople in areas like Nalbari and Lakhimpur to expand their businesses, frequently resulting in the creation of jobs for other women in their communities.

d) Dhanalakshmi Scheme (Adapted Model In Assam)

The conditional cash transfer model of the Dhanalakshmi Scheme, which was initially a government supported pilot program, has been incorporated into Assam's state welfare policy, especially in initiatives aimed at encouraging girl child education and postponing

child marriage.

Features: Bpl girls receive financial rewards for finishing secondary school and staying single until they reach legal adulthood.

Carried out by coordinating the health, social welfare and education ministries.

Impact: In certain districts, girls' secondary school completion rates have significantly increased.

Additionally, it backs Assam's initiatives to stop child marriage, which is a recurring problem in several tribal and underdeveloped communities.

e) Assam State Rural Livelihoods Mission (ASRLM)

ASRLM functions with a clear regional focus, adapted to the unique conditions of Assam, even though it is officially a component of the national rural livelihoods mission. Its main beneficiaries are women's collectives and self-help groups (SHGs).

Features: Livelihood skill development, market connections, microcredit access, and financial literacy training for SHGs.

In tea garden communities, where women frequently experience severe economic and social isolation, ASRLM actively works.

Impact: In Assam, more than 3.5 lakh women belong to self-help groups (SHGs) and many of them are currently working in retail establishments, weaving, livestock husbandry and other revenue-generating ventures.

Women's savings practices, negotiating strength, and community leadership have all improved as a result of ASRLM.

4. WOMEN-LED SELF-HELP GROUPS (SHGS)

In Assam, self-help groups (SHGs) have become a revolutionary grassroots movement that empowers women, especially those from marginalized and rural communities, to achieve social agency, economic independence, and collective bargaining power. Usually funded by government initiatives like the Assam state rural

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livelihoods mission (ASRLM), which is part of the nationwide Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – national rural livelihoods mission (DAY-NRLM), these small, voluntary groups of 10–20 women operate on the tenets of credit, savings and mutual trust.

Particularly for women in rural, tribal and tea garden communities where formal jobs and banking facilities are scarce, self-help groups (SHGs) have emerged as essential platforms for financial inclusion, livelihood promotion, and community leadership in Assam.

a) SHG formation and Structure

usually, a SHG begins as a savings group in which each member makes a regular, set contribution. Members can then receive low-interest internal loans from this pooled savings. SHGs can eventually apply for bank linkage and loan facilities through ASRLM and public sector banks if they maintain good repayment records and group discipline.

Important Characteristics:

The fact that SHGs are primarily run and led by women, encouraging group decision-making and financial literacy.

In order to increase their bargaining power and get access to bigger markets or financial services, groups frequently form federations.

ASRLM and NGOs often offer training in livelihood skills, leadership, bookkeeping and social awareness.

More than 3.5 lakh women from Assam's 35 districts are members of SHGs under the ASRLM as of 2024.

b) Using livelihoods to empower the economy

SHGs play a key role in women's involvement in revenue-generating pursuits like:

Weaving, especially in Dhemaji, Sivasagar and Barpeta, where Mekhela Chador and other traditional Assamese handloom goods are made.

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Government livestock programs encourage pig and poultry rearing, which are common in tribal regions.

Under the confluence of the horticulture and agriculture departments, organic farming and kitchen gardening are promoted.

Handicrafts, food processing, tailoring, and micro businesses like pickle making, spice grinding, or environmentally friendly packaging.

SHG members have been able to expand from subsistence activities to micro-enterprises thanks to the Start-up Village Entrepreneurship Programme (SVEP), which has been implemented in specific blocks under ASRLM. This has reduced migration and created jobs locally.

c) Bank Linkage and Financial Inclusion

Getting women into the official banking system is one of SHGs' main goals. Using ASRLM:

Under the SHG-Bank Linkage Program (SBLP), SHGs establish group savings accounts, keep track of credit histories and apply for bank loans without collateral.

To assist disadvantaged members and common livelihood activities, numerous groups have been awarded Vulnerability Reduction Funds (VRFs) and Community Investment Funds (CIFs).

The ASRLM Annual Report 2023 states that approximately¹ 3,000 crore in credit has been made available through SHGs in Assam over the past five years, with an average payback rate of over 95%, demonstrating the financial prudence of women.

d) Social Empowerment and Community Leadership

SHGs have a significant impact on social mobilization and awareness-raising in addition to their financial advantages:

SHG members take an active part in literacy initiatives, health and sanitation drives, efforts to avoid child marriage and awareness-raising about domestic abuse.

When disasters like floods, pandemics, or family emergencies

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strike, SHGs are frequently the first to arrive on the scene.

Women who received SHG training have influenced local governance as Panchayat Leaders, Anganwadi Workers and Community Resource Persons (CRPs).

SHG federations have even accepted contracts to oversee village-level infrastructure projects in areas like Majuli and Kokrajhar, indicating a rising confidence in women's leadership.

e) SHG Convergence with Government Schemes

SHGs are important collaborators in the execution of several government programs:

SHGs assist in raising awareness and identifying eligible women under the Orunodoi initiative.

SHG kitchens assist with nutrition programs in Poshan Abhiyaan by distributing locally grown produce and cooking hot meals.

To improve outreach and mobilization, SHGs have been incorporated into the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, PMAY-G and National Health Mission.

Women are guaranteed to be active development facilitators rather than only passive receivers thanks to this convergence paradigm.

f) The Difficulties SHGs Face

SHGs in Assam confront a number of obstacles notwithstanding their outstanding accomplishments:

Capital access is still unequal, particularly in rural areas with inadequate banking infrastructure.

More assistance is required for SHG product branding and marketing. Many women are not familiar with digital sales strategies and e-commerce platforms.

Additionally, supply chain management, value chain development and advanced skill training are required, particularly in high-potential industries like food processing, dairy and handloom.

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Some women are still prevented from entering or leading Self-Help Groups (SHGs) by patriarchal and cultural barriers, especially in conservative rural areas.

g) Moving Forward

To optimize Assamese Self-Help Groups' potential:

The government needs to spend money on e-commerce training, digital literacy and market connections.

Women can influence local administration, obtain larger contracts and bargain for lower pricing by strengthening cluster-level federations.

Collaborations with academic institutions, NGOs and private companies can guarantee sustainability, bring innovation and enhance business models.

Support for SHG activities can be increased in society by introducing gender-sensitization workshops for males and raising general community knowledge.

5. PROTECTION AND LEGAL SUPPORT INITIATIVES

In Assam, violence against women persists despite advancements in health, education and economic empowerment. Women throughout the state are subjected to various sorts of exploitation and injustice, ranging from sexual harassment and online abuse to child marriage, trafficking, and domestic violence. Preventive measures, emergency support services and easily available legal redressal processes are all necessary for the protection of women's rights, in addition to punishing legal actions.

The Central and Assamese governments have responded to these issues by establishing specific programs and support systems that provide comprehensive aid to women experiencing hardship. In order to ensure that women not only survive violence but are also given the tools they need to take back their lives, these programs emphasize legal awareness, crisis response, shelter services, counseling and rehabilitation.

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a) One Stop Centre Scheme (OSC)

The Ministry of Women and Child Development introduced the One Stop Center Scheme, commonly called Sakhi, to offer comprehensive support services to women who have experienced violence in one location. These centers, which have been established in several districts around Assam, are particularly important in emergency response scenarios.

FEATURES:

- OSCs offer free, round-the-clock services, including temporary housing, legal advice, counseling, medical assistance and police facilitation.
- Usually connected to the closest district hospital, police department and legal service authority, these centers provide help to victims of domestic abuse, dowry harassment, rape, trafficking, acid attacks and cybercrime.

IMPLEMENTATION IN ASSAM:

- Among other important districts, OSCs are active in Jorhat, Barpeta, Silchar, Tezpur, Guwahati (Kamrup Metro) and others¹.
- More than 5,000 women in Assam used OSC services in 2023, demonstrating the rising need for these facilities.

Challenges:

- Their efficacy is nevertheless hampered by a lack of trained counselors, a staffing shortfall and a lack of outreach in rural and tribal communities.
- The stigma and fear of social reaction still make many women reluctant to seek help, particularly in traditional rural communities.

b) Women Helpline 181

The 181 Women Helpline is a nationwide program that has been expanded to Assam to offer women in need of information and emergency response services 24/7.

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Features:

- Runs via a centralized call center that is connected with district authorities for prompt action; it offers phone support, instant counseling, and referrals to police, OSCs, shelter homes or legal aid agencies.
- Preserves callers' identities and guarantees secrecy.

Use in Assam:

- Due to a surge in domestic violence and mental health cases during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, the helpline has emerged as a vital initial point of contact for women experiencing violence at home or in public places.

Challenges:

- Lack of knowledge about the helpline, particularly in isolated or technologically isolated places;
- Support for languages and dialects is necessary to ensure that services are available to women from tea garden areas and tribal tribes.

c) Legal Aid Clinics and District Legal Services Authority (DLSA)

Assam's District Legal Services Authorities (DLSAs) run Legal Aid Clinics throughout the state in accordance with the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, especially in rural and tribal areas where official legal institutions are hard to come by.

Features:

- Works together with NGOs, panchayats and women's collectives to conduct legal literacy initiatives;
- Offers free legal help, advice and representation to women, particularly those from marginalized communities.
- Provides assistance in matters pertaining to property rights, dowry disputes, domestic abuse, family conflicts and sexual harassment.

Special Programs in Assam:

- In isolated districts like Dhemaji, Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao, mobile legal assistance vans have been introduced.
- The Protection of Children from Sexual Offenses (POCSO) Act and the PWDVA (2005) are the main topics of the “Legal Aid to Women” awareness camps that are frequently held by the Assam State Legal Services Authority (ASLSA).

d) Assam State Commission for Women (ASCW)

The Assam State Commission for Women is a statutory body tasked with protecting women’s rights and recommending policy measures to the state government.

Functions:

- Acknowledges and looks into claims of discrimination, harassment, and abuses of rights.
- Is it possible to address issues raised by civil society or the media on your own?
- Organizes public hearings, studies and campaigns for the legal and social rights of women.

Notable Interventions:

- The ASCW has been proactive in combating workplace harassment, acid attacks and witch hunts, frequently stepping in during police investigations and assisting women in obtaining compensation plans.

e) State Shelter Homes and Short Stay Homes

For women in need, the Assamese Social Welfare Department runs state-run and assisted shelter facilities in partnership with NGOs.

These include:

- Short-term housing for victims of domestic abuse.
- Swadhar Greh for women who have been rescued from human trafficking, abandoned wives and underprivileged women.
- Homes for women and children trafficked in Ujjawala.

In addition to providing short-term shelter, these centers help

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women reintegrate into society by providing skill development, medical assistance and rehabilitation programs.

6. CONCLUSION:

The various government schemes implemented in Assam over the past decade demonstrate a significant commitment to addressing the multifaceted issues faced by women in the state. From direct financial assistance and entrepreneurship promotion to education incentives and healthcare support, the government has strategically targeted multiple dimensions of empowerment. These schemes have not only improved the material conditions of women— particularly those in rural and economically disadvantaged communities— but have also contributed to enhancing their agency, decision-making power, and societal standing.

Initiatives such as the *Orunodoi Scheme* and *Matri Suraksha Yojana* have provided financial stability and improved health outcomes, especially in districts with high maternal mortality rates. Programs like the *Mukhya Mantri Mahila Udyamita Abhiyaan* and *Lakhpati Baideo Scheme* are redefining women's roles in the economic landscape, helping them transition from informal laborers to micro-entrepreneurs. Simultaneously, educational support schemes like *Mukhya Mantrir Nijut Moina* are ensuring that girls not only stay in school longer but also pursue higher education, which is critical for long-term social mobility.

However, despite these encouraging developments, several structural and operational challenges persist. Issues such as uneven implementation across districts, lack of awareness at the grassroots level, bureaucratic delays and limited digital literacy among beneficiaries can undermine the effectiveness of these schemes. Additionally, deeply entrenched socio-cultural norms continue to pose barriers to women's full participation in the workforce and public life. Therefore, while policy frameworks are robust, consistent efforts are needed to enhance last-mile delivery and monitor outcomes

rigorously.

Moreover, it is essential to involve local stakeholders including women's groups, panchayati raj institutions and community-based organizations in both the planning and evaluation stages of these programs. Such participatory approaches ensure that schemes are contextually relevant and responsive to the actual needs of women.

In conclusion, the government schemes currently in place offer a comprehensive framework for the empowerment of women in Assam. They have laid a strong foundation for inclusive growth, gender justice and the socio-economic transformation of women. Moving forward, sustained political will, better inter-departmental coordination, community engagement and data-driven monitoring will be crucial to scaling these initiatives and ensuring that no woman is left behind.

IN-TEXT CITATIONS:

1. On the Orunodoi Scheme:

The Orunodoi Scheme, introduced in 2020, provides direct financial support to over 3.7 million women in Assam to help meet household nutritional and medical needs (Government of Assam, 2023).

2. On Self-Help Groups and Entrepreneurship:

SHG-linked schemes such as MMUA have enabled thousands of women to transition from informal laborers to self-sustaining entrepreneurs (Borah, 2023; Prag News, 2025).

3. On Educational Empowerment:

Initiatives like Mukhya Mantrir Nijut Moina aim to tackle high dropout rates among adolescent girls, particularly in rural and tea garden communities (Pratidin Time, 2025; Roy, 2021).

4. On Healthcare Programs:

Matri Suraksha Yojana supports institutional deliveries and improved maternal care in rural Assam (Guwahati Plus, 2025; Planning Commission of India, 2014).

5. On Gender-Based Violence Services:

Sakhi One-Stop Centres provide critical legal and psychological aid to women survivors of violence (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2023; Assam Tribune, 2025).

6. On Policy Gaps and Recommendations:

Despite the range of schemes, challenges such as social stigma and administrative delays persist (Choudhury, 2022; Northeast Network, 2022).

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Socio-Economic Status of Women in Guwahati with Special Reference to Adult Women

ROMPI DEB

ABSTRACT

The women population comprise a significant section of any society. Their socio-economic status reflects the true socio-economic picture of the society as a whole. The North-east state of Assam in India has been developing rapidly over the years with advancement of science and technology as well as the proper utilisation of the available resources. Guwahati city of Assam has also been advancing fast with increasing opportunities in education, health, employment and other sectors. This study attempts to provide a descriptive analysis of the socio-economic status of women in Guwahati with special reference to adult women in terms of socio-economic parameters such as age, education, caste, occupation status, income level, saving and borrowing sources etc. The study reveals that there is still illiteracy and absence of higher education level among the majority of adult women in Guwahati and majority of them fall in the not working group without financial independence. The study also highlights the lack of proper formal sources of finance or borrowing and less preference for diversified saving options of the adult women in Guwahati. The performance of

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other indicators is also not much satisfactory implying the need for policy intervention as well as collaboration with the social organisations for uplifting the socio-economic status of women in Guwahati.

(Keywords: *Adult women, Guwahati, social indicators, Economic indicators, Government Intervention.*)

INTRODUCTION:

The socio-economic status is a complex and multi-dimensional term comprising of both the objective components like income and education as well as the subjective rating of person in an economic sphere (Carrillo et al., 2020). The socio-economic status of an individual is an important indicator of his quality of life. Social capital plays an important role in reflecting the socio-economic status of an individual with positive correlation between social capital and quality of life (Nutakor et al., 2023). The socio-economic policies in a country should be formulated in such a manner that it enables the children from low economic status to get education and equal opportunities at par with the well off sections of the society (Gobena, G.A, 2018).

The women folk comprise half of the population in a country but their position in the society is still inferior compared to that of the men (Parathara, 2020). This situation exists in the most of the countries of the world including the European countries (Marin, 2016) and the Asian countries (Edwards et al., 2000). There is also a significant effect of the socioeconomic status on women's health and well being (Neil et al., 2020). In India, the patriarchal system along with the age old traditions and mindset of the people pose a serious challenge in the upliftment of the status of women in the society and achieving gender equality (Singh, 1998; Patil, 2021).

According to the 2011 Census of India data, the total population of Assam was 312.05 lakh comprising of 159.39 lakh males and

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152.66 lakh females. Guwahati city of Assam with an area of 219.1 sq.km recorded a population of 9,62,334 under the 2011 Census data with sex ratio of 933 per 1000 males. This paper simply tries to analyse the socio-economic status of women in Guwahati city of Assam with special reference to adult women of age 18 and above. It also discusses some steps which can be taken by the government and other authorities in order to uplift their socio-economic status in the society.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

At the global level, women participation is still lagging behind men in the labour force with even higher chances of getting out of job compared to men. Moreover, there are more instances of females getting employment in the informal and vulnerable sector compared to the formal secure sector. There is about 23 per cent gender pay gap between men and women for the same job at the global scale which depicts the discrimination faced by women in the labour market. Even in the European Union, the gender policies are not being implemented sufficiently due to social and cultural factors and the situation of rural women is worse compared to urban women requiring serious policy intervention (Francic et al., 2019). Investment in social infrastructure is also found to have a positive effect in decreasing social inequalities and encouraging social networks and connections (Nutakor et al., 2023).

Women in Europe are still oppressed by gender violence, marginalisation, economic exploitation and all. The recent economic and financial crisis with the following austerity policy decisions has worsened the situation. The fertility rates are declining in the European countries due to the prevailing strict working conditions and absence of maternity benefits in many sectors (Marin, 2016).

The present status of women in most of the Asian countries appears to be somewhat similar. In some countries, women enjoyed

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an empowered position earlier which was reduced to a lower level but again improved revealing ambiguous current situation. The adoption of modernised attitude also requires the women to take new responsibilities while also managing their traditional roles which are quite challenging (Edwards et al., 2000).

With the advancement of the economic and political scenario, there has been improvement in the status of women in the Asian countries. However, they still lag behind the Western countries in terms of legal protection, education and employment opportunities. There are also cultural and social barriers in the central Asian countries depriving women of leadership positions in most cases and policy interventions are needed to ensure gender equality in the true sense (Rani et al., 2023).

In South Asia, the lives of women are surrounded by stereotypical religious and cultural attitude. The practice of sati, dowry, purdah system, not allowing females to participate in labour force etc was a great obstacle in their upliftment earlier. Although there has been significant progress in their status in recent times, their survival is still challenging (Waters, 1997). Although the South Asian countries advocate women's rights through laws and legislations, their practice is limited by the existing socio-political scenario depriving women of their deserving rights. The sudden focus on 'work from home' resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic has also brought about both positive and negative consequences for the women. Successful implementation of gender equity laws and legislations is very important to overcome the challenges faced by the women in these countries (Strachan, G et al., 2023).

The social status of Indian women has always been inferior to men in all spheres since ancient times. It is still evident in this 21st century where the patriarchal set up dominates the position of women in the social aspects like family decisions, religious teachings, media,

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law, labour structure etc making the achievement of equality in social system is still a dream (Patil, 2021). In spite of the repeated attempts to improve the status of women in the society, the prevalence of illiteracy, ignorance, dowry system and economic dependence is hampering the process which need to be eliminated (Singh, 1998).

The problems faced by the women in modern India are much less than those faced by them in earlier times. The removal of the evils like child marriage, sati, purdah system, prohibition of widow remarriage and all from the society to a significant extent has provided socio-political security to the women today. However, the new responsibilities endowed upon the women have also led to stress, tension and time management issues for the women which need to be handled (Thanavathi, 2018). It is highly necessary to identify the historical and cultural factors causing gender inequality in the society to fully eliminate them (Anand, 2024). The constitution of India advocates equal rights and opportunities for both men and women but the mindset of the people do not allow it to be practised. Education and mass media can play a major role in changing this stereotypical scenario (Parathara, 2020).

The North-eastern region of India comprises of multifaceted geographical, social and ethnic background. There is still gender disparity and economic independence of women is significantly lower compared to the males in the society. Only social change accompanied by improvement in women's conditions can result in gender parity in the economic, political and social fields (Brahmachary, 2021). Illiteracy is rampant among the tea garden female workers of Assam due to superstitions against them as well as other cultural and social reasons. Government, NGOs and the like must come forward for their upliftment (Devi, 2014).

OBJECTIVES:

1. To analyse the socio-economic status of adult women in Guwahati city of Assam.
2. To suggest measures for improving the socio-economic status of adult women in Guwahati city of Assam.

DATA SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY:

The study is mainly based on primary data. Primary data has been collected from the adult women in households of Guwahati city. One ward has been selected on the basis of simple random sampling from each of the Central, East, South and West zones of Guwahati city for the purpose of the study. The ward numbers selected are 19, 54, 35 and 13 for the Central, East, South and West zones respectively. 25 sample households have been selected from each of these wards and the socio-economic status of adult women of age 18 and above in these households have been studied in terms of socio-economic indicators. The number of adult women found in the sample households is 42, 62, 49 and 65 for the ward numbers 19, 54, 35 and 13 respectively. The social indicators taken are age, education, caste and community. The economic indicators taken are occupation, income, household infrastructure, expenditure, savings and borrowings.

Table 1: Selection of sample of adult women for the study

Zone	Ward No	No. of households	No of Adult women
Central	19	25	42
East	54	25	62
West	13	25	65
South	35	25	49

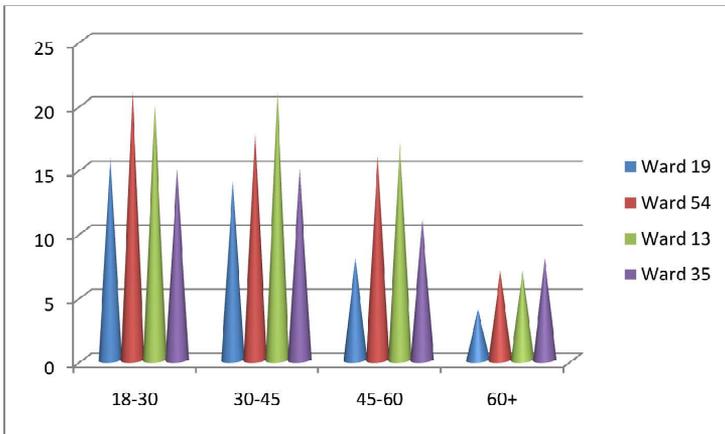
Source: Field survey

SOCIAL INDICATORS:

a. Age of the respondents

The adult women found in the sample households have been grouped into the following classes: 18-30, 30-45, 45-60 and 60+.

Figure 1: Age groups for adult women in Guwahati



Source: Field Survey

Figure 1 depicts that the highest percentage of adult women in all the four wards belong to the age group of 18-30. The second highest percentage falls in the age group of 30-45 followed by the age group of 45-60. The lowest percentage belongs to the 60 plus age group.

a. Religion, Caste and Community of the Respondents

Majority of the adult women of about 76 per cent, 66 per cent, 61 per cent and 67 per cent are found to be Hindu in ward numbers 19, 54, 35 and 13 respectively. About 19 per cent, 22 per cent, 27 per cent and 22 per cent respondents are Muslims while about 4 per cent, 11 per cent, 11 percent and 10 per cent are Christians in ward numbers 19, 54, 35 and 13 respectively. There are no respondents belonging to any other religion. Again, majority of the respondents of above 40 per cent belong to general category in all the four wards

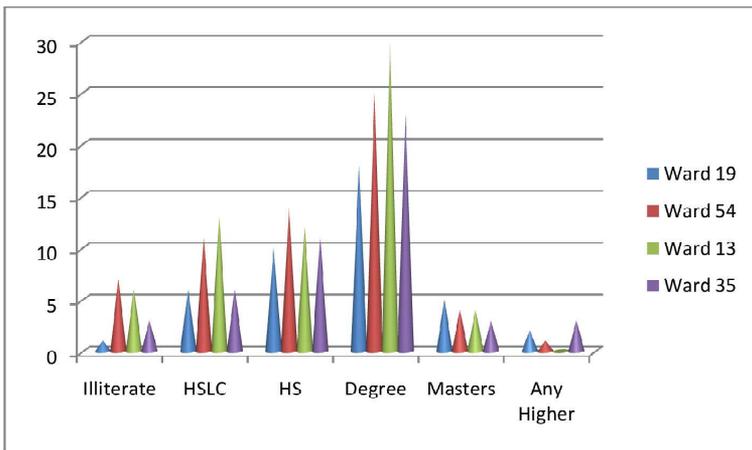
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while above 30 per cent fall in the OBC category. About 9 per cent, 8 per cent, 7 per cent and 10 per cent respondents belong to SC community in ward numbers 19, 54, 35 and 13 respectively and the remaining respondents fall in the ST community.

b. Education of the respondents

The education levels taken into account are illiterate, HSLC, HS, Degree, Masters and Any Higher levels.

Figure 2: Education level of adult women in Guwahati



Source: Field Survey

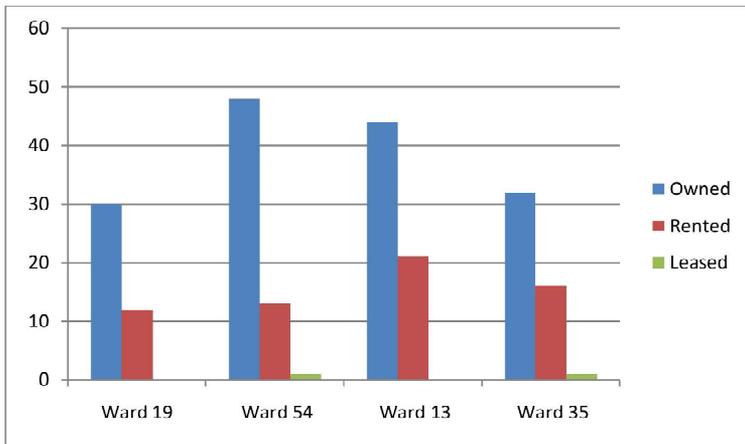
Figure 2 depicts that the highest percentage of above 40 per cent of the respondents have Degree level of education in all the four wards and the lowest percentage belongs to Any Higher level. The second highest percentage belongs to HS level followed by HSLC level in all the four wards. In case of the remaining respondents, ward numbers 13 and 21 have more illiterate respondents compared to Masters level respondents while ward number 19 has more Masters level respondents than illiterate respondents and ward number 35 has the same number of illiterate and Masters level respondents.

ECONOMIC INDICATORS:

a. Type of Housing accommodation

The types of housing accommodation taken into account are Ownership housing, Rental Housing and Leased housing.

Figure 3: Distribution of respondents according to their type of housing tenure



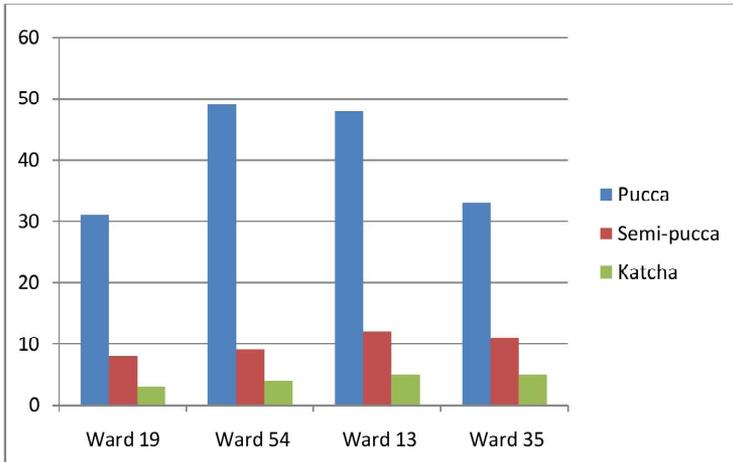
Source: Field survey

Figure 3 depicts that majority of the respondents of above 65 per cent live in their own houses in all the four wards. Rented accommodation occupies the second place in all the four wards and very few respondents live in leased accommodation in Ward number 21 and Ward number 35. None of the respondents live in leased accommodation in Ward number 19 and Ward number 13.

a. Type of House and Sanitation

The types of housing and sanitation taken into account are Pucca, Semi-pucca and Katcha housing.

Figure 4: Distribution of respondents according to their type of house and sanitation



Source: Field survey

Figure 4 depicts that majority of the respondents have pucca house and sanitation facilities followed by semi-pucca ones in all the four wards. A few of the respondents have katcha house and sanitation facilities in all the four wards but it is less than the semi-pucca ones and much lesser than the pucca ones.

b. Occupation Status

The respondents have been broadly divided into two main groups- Working and Not Working.

Figure 5: Distribution of respondents according to Working and Not Working groups

Figure 5 depicts that majority of the respondents fall in Not Working group. The figures are about 64 per cent, 77 per cent, 87 per cent and 67 per cent in Ward numbers 19, 21, 13 and 35 respectively. The remaining ones fall in the Working group in the respective wards.

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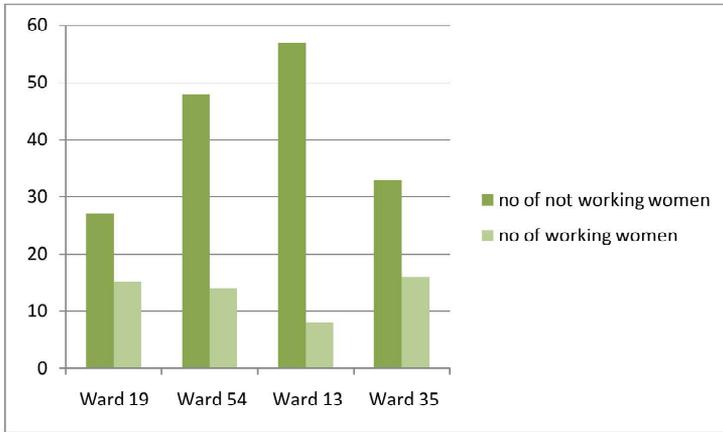


Figure 5 : *Source: Field survey*

Out of the respondents falling in the Working group, majority of the respondents work in the private sector of about 46 per cent, 50 per cent, 62 per cent and 44 per cent in Ward numbers 19, 21, 13 and 35 respectively. Next is the government sector where about 33 per cent, 21 per cent, 12 per cent and 31 per cent are employed in Ward numbers 19, 21, 13 and 35 respectively. The remaining ones are engaged in self-employed sector in the respective wards.

d. Income Status

The monthly income levels taken into account for the purpose of the study in terms of rupees are 0-25000, 25001-50000, 50001-75000 and above 75000. It has been observed that majority of the respondents fall in the income level of 0-25000. The figures are about 40 per cent, 36 per cent, 39 per cent and 37 per cent for Ward numbers 19, 21, 13 and 35 respectively. The next highest is occupied by the 25001-50000 income level with about 33 per cent, 29 per cent, 38 per cent and 27 per cent in Ward numbers 19, 21, 13 and 35 respectively. It is followed by the income level of 50001-75000 where about 13 per cent, 28 per cent, 12 per cent and 24 per cent fall in

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Ward numbers 19, 21, 13 and 35 respectively. The very few remaining ones fall in the income level of above 75000 in the respective wards.

e. Pattern of Expenditure

The items of expenditure taken into account are Food, Clothing, Medical, Education, Festival, Transportation and others.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents according to their annual expenditure on various items (in percentage)

Items	Ward 19	Ward 21	Ward 13	Ward 35
Food	65.3	67.9	68.4	65.7
Clothing	8.2	7.9	7.3	7.5
Medical	5.2	4.9	4.4	5.3
Education	2.3	2.8	2.6	2.8
Festival	5.3	6.2	5.8	6.2
Transportation	6.2	4.5	5.3	5.8
Others	7.5	5.8	6.2	6.7

Source: *Field survey*

Table 2 depicts that the major portion of income of the respondents of above 65 per cent is spent on food in all the four wards. Next to food is expenditure on clothing in all the four wards. In case of medical expenditure, the proportion of income spent is 5.2 per cent, 4.9 per cent, 4.4 per cent and 5.3 per cent in Ward numbers 19, 21, 13 and 35 respectively. The proportion of income spent on education ranges between 2-3 per cent in all the four wards. For festival, the proportion of income spent is 5.3 per cent, 6.2 per cent, 5.8 per cent and 6.2 per cent in Ward numbers 19, 21, 13 and 35 respectively. Transportation accounts for 6.2 per cent, 4.5 per cent, 5.3 per cent and 5.8 per cent in Ward numbers 19, 21, 13 and

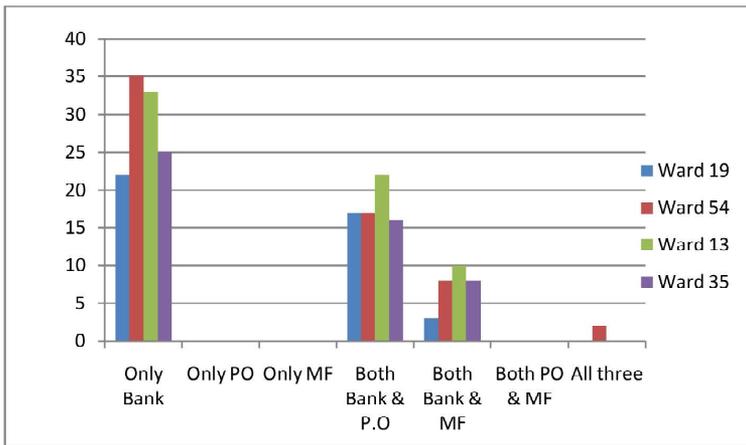
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35 respectively. Others also accounts for a good proportion of income of for 7.5 per cent, 5.8 per cent, 6.2 per cent and 6.7 per cent in Ward numbers 19, 21, 13 and 35 respectively.

f. Saving pattern

The saving options taken to be available are Banks, Post Office and Mutual funds.

Figure 6 : Distribution of respondents according to their saving options



Source: Field survey

Figure 6 depicts that the highest number of respondents in all the four wards have savings only in banks. There is no respondent who has saving only in post office or mutual funds or in both post office and mutual funds. The next highest number of respondents has savings in both banks and post office followed by those in both banks and mutual funds. The remaining few respondents have savings in all the three options.

g. Sources of Finance/Borrowing

The sources of finance or borrowing have been broadly categorised as Informal and Formal. The informal sources taken

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into account are private moneylenders and friend and relatives. The formal sources considered are commercial banks (excluding Bandhan), Bandhan and co-operative societies.

Table 3: Distribution of respondents according to their sources of finance/borrowing

Informal	Sources of Finance/ borrowing	Ward 19	Ward 21	Ward 13	Ward 35
	Private moneylenders	4	12	11	8
	Friends & Relatives	9	14	16	15
Formal	Commercial Banks (Excluding Bandhan)	5	8	7	6
	Bandhan	17	23	23	16
	Co-operative societies	7	5	8	4

Source: Field survey

Table 3 depicts that the highest number of respondents have borrowed from Bandhan bank in all the four wards. Next to Bandhan bank, the second highest number of respondents has borrowed from friends and relatives. The borrowings from commercial banks other than Bandhan and co-operative societies are somewhat similar and much lesser compared to Bandhan bank in all the four wards. The number of respondents borrowing from private money lenders is 4, 12, 11 and 8 in Ward numbers 19, 21, 13 and 35 respectively.

CONCLUSION:

It has been observed that the socio-economic status of adult women in Guwahati is not much satisfactory. There is still prevalence of illiteracy and lack of education of higher levels among the women folk. A significant section of the adult women live in rented accommodation which indicates lack of access to ownership housing

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due to various reasons. Also, existence of semi-pucca and katcha housing structure indicates the problems faced by the adult women in such structures which are difficult to survive properly.

Again, majority of the adult women fall in the not working group which reveals that they are not financially independent. Even out of the few working women, majority of them are engaged in the private sector which lacks proper security compared to the government sector. Very few are employed in the self-employment sector which indicates the limited accessibility to resources required for setting up self-employment opportunities. The income level of majority of the working women has also been observed to be low. The major portion of the income earned is used for consumption expenditure purposes and little is left for saving. Their saving habit is also traditionally largely limited to banks and post offices with much less preference for other options available in modern times. They significantly depend on Bandhan bank and informal sources of borrowings or finance which indicates that they are unable to access the services of other formal sources due to various reasons and get trapped in debt burden eventually.

The study reveals that there is urgent need to uplift the socio-economic status of women in Guwahati. The government may play an important role in this regard by introducing specific schemes where women employment is encouraged as well as imparting job oriented training to women. Also, finances and other resources should be made available to women at flexible conditions so that they need not approach the sources with higher liability. The not-for-profit organisations in the society may also come forward to help the women in this regard.

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Health care provisions for Vulnerable Women in Assam

DR. JONALI NATH

ABSTRACT:

Women health is the most important and sensitive issue now a days. Health is wealth. The development of a society directly depends upon the physical and mental health of the women. Advancement in medical sciences in recent times has been instrumental in reducing many dangers of childbearing and many other diseases among women. Despite these progresses, approximately half a million woman die every year during pregnancy and childbirth all over the world

Assam recorded as the one of the highest Maternal Mortality Rate (215 per 100000 live births) among India state in 2007-09. IMR is 40 per 1000 live birth. 29.8% children under five years underweight. And 35.7% children aged 6-59 months are anaemic. Most victims are poor people in remote rural areas who have little or no access to health care. These health indicators are high in char areas and tea garden areas because in these areas health care services are very poor. Assam is highly focused state under NRHM. It may be noted that the rate of utilization of maternal health care schemes has been relatively high in Assam relative to other north-Eastern state. The Government of Assam passed “The Assam public

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Health Bill” April 2010, to grant the right to health care sans any financial constraint. In recent time Govt. of Assam has launched a number of maternal health care schemes. The schemes launched by the government of Assam are “Majoni, ‘Morom’, ‘Mamoni ‘Adoroni’ etc. The main objectives of all these schemes are to reduce MMR, IMR, and to ensure the safe motherhood. At present govt. has introduced number health care services for vulnerable women. In my paper I will try to discuss about the health care provision for vulnerable women in Assam.

(Keywords: *Women, Health, Assam, vulnerable, Incentivs.*)

1. INTRODUCTION:

Women health is the most important and sensitive issue now a days. Health is wealth. Health is one of the most important components of human development index. The development of a society directly depends upon the physical and mental health of the women. Advancement in medical sciences in recent times has been instrumental in reducing many dangers of childbearing and many other diseases among women. Despite these progresses, approximately half a million woman die every year during pregnancy and childbirth all over the world.

Women health status among vulnerable group in the state is very poor compared to other states of the country. At present govt. of Assam provides number of health care facilities for vulnerable women through several initiatives like financial initiatives for institutional deliveries, health insurance schemes and many outreach programs in underserved areas. The main aims of these initiatives are to improve access to quality care, especially for pregnant and lactating women, mother and children, while they facing challenges like geographical barriers and insecure health care facilities. In my article I try to study the health status of women in Assam and healthcare facilities for vulnerable women in Assam.

2. OBJECTIVES : FOLLOWING ARE THE TWO MAIN OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

- A) To study the women health status in Assam
- B) To study the health care facilities for vulnerable women in Assam

3. METHODOLOGIES :

The study is mainly base on secondary data which are collected from published or unpublished official data, various books, conference proceeding, economic survey and web based resources.

4. THE HEALTH STATUS OF WOMEN IN ASSAM:

Women health status among vulnerable group in the state is very poor compared to other states of the country. National Family health Survey 5 (NFHS) 2019-20 released in December 2020 shares some important facts related to nutritional and health aspects of women in Assam. Following are some of the details;

- 1) Assam recorded as the highest maternal mortality Rate (MMR) of 195 per 100000 live births in the entire country
- 2) The Neo natal mortality rate in the state of Assam is 3rd highest among the states.
- 3) The Infant Mortality Rate in the state of Assam is 4th highest among the states.
- 4) The under 5 mortality rates in the state of Assam is the 4th highest amongst states.
- 5) Around one in three women age 20-24years is married before age of 18 years in the state of Assam.
- 6) Around 1 in 10 women age 15-19 years were already mothers or pregnant at the time of the survey.
- 7) Around 60% of women receive ANC in their first trimester in the state of Assam.
- 8) The state is at the bottom 3rd in respect to percentage of own receiving 4 ANCs.

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- 9) The state lags in the breastfeeding children aged 6 to 23 months receiving and adequate diet.
- 10) Less than 50% of children in the state are breastfed with one hour after birth. More than 60% of the children in the state are exclusively breastfed. The state stands at bottom second position among the 22 states.
- 11) Although institutional delivery is more than 80% but needs further improvement.
- 12) The child anaemia of the state is high at more than 60%. The pregnant women anaemia of the state is high at more than 50%.

Comparison of women health indicators in Assam and India

Indicators	India (NFHS-4)	Assam (NFHS 4)
1 Mother who had ANC in 1 st trimester	58.6	55.1
2 Mother who had at least 4 ANC visit	51.2	46.5
3 Mother whose birth was protected against neonatal Tetanus.*	89.0	89.9
4 Mother who consumed IFA for 100 days or more	30.3	32.0
5 Mother who had full ANC.**	21.0	18.1
6 Mother who receive PNC from Doctor/Nurse/ ANM/midwife/ other health personnel within 2days of delivery	62.4	54.0

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Indicators	India (NFHS-4)	Assam (NFHS 4)
7 children born at home who were taken to a health facility for check up within 24 hours of birth	2.5	1.9
8 Institutional delivery	78.9	70.6
9 Institutional birth in public facility	52.1	60.0
10 Home delivery conducted by skilled birth personnel	4.3	3.9
11 Birth assisted by Doctor/ Nurse/ANM/ and other health personnel.	81.4	74.3
12 Birth delivered by cesarean section.	17.2	13.4
13 Birth in a private health facility delivered by cesarean section	40.9	53.3
14 Birth in a public health facility delivered by cesarean section	11.9	12.9

Source: NFHS 4 factsheet. *include mother with two injections during pregnancy of her last birth or two or more injection (the last within 3 years of the last live birth), or three or more injections (the last within 5 years of the last birth) or four or more injection (the last within 10 years of the last live birth), or five or more injection at any time prior last birth. **Full ANC includes at least four ANC visit, at least one Tetanus Toxoid injection and iron folic acid tablets or syrup taken up for 100 or more days.

On the basis of the recent NFHS-4 report, a comparison has made on maternal health care indicators between India and Assam

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on the Table 3.11. It is evidence from the table that percentage of mother receive ANC in 1st trimester is 58.6% in India and in Assam this rate is 55.1% which is less than all India average. In case of mother who protected against neonatal tetanus is 89.9% in Assam which is slightly high than all India average. The percentage of women receive full ANC is 21.0% in India and 18.1% in Assam. In case of percentage of mother consuming IFA for 100 days is 30.3% in India and in Assam this rate is 32.0% which is higher than all India average. Regarding institutional delivery, the percentage of institutional delivery in India is 78.9% and Assam it is 70.6% which is less than all India average. In India 52.1% women delivered in public health institutions and in Assam 60.0% women delivered in public health institution. Again in case of receiving PNC visit, 62.4% women receive PNC by Doctor/Nurse/ANM/ other health personnel within 2 days of delivery and in Assam only 54.0% women receive PNC service which is less than all India average. The percentage of birth assisted by health personnel is 81.4% in India and in Assam this rate is 74.3%. it is evidence from the table that in Assam most of the maternal health care indicators are less than all India average.

NFHS 5 Report 2019-20 (Assam)

ANC Check up in first trimester	63.8
At least 4 ANC check up	50.0
Neonatal tetanus received	94.5
100 IFA tablet consumed	47.5
Home Delivery	15.9
Institutional Delivery	84.1
Home delivery by SBA	2.6
PNC within 2 days of delivery	65.3
Breastfed within 1 hour of birth	49.1
Full Immunisation	66.4

NFHS-5

5 HEALTH CARE PROVISIONS FOR VULNERABLE WOMEN IN ASSAM:

At present the govt. of Assam provides number of health care facilities for vulnerable women through several initiatives, including financial incentives for institutional deliveries, health insurance and outreach programs in remote rural areas. These initiatives aim to improve access to quality care, especially for pregnant women, mothers and children while addressing challenges like health care infrastructure and other geographical barriers. Following are the some key initiatives and programs for vulnerable women in Assam.

- 1. Financial incentive for institutional deliveries :** The govt. of Assam offer cash incentives for pregnant women who choose to deliver at government health facilities for encouraging safe motherhood and newborn health, particularly for weaker section of the society. Govt. introduced number of schemes like Mamoni, Moromi, Adoroni for safe and secure motherhood.
- 2. Tribal RCH (Reproductive, child and Adolescsnt Health) pogram :** This program providing free and quality health care services including prenatal care, through outreach health camp especially for underserved tribal population.
- 3. Atal Amrit Abhiyan Health Insurance Scheme:** This scheme provides health insurance coverage, up to 2 lakh per year, to each family in Assam, ensuring affordable and accessible health care, especially for critical care and cash less treatment.
- 4. Public private partnership (PPP) Model :** A PPP model is used in tea garden areas strengthen primary health care facilities including routine vaccination and ante – natal and post natal check up by partnering with private hospitals and

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providing supports from National Health Mission (NHM) Assam.

5. **Mamata Initiative :** The Mamata scheme provides financial incentives to mother delivering a girl child in hospital. The program aims to promote gender equality and improve the female child sex ratio of the state.
6. **Awareness and training program :** The Govt. conducts awareness program to educate women about their health rights and available services and community health volunteers are trained to provide proper supports and health care facilities.
7. **Janani Suraksha yojona (JSY) :** Janani surajsha yojona is a safe motherhood intervention under the National Rural health Mission (NRHM) being implemented with the objective of reducing maternal and neonatal mortality by promoting institutional delivery among the poor pregnant women. JSY integrates cash assistance with delivery and post delivery care.
8. **The Assam Arogya Nidhi(ANN):** The Assam Arogya Nidhi initiative provides financial assistance up to Rs. 150000/ to BPL families and the families having a monthly income of less than Rs 10,000/ for general and specialized treatment of (1) life threatening disease, (2) of injuries caused by natural and manmade disasters such as industrial/ road/ rail accident bomb blast etc. life threatening diseases includes heart disease, heart surgery, cancer kidney and urinary diseases, Aids and chronic mental illness. Under the ANN, Govt. of India contributes 50% of funds sanctioned by the State Govt.
9. **Chief Minister's Free Diagnostics Services :** This Scheme is envisaged to ensure availability of minimum set

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of diagnostics services at health institutions. Under Chief Minister's Free Diagnostic Service CT Scan, X-Ray and Laboratory services will be provided free of cost to all irrespective of APL/BPL status.

- 10. Sneha Sparsha :** Sneha Sparsha is the recent unique health care incentives for children below 12 years of age launched by the dept. of health and family welfare, Govt. of Assam. It is a striving public health initiative that aims at bearing expenditure of very high end specialised treatment such as Thalassaemia requiring Bone Marrow Transplant, Liver and Kidney transplant. Families with annual income less than Rs 2.50 lakh shall be eligible for availing benefits under the scheme, while priority shall be given to BPL families.

CONCLUSIONS :

The primary objective of this paper is to study the health status of women and the health care provisions for vulnerable women in Assam. Health is most important issue nowadays and it is the most important component of human development index of a country. The future of a nation depends on women's (mother's) health. Because only healthy mother can give birth the healthy children. The Health status of vulnerable women in Assam is poor than other states of the country. Though govt. introduced number of health care facilities, most of the women in remote rural areas have not yet received it. So, Govt. should introduce more health care incentives in near future for vulnerable women of our state.

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Position of a woman in her family in Assam *vis-à-vis* India: Insights from National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-V

**PAYEL PRIYAKASHYAP¹
JITU TAMULI²**

ABSTRACT :

The existence of gender inequality leads to numerous adverse effects on individual, social, and economic levels. Gender inequality is evident in the life of a girl child throughout various stages of her life. In extreme cases, societal preference for sons results in practices like sex-selective abortions and infanticides, which significantly contribute to the declining sex ratio. Acknowledging the critical role of gender equality in fostering a woman's development, this study investigates gender inequality within families in Assam compared to India through insights derived from the National Family Health Survey-V. This research employs descriptive statistics, including percentages, rates, and ratios, along with pie and bar diagrams. The findings indicate the presence of son preference, insufficient care during and after childbirth, the prevalence of child marriage and adolescent pregnancy, lower educational attainment, a significant wage gap, and discrepancies in how men and women report control over women's earnings.

(Keywords: *Gender inequality, women, men, pregnancy, education, Assam, India.*)

1. INTRODUCTION:

Achieving gender equality has been a fundamental goal in both the Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals, as gender inequality negatively affects both society and the economy (Danylova & Kats, 2019). Nations with greater gender inequality tend to experience poorer economic performance, higher levels of malnutrition, reduced living standards, shorter life expectancy, poorer health outcomes, increased child and maternal mortality rates, and acute poverty (Aina & Olayode, 2011). Gender inequality often manifests in various ways, including lower participation rates of women in the workforce, minimal decision-making authority at home and in public spheres, disparities in pay, and differences in ownership rights (Koengkan et al., 2022). Girls encounter gender discrimination at every stage of their lives and in some cases, even before they are born. This bias against girls results in increased rates of female foeticide, sex-selective abortions, infanticides, and diminished sex ratios. The preference for sons is deeply entrenched in patriarchal culture because boys are perceived to hold greater value and status; they continue the family lineage, provide financial benefits and are responsible for performing the funeral rituals of their parents (Lamichhane et al., 2011). The societal attitude favoring sons also puts pressure on women to bear sons, often resorting to sex-selective technologies such as sex-selective abortions, which adversely affect women's mental and physical health. A mother with sons receives not only more prenatal care than a mother with daughters but also greater respect from her family. It is clear that a mother of sons has more antenatal checkups during her subsequent pregnancy compared to a mother of daughters. Studies have shown that girls are breastfed for approximately 0.37

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months shorter than boys (Seema Jayachandran & Ilyana Kuziemko, 2009). Women who only have daughters in their past pregnancies tend to breastfeed less in order to conceive with a son in their next pregnancy. Boys not only tend to be breastfed for a longer duration but also receive vaccinations and vitamin supplements, while girls are frequently overlooked (Barcellos et al., 2010). Parents dedicate more effort to caring for boys compared to girls. Households with boys allocate 10 percent more resources daily to boys than those with girls. This difference becomes even more significant in families with only one child. In families with a single male child under the age of 6, approximately 50 additional minutes are spent daily on the child compared to families with one girl of the same age (Barcellos et al., 2010; Seema Jayachandran & Ilyana Kuziemko, 2009). This has a long lasting negative impact on the development of girl children.

One of the repercussions of a preference for sons is the decreasing sex ratio at each age group, resulting in fewer girls of marriageable age compared to boys. This imbalance leads to child marriages among girls before they reach the legal marriage age. Research shows that in Nepal, approximately 7 percent of girls are married by the age of 10, and 40 percent by the age of 15 (Hervish & Feldman-Jacobs, 2011).

Through early and coerced marriages, young girls find themselves in situations that deprive them of their fundamental human rights, cut-off their chances for education and schooling, limit their freedom, increase their vulnerability to domestic violence, hinder their economic independence and prospects and place them at a greater risk for negative physical, cognitive, emotional and psychological outcomes (Hervish & Feldman-Jacobs, 2011). Additionally, early marriage often leads to early pregnancy, which carries serious implications for both the physical and mental growth of young girls, including heightened risks for obstetric fistula,

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pregnancy complications and potentially fatal injuries during childbirth (Hampton, 2010).

Complications during childbirth for girls whose bodies are not fully mature are a leading cause of maternal mortality among those aged between 15 and 19 in developing nations (Hervish & Feldman-Jacobs, 2011). Again, children born to adolescent mothers are more likely to be born prematurely, have low birth weights and experience higher rates of malnutrition (Rafferty, 2013).

In India, gender bias has been apparent since ancient times, which is reflected in the sex ratio, life expectancy, literacy levels, health-related issues, school enrollment rates, school dropout rates, job prospects, and the economic and political involvement of women (Malenahalli Chandrashekarappa et al., 2017).

Consequently, recognizing the significant adverse effects of gender inequality, often stemming from the family environment of a girl child, on her proper development into a woman, this research aims to examine the current status of women within their families.

This paper is organized under five sections. The first section deals with the introduction. The second section lays the objectives of the study. The third section discusses the methodology used in this study. The fourth section presents a discussion of the research findings and the last section provides a conclusion to the paper.

1. OBJECTIVES:

The main aim of this research is to explore the existence of gender inequality within families and its impact on a woman's ability to make decisions regarding pregnancy outcomes, prenatal care, educational attainment, workforce participation, income and control over her own resources in India, particularly in Assam.

2. METHODOLOGY:

The paper is basically descriptive in nature. It uses secondary data from National Family Health Survey-round 5th to examine the

presence of gender discrimination within a family in Assam as well as in India. Summary statistics like average, ratio, percentage and liner regression are applied and pie chart and bar diagrams are drawn to analyze the status of women in her family in Assam *vis-a-vis* India.

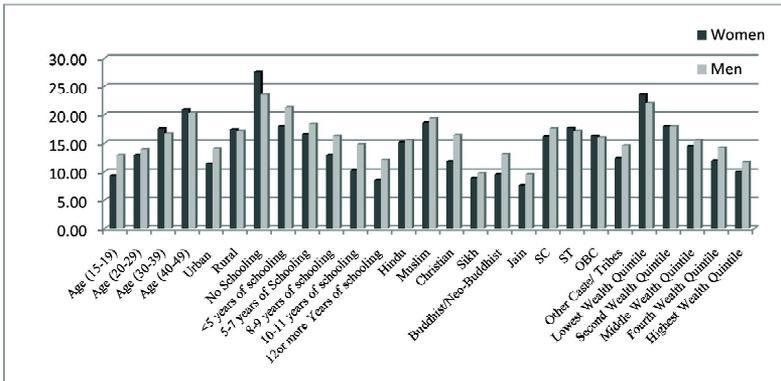
3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION:

Indian society operates within a patriarchal framework, where the preference for sons influences family's birth outcomes. Families with only daughters often desire more children to ensure at least one son. A woman who has three living daughters may choose to have an ultrasound during her current pregnancy to confirm that her reproductive journey concludes with the birth of a son. It is noteworthy that only 51 percent of women in this situation have a son, while 37 percent give birth to a daughter. However, the sex of the newborn for the remaining 12 percent of these women remains unreported. This raises concerns about the potential for severe consequences stemming from son preference, such as female foeticide, sex-selective abortions, or infanticide. India has witnessed sex selective abortions and researches also have revealed that more than 10 million female fetuses have been illegally aborted in India since 1990s. Overall, 2.1 percent of all abortions in India, with 1.7 percent occurring in urban areas and 2.4 percent in rural areas, were conducted for female fetuses during 2019- 2021. Abortion of female fetuses was highest in Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Daman & Diu (about 7.6 percent), followed by Goa (about 7.3 percent), Bihar (about 5.3 percent) and Jharkhand (4.9 percent). Among the NE-states, Manipur (3 percent) has the highest sex selective abortion followed by Arunachal Pradesh (1 percent) and Tripura (0.8 percent), whereas no NE-states abort male fetuses. The discrepancy in the male to female population ratio in India indicates the prevalence of sex-selective abortions. According to the National Crime Records

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Bureau’s annual report from 2019, the number of missing children was recorded at 63,407, 63,349 and 67,134 in the years 2016, 2017, and 2018, respectively (National Crime Records Bureau, 2019). Again, the sex ratio for children aged 0-6 years in urban and rural regions was only 924 and 930, respectively in 2021 (International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF, 2021). The decreasing sex ratio across all age groups indicates son preference in India. Chart 1 illustrates the preferences for sons in India, categorized by factors such as the age of men and women, place of residence, educational levels,

Chart 1: Son Preference among women and men for more sons than daughters as per age, wealth quintiles, residence, education, religion and caste:



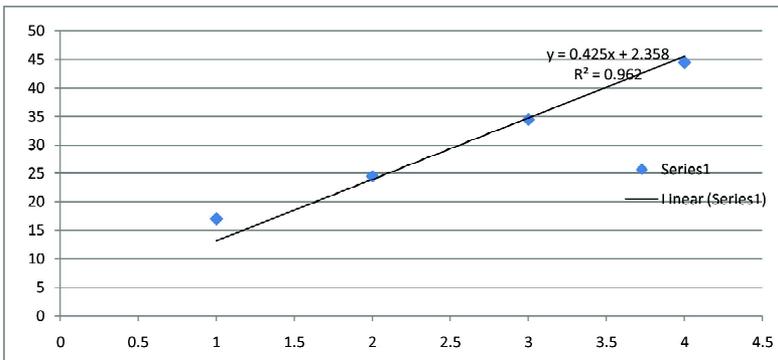
Source: NFHS-V (2019-21)

religion, caste, and wealth quintiles. This comparative analysis shows that the preference for sons is more pronounced among men than women. The strongest son preference is found among men and women who have not received any formal education, followed by those in the lowest wealth quintiles. Individuals with limited or no education tend to be unaware of societal changes, adhering to traditional beliefs and resisting progress. Moreover, those enduring

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poverty and lacking literacy may view sons as valuable assets for generating income. They tend to favor sons and consider daughters as a liability. The trend line in chart no. 2 indicates a positive association between the age of currently married women and their inclination towards preferring sons over daughters. This may occur because, with age, women become more cognizant of the traditional beliefs upheld by a patriarchal society, which sees sons as the primary caregivers in their later years while daughters are expected to be married off to other families. They often perceive daughters as a financial burden due to the costs associated with raising them and the dowries that need to be provided during weddings. In contrast, younger married women tend to favor daughters, as they are more informed about recent societal shifts and, in some cases, are the pioneer of change. They advocate for equal treatment of both sons and daughters.

Chart 2: Regression of age of the currently married women (cohort) on son preference as want more sons than daughters:



Source: Authors' own calculations from NFHS-V, 2019-2021

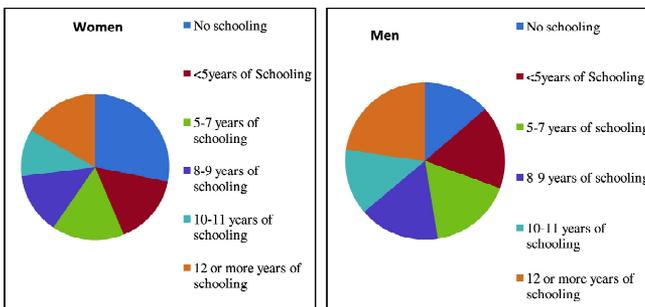
At the same time, the preference for sons declines as educational levels rise. Individuals with higher educational qualifications tend to justify issues scientifically and do not blindly

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adhere to unscientific traditional practices. Only 8.50 percent of women with 12 years or more of education prefer sons over daughters, while 12.10 percent of men in the same educational attainment prefer more sons. In contrast, approximately 27.50 percent of women and 23.60 percent of men with no education prefer more sons. A significant 81 percent men prefer more sons while only 15 percent women prefer more sons. Conversely, only 16 percent of men desire more daughters and just 4 percent of women prefer daughters over sons. In Assam 14.3 percent women prefer more sons than daughters while only 4 percent women prefer more daughters to sons. About 15.3 percent men prefer more sons than daughters while 3 percent men prefer more daughters than sons.

In a poverty-stricken country like India, the practice of patriarchy undermines essential facilities needed for the healthy development of the female population and exacerbates the deprivation of women. When comparing educational attainment between men and women, a higher percentage of women (28.2 percent) are illiterate compared to men (13.5 percent). Chart 3 illustrates that the percentage of women is consistently lower than that of men across all categories of years of education.

Chart 3: Percentage distribution of men and women in each category of years of educational attainments:



Source: NFHS-V, 2019-2021

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Median years of schooling in India for women are 4.9 years of schooling and for men 7.3 years of schooling. While in Assam, median years of schooling completed for women and men are 5.3 years and 6.3 years respectively. The main reason for gender bias in attaining education is financial costs associated with education. In India, about 6.8 percent of total women

Table 1: Percentage distribution reasons for not attending current year of schooling of children of age (6-17) years:

Main Reasons	Urban		Rural		Total	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Further education not considered necessary	3.2	5.4	3.9	3.4	3.7	3.8
Required for household work	9.5	13.9	9.9	13.2	9.8	13.3
Costs too much	14.9	20	16.5	20.8	16.1	20.6
Required for care of siblings	0.3	0.7	0.4	0.7	0.4	0.7
Got married	0.3	5	0.3	7.2	0.3	6.8
Other reasons	10.5	10.9	8.3	7	8.9	7.7

Source: NFHS-V, 2019-2021

of age 6-17 years are not attending current year of schooling because of their marriage. This statistic highlights the ongoing issue of child marriage in India, and when comparing males and females in the same age group, it is evident that females are disproportionately affected. A pertinent question arises: if fewer boys are married compared to girls, then girl child are married to whom? Thus, the age at which individuals first marry serves as a significant indicator of gender-based discrimination affecting both men and women in the context of marriage.

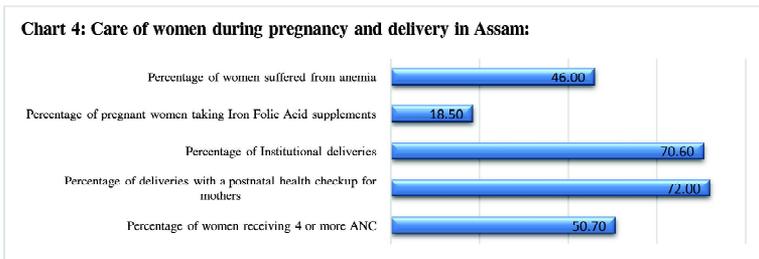
In India, 38 percent of women aged 20 to 49 are married

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before reaching the legal minimum marriage age of 18 years, while only 23 percent of men aged 25 to 49 marry before the legal minimum age of 21 years. Although early marriage rates have been decreasing, 23 percent of women aged 20-24 and 47 percent of women aged 45-49 are still married before the legal age of 18. The median age for first marriage among women in the 20-49 age group is 19.2 years, whereas for men aged 25-49 it is 24.9 years. Women in urban areas tend to marry later than their rural counterparts. Additionally, women with higher education levels prefer to marry at older ages. The median age at first marriage for women aged 25-49 rises from 17.1 years for those with no education to 22.8 years for those with 12 years or more of schooling. Education not only decreases child marriage but also lowers the rates of teenage pregnancy. For women with no education, the median age at first childbirth is 19.9 years, while for those with 12 or more years of education, it increases to 24.9 years. In India, 7 percent of women aged 15-19 begin childbearing, which can lead to numerous adverse health outcomes for both mothers and newborns, including preterm birth, low birth weight, post-delivery complications, and increased rates of neonatal and maternal mortality. High maternal mortality rates indicate a lack of developed healthcare facilities in a country. Insufficient and unsafe maternal care services during pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period pose risks not only to mothers but also to their newborns. Consequently, the WHO set forth four essential care indicators to ensure a healthy pregnancy: (i) met demand for family planning, (ii) at least four antenatal checkups (ANC), (iii) delivery at a healthcare facility and (iv) postnatal care after two days postpartum. However, in India, only 58.5 percent of women receive four or more ANC visits. Within the various states and union territories in India, Nagaland has the lowest rate of mothers attending four or more ANC visits at just 20.7 percent, followed closely by

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Arunachal Pradesh. Several factors contribute to this trend. Among these, about 14.2 percent of men in urban areas and 20.1 percent in rural areas believe that ANC is unnecessary and hence ignore it. Additionally, 15.3 percent of families in urban areas and 12.1 percent in rural areas of pregnant women also do not deem ANC necessary and consequently do not permit to undertake. Moreover, husbands and family members of pregnant women have revealed that ANC can be prohibitively expensive. Approximately 19.4 percent in urban areas and 29.6 percent in rural areas report that costs deter them from pursuing ANC services.



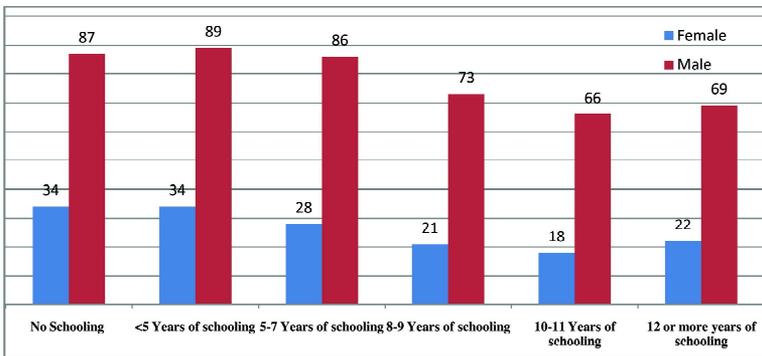
Source: NFHS-V, 2019-2021

In India, 88.6 percent of women gave birth in a healthcare facility. Even though approximately 72.5 percent of husbands are informed by the health care providers about significance of institutional delivery, nearly 30.5 percent husbands in urban areas and 27.6 percent in rural areas do not opt it. However, approximately 20.3 percent of husbands in India consider institutional deliveries to be too expensive to afford. Additionally, 18.1 percent families in urban areas and 19.5 percent in rural areas did not permit this because they also think it is unnecessary. However, 22.6 percent of women did not deliver in a health facility experienced severe vaginal bleeding, and 18.9 percent faced very high fever. Furthermore, 19.6 percent and 17.8 percent of non-institutional deliveries assisted by a ‘Dai’ faced massive vaginal bleeding and very high fever respectively.

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About 46.3 percent of women delivered at home and 49.1 percent delivered at their parents' home did not get any post-delivery check-up. In numerous cases, pregnant women are unable to access the best care options due to financial reliance. In India, married women are not always encouraged to work outside their homes. Various factors contribute to this. The predominant reason is the patriarchal mindset in society, where men are viewed as the primary bread earners and women as the caregivers. Moreover, other reasons for women's lower employment arise from discrimination faced earlier in their lives, including limited educational opportunities, early marriages and childbirth at a young age. According to NFHS-V, men aged 15-49 are three times more likely (i.e., 75 percent) to be employed compared to women (i.e., 25

Table 2: Employment (%) of male and female as per the years of schooling in India:



Source: NFHS-V (2019-2021)

percent) during the period of 2019-2021. In the same report, it is noted that approximately 70 percent of women are unemployed, compared to 19 percent of men. In Assam, only 17.9 percent women and 76.5 percent men are currently working. From 2015-16 to 2019-21, the percentage of women with employment has slightly risen from 24 percent to 25 percent. In India, 46.2 percent of women are

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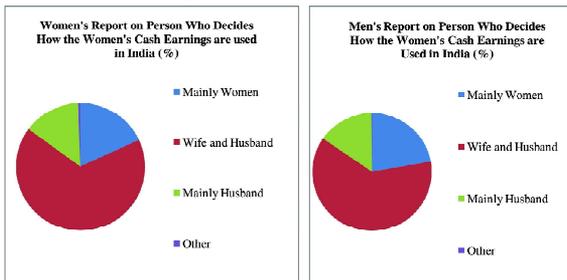
engaged in agricultural work, with around 53.8 percent being seasonal workers. Among all female agricultural workers, 83.5 percent are employed by family members, 10 percent by non-family members, and only 6.4 percent are self-employed. There exists significant gender discrimination regarding wage payments in India. Approximately 23.7 percent of women do not receive payment, whereas about 10 percent of male workers go unpaid. In various sectors, a higher percentage of women (15 percent) than men (3.8 percent) are not compensated. Furthermore, 74.8 percent of all employed women receive their payments in cash, while 7.8 percent receive both cash and in-kind payments and 2.4 percent receive payment solely in-kind. In contrast, for employed men, 86.1 percent receive cash payments, 8.9 percent receive both cash and in-kind income and only 1.3 percent receive in-kind compensation exclusively. Similarly, earnings of men and women within families are also not equal. The reporting by both men and women regarding husbands' cash income compared to their wives does not align. The higher percentage of women reported that of husbands' cash earning is more than their wives across all age groups from 15 years to 49 years than men reported. This is obvious in a patriarchal society. However, with increase in educational attainment this patriarchal mindset has changed and this is visible in case of reporting women and men with 12 or more years of education. In this group, men reported a lower percentage of husbands out-earning their wives compared to what women had reported. However, men reported higher percentage of husbands with higher cash earnings than their wives than women reported regardless of place of residence (rural or urban), family type (nuclear or non-nuclear) and across all religions. The largest gap between men's and women's reporting is observed in Sikh religion.

When comparing men's and women's reports on the category

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of ‘husbands’ cash earnings being less than their wives’ cash earnings’, it becomes evident that men’s reporting is lower than that of women across all socio-demographic groups, except in urban regions, among individuals with 12 or more years of education, within the Muslim community, and in the highest wealth quintile. There is also a discrepancy in how men and women report on who determines the utilization of women’s cash earnings. Based on women’s accounts, only 18.1 percent of women have control over how their cash earnings are spent, whereas men’s accounts indicate this figure is slightly higher at 22 percent. Women noted that around 14.3 percent of women’s cash earnings are allocated by husbands, while men reported that husbands decide on the use of just 15.2 percent of women’s earnings. Additionally, 60 percent of women’s cash earnings are jointly decided upon by both husbands and wives. However, control over how women’s cash earnings are utilized by husbands and other relatives diminishes as women age. It is also observed that in rural areas, a higher proportion of decisions regarding the use of women’s cash earnings is made by husbands and other family members compared to urban areas. Furthermore, urban women exercise more control over the distribution of their cash earnings than their rural counterparts.

Chart 6: Who Decides What Percent of Currently Married Women’s Cash Earning is Used:



Source: National Family Health Survey-V, 2019-2021

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4. CONCLUSION:

Wage and income disparities between men and women arise because women tend to hold lower-paying positions, often due to lower skill levels and educational qualifications, or due to lifelong deprivation in areas such as nutrition, education, marriage, and childbirth. The differences in wages for the same job level are predominantly observed in low-paying work that requires physical labor, like daily wage laborers, whereas in high-paying positions, gender-based wage discrepancies are less prevalent. The opportunity costs associated with family caregiving and opting for larger families due to a preference for sons are significant, as women have limited time for self-discovery and personal growth, including pursuing employment and earning income. Understanding the motivations behind son preference is crucial for developing effective policies aimed at reducing gender bias in parental investments for both boys and girls. This preference stems from the perceived

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advantages parents have when raising male children, who they believe will yield greater financial returns, while raising daughters often incurs higher costs due to expectations such as dowries. Many people still hesitate to grant their daughters the rights they deserve, which can encompass food distribution, inheritance and health care, division of labor, economic participation, and education. However, with adequate education and increased awareness about the legal rights that protect girls and women's rights, it is possible to achieve gender equality, though this progress may require a significant amount of time due to its deep-rooted nature in societal norms. Increasing the empowerment of women will enhance gender equality in society, as it paves the way to dismantle patriarchal structures.

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Invisible Wounds, Public Health Crisis: Gender-Based Violence and RCH Outcomes in Assam

MINAKSHI BARO

ABSTRACT :

Violence against women is a pervasive issue with severe consequences for their physical, emotional, and reproductive health. Access to and use of reproductive and child health (RCH) services by women are significantly impacted by domestic and gender-based violence in the socio-cultural context of Assam, where patriarchal norms and socioeconomic vulnerabilities endure. Drawing on secondary data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), scholarly literature and government reports, this paper explores the relationship between violence against women and RCH outcomes in Assam. It further examines the multidimensional impact of violence including physical abuse, sexual coercion, and psychological distress on antenatal care, institutional delivery, contraception use and child immunization. It also highlights the role of institutional mechanisms, public health policy and community interventions in addressing the dual burden of violence and poor health among women in Assam. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for incorporating gender-sensitive strategies into RCH programmes to ensure holistic well-being of women.

(Keywords: *Violence against women, RCH, Assam, Domestic violence, Public health, Gender, NFH.*)

1. INTRODUCTION

Violence against women is a deeply rooted societal issue with far-reaching repercussions, particularly for the health and well-being of women. It encompasses a spectrum of abusive behavior ranging from physical assaults to psychological intimidation, sexual coercion, and financial hardship. Such violence is not only a human rights violation but also a public health emergency that undermines the effectiveness of RCH interventions.

The socio-economic landscape of Assam is characterized by ingrained patriarchal traditions, rural poverty and high illiteracy rates among women. These factors restrict women's liberty in seeking medical attention and amplify women's vulnerability to violence. This paper highlights how these acts of violence frequently committed behind closed doors intersect with critical aspects of maternal and child health, including antenatal care, institutional deliveries, contraceptive access and child immunization.

RCH outcomes are increasingly being studied through a gendered perspective that accounts for the effects of violence against women. Numerous research conducted globally and within India have identified that access to mother and child health services is significantly hampered by gender-based violence, especially intimate partner violence.

According to Jejeebhoy and Bott (2003), intimate relationship violence is one of the most widespread and least acknowledged forms of violence that affects reproductive autonomy of women in India. According to their research, women in abusive relationships frequently had limited access to contraception, delayed antenatal care and increased fertility rates. Silverman et al. (2007) used NFHS-3 data to establish that Indian women experiencing spousal violence

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were significantly less likely to use antenatal care services or have institutional deliveries. This finding is echoed by Ackerson and Subramanian (2008), who found a strong correlation between domestic violence and poor child immunization outcomes across Indian states. Women who experiences physical or sexual abuse are significantly more likely to suffer from poor maternal outcomes, including miscarriage, low birth weight and postpartum depression (WHO, 2013). The WHO multi-country study highlighted the cumulative physical, psychological and social health burdens associated with intimate partner violence and recommended its integration into primary health care and maternal health services. Das and Sarkar (2020) contend that cultural stigma, economic dependence, and geographical isolation exacerbate women's vulnerability in Assam and limit their access to RCH services. According to their study on rural Assam, women from tea garden communities face twofold marginalization, due to both their socio-economic status and the prevalence of domestic violence.

Research from the Centre for Catalyzing Change (2022) further demonstrates that in Northeast India, particularly Assam, there is a lack of institutional capacity to integrate gender-based violence response into health systems. Health workers are not adequately trained to screen for violence and most community-level interventions do not include gender-sensitive elements. Studies consistently show that gender-based violence is both a cause and an effect of poor reproductive and child health. According to Pallitto et al. (2013), intimate partner violence during pregnancy is associated with delayed or reduced antenatal care and increased risk of maternal complications, especially in low and middle-income countries. They highlighted that intimate partner violence impairs women's autonomy, mobility and ability to make decisions about their health. A longitudinal study conducted in Uttar Pradesh by Koenig et al. (2006) found

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that women who experienced physical or sexual violence had significantly lower odds of seeking skilled birth attendance and were less likely to complete four or more antenatal visits. Their study emphasizes the importance of addressing gender-based violence to improve maternal health outcomes.

According to Bhattacharya and Rajan (2013), traditional gender roles and power hierarchies often result in low RCH indicators in India, especially in tribal and tea garden communities. According to their ethnographic study in Assam, violence was not always perceived as abnormal behaviour, which normalized abuse and resulted in underreporting. George (2007) argued that India's maternal health programmes often overlooked gender power dynamics from the standpoint of public health systems. Her critique of the RCH Programme under NHM suggests that the failure to integrate gender perspectives has contributed to low uptake of services in high-burden states like Assam and Bihar.

A more recent study by Kumar and Jeyaseelan (2020) evaluated the association between intimate partner violence and child immunization outcomes using NFHS-4 data. They found that children of mothers who had been victims of spousal violence were less likely to have received all recommended vaccinations, indicating the impacts of violence on the health of women and future generations. International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW, 2016) noted that in pilot studies conducted across rural India, integrated interventions combining RCH services with gender-based violence support and counselling led to better maternal outcomes, improved contraceptive uptake, and reduced violence.

These studies highlight the urgent need for a rights-based and integrated policy approach to address gender-based violence as a critical factor influencing RCH outcomes. Despite increased awareness, systematic integration of gender considerations into

maternal and child health policies remains limited, particularly in states like Assam where vulnerabilities are structurally embedded.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: VIOLENCE AS A SOCIAL DETERMINANT OF RCH

The relationship between gender-based violence and reproductive health is both direct and systemic. According to the World Health Organization (2013), women who are victims of intimate partner violence are twice as likely to suffer from depression, have low birth weight babies and are 50% more likely to have HIV. The impact is magnified in Assam due to the compounded effects of social marginalisation, economic dependence and lack of support systems. Gender violence functions as a structural barrier, much like poverty or caste discrimination, which impact physical access to health centers, the ability to make reproductive decisions and trust in public health institutions.

RCH includes the well-being of women and children, not just in biological terms but also across emotional, social, and psychological dimensions. Gender-based violence, especially intimate partner violence, disrupts each of these dimensions, functioning as a social determinant that directly and indirectly affects health outcomes. Violence impairs this well-being at multiple levels:

Physical impact: Violence often results in physical trauma, miscarriage, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and complications during childbirth.

Psychological impact: Mental health conditions like anxiety, sadness, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder can result from persistent abuse, which in turn discourage women from seeking medical attention or pursuing treatment.

Behavioural impact: Women living under abusive environments may avoid contraception, miss antenatal visits or refuse institutional delivery out of fear or control exerted by the

abuser.

This framework emphasizes the need to address violence as a structural impediment to fair access to healthcare, rather than only as a legal or criminal issue.

3. STATUS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN ASSAM

One in three women worldwide experiences physical or sexual violence in her lifetime, with significant impacts on RCH outcomes (World Health Organisation, 2013). The problem of violence against women in Assam is aggravated by several risk factors. Controlling behaviour and abuse within households are often normalized by the cultural acceptance of male dominance. The high prevalence of alcoholism among men, particularly in tea garden belts, where alcohol abuse is both a coping mechanism and a trigger for aggression further intensifies this even more. About 57.3% of women whose husbands consume alcohol reported spousal violence, indicating a strong linkage between substance abuse and gender-based violence in Assam. Women's financial reliance on men restricts their ability to leave abusive relationships or seek help. Further, low literacy levels and early marriages reduce women's awareness of their rights and limit their access to support systems, leaving them more vulnerable to exploitation and violence. In Assam, 32% of women aged 20–24 was married before age 18, one of the highest rates in India. These intersecting disadvantages stand as barriers to women's mobility, decision-making power and ability to seek timely healthcare for themselves and for their children.

The National Family Health Survey-5 (2019–21) reveals a sobering view of the prevalence of violence against women in Assam. As per the report, 32% of ever-married women aged 18–49 years in Assam have been the victims of spousal physical, sexual or emotional violence. The figure is significantly above the national average of 29.3%. Among them, 30.1% reported physical violence,

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and 7% reported sexual violence, highlighting the serious nature of abuse experienced even within intimate relationships. About 8.5% of women experienced emotional violence, which is often under reported. Alarming, more than 1 in 10 women in Assam experienced violence during pregnancy, which poses grave risks to both mother and unborn child's health.

The NFHS-5 further shows that only 9.5% of women in Assam who experienced any form of spousal violence sought help, which indicate that a high level of normalization, fear, and stigma associated with reporting abuse. Alarming about 81% of women who faced violence never told anyone and just 0.6% approached the police or legal authorities for help. The main source of help for those who did sought support was family (7.3%), followed by neighbours or friends. This low incidence of formal reporting reflects systemic barriers such as a lack of trust in institutions, fear of retaliation and socio-cultural taboos that prevent women from disclosing their experiences.

Assam presents a particularly vulnerable context due to high rurality (over 85% rural population), low female literacy (77.2%), and cultural norms that upholds male dominance. These factors restrict women's access to timely antenatal care, family planning, and child health services. The violence, often hidden and normalized, weakens women's ability to seek care or make autonomous reproductive decisions, undermining efforts of the state to improve maternal and child health.

Table: NFHS-5 Indicators Reflecting Violence against Women in Assam

Indicator	Assam (%)	Description
Ever-married women who have ever experienced spousal violence	32	Includes physical, sexual, or emotional violence by husband/partner

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Indicator	Assam (%)	Description
Ever-married women (age 18–49) who have experienced physical violence	28.8	Includes violence from husband, family members, or others
Ever-married women (age 18–49) who have experienced physical or sexual violence	36.8	Covers all forms of forced or coerced sexual acts
Women (ever married) who experienced physical violence during pregnancy	9.4	Reflects violence during any pregnancy, affecting maternal and fetal health
Women who sought help after experiencing any form of violence	9.5	Indicates help-seeking behaviour after facing violence
Women who never sought help or told anyone about the violence	81.2	Reveals normalization and silence around abuse
Women who believe a husband is justified in hitting or beating his wife	31.9	Reflects internalized gender norms; justification in certain situations

Furthermore, NFHS-5 shows that women who lived in rural areas and with no formal education reported higher incidences of violence, which reflect the compounding effect of poverty, illiteracy, and patriarchal norms. The survey also reveals that working women were more likely to experience spousal violence (49.1%) than unemployed women (29.6%). This may be due to increased male insecurity and resistance to shifting gender norms.

According to the National Statistical Office (NSO) survey on “Women’s Safety in India” (2020), a significant percentage of women aged 18 and above reported experiencing various forms of violence during their lifetime. While physical violence by husbands remained the most prevalent, the report also disclosed substantial instances of emotional violence and economic control, particularly in rural areas. Interestingly, the survey also found that over 70% of women who experienced violence did not report it to anyone, citing

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reasons such as “did not think it was serious enough,” “fear of retaliation,” or “family honour.” These findings align with NFHS-5 data from Assam, where only 9.8% of abused women sought help. The NSSO survey further revealed that women from marginalized communities, including Scheduled Tribes and rural populations, reported higher vulnerability, upholding the need for targeted interventions.

4. RCH INDICATORS IN ASSAM: A GENDERED PERSPECTIVE

Assam continues to perform below national averages on several RCH indicators. While progress has been made in recent years, disparities remain, especially in districts where violence against women is prevalent.

Antenatal care (ANC): Compared to 58.1% nationwide, only 50.7% of pregnant women in Assam receive four or more ANC visits. This indicates systemic issues like poor infrastructure, lack of awareness, and gendered power dynamics at home.

Institutional deliveries: Assam’s institutional delivery rate of 84.1% is still below the national average of approximately 88.6%, reflecting limited access to maternal health services.

Contraceptive use: The use of modern contraceptive methods is limited to 45.3%, often due to spousal disapproval or coercion compared to a national average of 56.5%.

Child immunization: Full immunization for children aged 12–23 months stands at just 66.4%, against national average of 76.4% indicating gaps in service delivery and follow-up.

Districts like Barpeta, Darrang, and Dibrugarh, which report high incidences of domestic violence, also exhibit poor RCH performance, reflecting a direct link between violence and maternal-child health outcomes.

5. LINKING VIOLENCE AND RCH: EVIDENCE FROM ASSAM

5.1 Antenatal Care and Domestic Violence

Women in abusive relationships often miss important antenatal checkups. They might not have financial autonomy, be confined at their homes, or fear negative reactions from their partners if they step out for medical visits. Their mental readiness for care is also affected by trauma leading to delayed detection of complications. According to NFHS-5 data, women who experienced violence were 10–12% less likely to attend four or more ANC visits. Despite high-risk conditions like anaemia in tea garden areas, many abused women reported never seeing a doctor throughout their pregnancies.

5.2 Family Planning and Coercion

NFHS-5 data shows that around 12% of non-users of contraception cited spousal objection. This aligns with national trends where control over fertility is often viewed as a male prerogative. Women are subjected to forced pregnancies or forbidden from using contraceptives in many cases, indicating deeply ingrained patriarchal control over reproductive rights.

5.3 Maternal and Neonatal Outcomes

Women experiencing violence during pregnancy face increased health risks, including increased chances of delivering low birth weight or stillborn babies. Over 20% of births in such households are low weight. Such violence can lead to serious maternal issues like anaemia and haemorrhage, endangering both mother and child health. NFHS-5 reveals that around 66% of women in Assam are anaemic, one of the highest rates in India. Furthermore, it significantly increases the risk of postpartum depression, which can adversely impact a mother's ability to care for her newborn. These effects are not isolated; they also result in intergenerational health problems and developmental delays in children.

6. INSTITUTIONAL AND POLICY RESPONSE :

6.1 Health System Response

RCH programs of Assam often overlook the intersection of gender violence and health despite the presence of the National Health Mission (NHM). Although the NHM has introduced key maternal health programmes like Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY) and Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY), but gender violence screening is rarely integrated into service delivery. Most health workers are not trained to recognize signs of abuse or offer referrals. If there are dedicated counselling units, they are inadequately staffed or functional. According to a report published by the Centre for Catalyzing Change (2022), only 12% of ANMs in Northeast India had training on how to handle cases of gender-based violence. Assam lacks dedicated One Stop Centres (OSCs) in many districts, and existing ones are often underfunded or understaffed. There is no state-level protocol that mandates regular screening for domestic violence during antenatal care.

6.2 Legal and Community Mechanisms

A legal framework is provided by the *Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act. (PWDVA), 2005*, but its implementation in Assam remains weak due to lack of awareness and trained personnel. In Assam, many districts lack Protection Officers or have overburdened staff. In some areas, Helpline 181 is active, but awareness is limited. NGOs like *North East Network (NEN)* and *Mahila Samittees* work to support victims but have a limited reach due to financial constraints and geographic isolation of some communities. To ensure the effectiveness of existing protection, community-based legal literacy campaigns and integration of legal aid into health programmes are urgently needed. A gender audit by the National Commission for Women (NCW) in 2021 found that Assam spent less than 1% of its NHM budget on gender-sensitive

interventions.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS :

It is imperative that RCH programmes adopt gender-sensitive strategies that recognize and address the structural inequalities faced by women to improve RCH outcomes in Assam. Below are key policy recommendations for integrating gender equity within maternal and child health services:

I. Routine Screening for Gender-Based Violence in Health Services

Using WHO's LIVES protocol (Listen, Inquire, Validate, Enhance Safety, Support), train frontline health workers (ANMs, ASHAs, nurses, doctors) how to identify and safely respond to signs of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse. Incorporate confidential screening for gender-based violence into antenatal, postnatal, and family planning services.

II. Capacity Building and Sensitization of Health Staff

Gender sensitization modules should be incorporated in all NHM and state-level RCH training programmes. Ensure that medical professionals, especially male providers, are trained and sensitized to handle survivors of violence with dignity and confidentiality.

III. Establish Women-Friendly Health Infrastructure

Make certain that all District Hospitals and Community Health Centres have Women's Help Desks, safe spaces and counselling rooms with trained female staff. Establish procedures for referrals to OSCs, legal aid, or police whenever or wherever necessary.

IV. Strengthen Data Systems with Gender Disaggregation

Disaggregation of all RCH data by sex, age, social group, and experience of violence are to be mandated. To improve monitoring and responsiveness, integrate gender-based violence-related indicators (e.g., screening rates, referrals, abuse disclosures) into district health dashboards.

V. Community-Based Gender Empowerment Initiatives

Leverage platforms like Self-Help Groups (SHGs), Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Committees (VHSNCs), and Panchayati Raj Institutions to:

- ❖ Raise awareness about gender-based violence and reproductive rights
- ❖ Establish safe community networks for support and referral
- ❖ Engage boys and men in shifting harmful gender stereotypes

VI. Gender-Responsive Budgeting

Ensure that within RCH programmes under the NHM have a dedicated budget line for tackling gender-based violence. Funds should support community outreach, training, help lines, mobile clinics and monitoring tools specifically targeting gender disparities.

VII. Collaboration with Legal and Social Services

To ensure that survivors receive legal, psychosocial, and financial support, develop a referral network linking healthcare centers with Protection Officers under PWDVA, OSCs, NGOs, and Child Protection Services.

8. CONCLUSION

The intersection of violence and reproductive health cannot be overlooked in the development discourse for Assam. Addressing violence against women is a critical component of enhancing women and children health outcomes and not merely a legal or moral imperative. An integrated, multi-sectoral strategy is necessary to ensure that women are not only safe but also healthy and empowered. This study calls for a paradigm shift in RCH policy, moving from a purely service-based approach to one that integrate *gender justice and protection* as central pillars.

The only way to improve maternal and child health outcomes and move toward inclusive, equitable development, isto address the

covert violence women experience and actively integrating support mechanisms into RCH programmes.

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Female Work Force Participation Rate of Major Indian States : A Special Focus on NER

**LEENA BHAGAWATI
BARNALI SAIKIA**

ABSTRACT :

Labor market participation of women not only enhances their status and strength in the society, but also a sign of country's potential to grow rapidly. However, different studies revealed existing gender inequalities in work force participation not only across countries but also on inter-state basis. This study tries to analyze the inter-state differences in work force participation of women and also discuss the probable economic, social and demographic factors responsible for it. It also analyzes the situation of North Eastern Region regarding Labor market participation of females specifically.

INTRODUCTION :

Women's participation in labor market not only reflect their contribution towards economic development but also shows lessening of discrimination, enhancing their capabilities in political, economic and social life. India, possessing the largest demographic dividend currently, should employ human resources including its female in a more efficient way. However, declining trend of female labor force participation rate is a sad reality. In a developing country like India Female Labor Force Participation Rate depends not only on

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economic factors such as household income, per capita consumption expenditure, level of educational attainment indicated by literacy rate, enrollment ratio etc., but also some demographic and socio-cultural factors such as marital status, fertility rate, social stigma etc. In this paper the author's analysis is based on cross section data of Female Work Force Participation Rate in major Indian states and also the factors influencing labor force participation of female viz gross fertility rate in the age group 15 & above and the literacy rate of the same age group.

LITERATURE REVIEW :

In this field many papers have been published and many reasons for low FLFPR have been pointed out. In a paper written by Lahoti and Swaminathan pointed out that though India is experiencing rapid economic growth but FLFPR is declining over time due to heavy use of technology in agricultural as well as in the manufacturing sector. As women are less skilled than men, that's why FLFPR is declining. Interestingly fertility rate is also declining over time, still FLFPR is not increasing due to higher income earned by the males who are running the house. That's why women don't feel the necessity of going to work and earn money to run the household. Daniel Coen-Pirani et. al pointed out that due to use of new household appliances such as microwave, fridge, washing machine etc., FLFPR in the U.S had increased during 1960's. Due to the uses of these kind of housing appliances it led to increase in FLFPR of married women to about 40%. But the case might not be same for India. A paper by David E. Bloom and others pointed out that declining fertility among women increases the FLFPR as well as increases the income per capita. Moreover, decline in fertility also increases the physical and human capital per capita.

METHODOLOGY :

In this paper mainly a cross-section study is being done & for

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this purpose 19 states have been taken into account. For the analysis of the model, 3 variables have been taken into account, such as, Working women in the age group 15 & above (Rural + Urban) per thousand population, marital status of women in the age 15 & above per 1000 of population, as well as literacy rate of women in the age 15 & above per 1000 of population. However, the data have been collected from the census report 2011, office of Registrar General India & NITI Aayog.

THE MODEL :

The proposed equation for the model is given below-

$$Y_t = \alpha + \beta X_t + \gamma Z_t + U_t$$

Here, U_t follows all the assumptions of OLS & U_t is a white noise error term with $(0, \sigma^2)$

Y_t represents dependent variable and X_t & Z_t represents independent variable.

t implies the time period i.e. the year 2011

Y_t implies Working women in the age group 15 & above per thousand of population

X_t implies marital status of women in the age group 15 & above per thousand of population

Z_t implies literacy rate of women in the age group 15 and above per thousand of population.

β & γ are slope coefficients, which shows marginal impacts of X_t and Z_t on Y_t . α is the intercept.

However, the rationale behind using these indicators are; a woman who gets married at an early age, has less probability or chance of joining the labour force as they need to take care of her babies and family. Moreover, a highly educated woman has greater chance of joining the labour market.

After running regression in SPSS and using STATA following results are found.

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Table No. 1: Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Working women in the age 15 & above per 1000	19	.00519	.95708	.1710268	.20412823
Married per 1000	19	.00567	.97456	.1819711	.20766520
Literacy per 1000	19	.00541	1.11587	.1869845	.23900144
Valid N (list wise)	19				

Table No.2: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	F
1	1.000 ^a	.999	.999	.00641091	9.116E3

a. Predictors: (Constant), literacy, marital status

b. Dependent Variable: Working Women in the age 15 & above per 1000 population

Table No. 3: Coefficient analysis

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients				
	B	Std. Error	t	Sig	Sig level
Marital status	.691	.061	11.315	.000	(***)= 1%
Literacy	.254	.053	4.794	.000	(***)=1%

Dependent Variable = Working women in the age 15 & above per 1000 population & *, **, ***, signifies that the model is significant at 1%, 5% and 10% level.

Table No.4: Test Results

Breusch-pegan/cook-wiseberg	0.8151
VIF	70.47

Breusch-Pegan/cook-Wiseberg = heteroscedasticitytest, VIF= Multicollinearity test.

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As, there was the problem of multicollinearity, after dropping the variable literacy rate, the problem is found to be solved. So, the revised model is-

$$Y_t = \alpha + \beta X_t + U_t$$

Here, the variables indicate the same, as defined earlier. After running the regression in SPSS and using the software STATA these results are being found-

Table No. 5: Model summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	F
1	.999 ^a	.998	.998	.00970744	7.943E3

- a. Predictors: (Constant), marital status
- b. Dependent Variable: Working Women in the age 15 & above per 1000 population

Table No. 6: Coefficients analysis

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients				Level of sig
	B	Std. Error	t	Sig.	
1(Constant)	-.008	.003	-2.554	.021	(***)= 1%
Marital status	.982	.011	89.119	.000	

- a. Dependent Variable: Working women in the age 15 & above per 1000 population and *, **, *** implies significance at 1%, 5% and 10% level.

Table No. 7: Test Results

Breusch pegan/cook-Weisberg	0.4828 (p)
VIF	1.00

Breusch pegan / cook- Weisberg test for Heteroscedasticity
VIF for Multicollinearity.

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NOTE: If ρ value is greater than 0.05, then it implies absence of heteroscedasticity.

When $VIF < 10$, it implies absence of multicollinearity.

Analysis of Results: From the above tables it is clear that the regressors have the significant impact on theregressed.

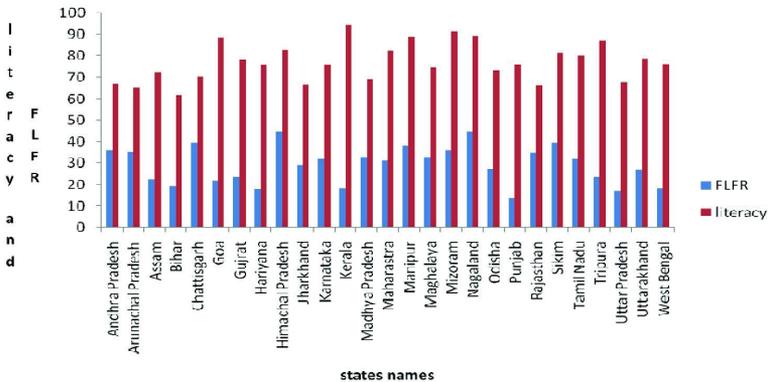
- ❖ From the table No. 2, the R^2 value is found to be .999 & adjusted R^2 also found to be 0.999, which implies that, 99.9% of variation in the dependent variable i.e. on Y_t is explained by these two independent variables i.e. X_t and Z_t . (as R^2 tends to 1 implies good fit).
- ❖ Moreover the model is significant with sufficiently large t values and small $\hat{\sigma}$ values. Both the variables (Literacy & Marital status) are significant at 1% level of significance, with significant F value.
- ❖ While dealing with cross section data set, the common problem that needs to be taken care of is the problem of heteroscedasticity. However, the model is free from the problem of heteroscedasticity, but the model is detected with the problem of multicollinearity with $VIF > 10$.
- ❖ However, to solve the problem of multicollinearity one of the independent variable is dropped out i.e. female literacy rate per 1000 population, which is found to be the problematic variable.
- ❖ After running the regression through SPSS i.e. regressing Y_t on X_t , the model is found to be significant, with R^2 0.998 & Adjusted R^2 also 0.998 & $\hat{\sigma}$ value equals to .000 (***) , which implies the model is significant at 1% significance level. Moreover, the F value is also significant for the model.
- ❖ Now the model is free from heteroscedasticity as $\hat{\sigma} = 0.4828$ which is greater than 0.05 and the model is free from multicollinearity as well, with $VIF=1$ (which is < 10).

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Diagrammatic representation of Female Work Participation Rate and Literacy Ratio in major Indian States: Data taken for the year 2011 are as follows–

STATES	Female work Participation Rate	Literacy Rate	STATES	Female Work Participation Rate	Literacy Rate
Andhra Pradesh	36.16	67.02	Manipur	38.56	89.22
Arunachal Pradesh	35.44	65.39	Meghalaya	32.67	74.43
Assam	22.46	72.19	Mizoram	36.16	91.33
Bihar	19.07	61.8	Nagaland	44.74	89.56
Chhattisgarh	39.7	70.29	Odisha	27.16	72.89
Goa	21.92	88.7	Punjab	13.91	75.84
Gujrat	23.38	78.03	Rajasthan	35.12	66.11
Haryana	17.79	75.55	Sikkim	39.57	81.42
Himachal Pradesh	44.82	82.8	Tamil Nadu	31.8	80.9
Jharkhand	29.1	66.41	Tripura	23.57	87.22
Karnataka	31.87	75.37	Uttar Pradesh	16.75	67.68
Kerala	18.23	94	Uttarakhand	26.68	78.82
Madhya Pradesh	32.64	69.32	West Bengal	18.08	76.26
Maharashtra	31.06	82.34	All India	25.51	72.99

FIG-1



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of sustainable economic development and a way towards gender equality.

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Embracing motherhood: An analysis of age at first birth among women in Assam using NFHS 5 data

SMITA CHOUDHURY

ABSTRACT:

Assam has been dealing with the critical issue of high maternal mortality since a very long time. Early motherhood is one of the contributing factors to poor maternal health outcomes. Women's age at the time of first childbirth provide us information about the time when women choose to embrace motherhood in their lives. It is obvious that various social, economic and demographic factors influence fertility choices of women such that age at first childbirth differ among different groups of women. Using unit level data from National Family Health Survey-5, this paper attempts to look at the factors influencing the age at first birth among women in Assam. Unit level data has been extracted and then tabulated across several variable heads to carry out the analysis. Findings reveal that Muslim women have a higher prevalence of first births by age 18 while tribal women in Assam have lower rate of early first births than their non tribal counterparts. Higher education levels and greater household wealth are associated with delayed first births. The study also finds that when women have autonomy to decide on their own healthcare, they can control their fertility behaviour which leads to

reduction in early childbearing.

(Keywords: *Women, age at first birth, early childbearing, NFHS-5, Assam.*)

INTRODUCTION:

Women's age at the time of first childbirth is an important indicator of maternal and child health. The median Assamese mother has her first child at 20 years now (NHFS 5 data). As women are beginning to have access to education, employment and income, the age at which women choose to have their first child are expected to grow over time. Biologically women are capable of childbearing at a young age but from a socioeconomic perspective early motherhood is associated with limiting freedom and autonomy for the mother in her life, including reduced educational attainment and economic opportunities. There are broader repercussions of early childbearing at societal level such as lower family income and rising poverty, demographic consequences in the form of larger family sizes and higher growth of population and increasing teenage pregnancies leading to higher risks of maternal and child mortality.

Assam has been one of the states with the highest Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR). However recent SRS data show positive improvements with the MMR dropping from 480 per lakh live births in 2006 to 125 in 2022, which is one of the sharpest declines in maternal deaths in India. Target 3.1 of Sustainable Development Goals SDG 3 specifically seeks to reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per lakh live births by 2030 (World Health Statistics). Thus, Assam still has much room for improvement as compared to the global standards which can be achieved if the state continues to address the issue of early pregnancies. Addressing early pregnancies also contributes to achieving SDG 5, which focuses on gender equality and empowering women and girls.

There are several studies on reproductive health in India but

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comprehensive studies on age at first childbirth is low. In the context of Assam this area of research remains further scarce. This highlights the important role of this study as an attempt to understand the various factors influencing the age at first birth among women in Assam using unit level data from the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5, 2019–2021). Analysing the key factors that decides women's age at first childbirth is crucial for designing effective policy interventions to improve maternal health outcomes and the overall quality of life for women.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Previous studies based outside India like that of Chowdhury et al. (2017) employed logistic regression to identify factors affecting the age at first birth among Bangladeshi women. Findings indicate that in Bangladesh literacy factor, fecundity factor, family planning factor, occupational factors are a major cause of the age at first birth of women.

In national level studies, Sardar and Sardar (2024) has explored the sociodemographic factors influencing the age at first birth among tribal women in India and found that higher education levels, greater household wealth, and media exposure are significantly associated with delayed first births. Srinivasan (2024) conducted a critical review of the contributing structural determinants of adolescent pregnancy in India and found that the key determinants include early marriages, caste and religious systems, sexual violence, limited education, lower socio-economic status and rural-urban disparities.

Research on age at first child among women in Assam is not adequate. The search results lead to a few studies relevant to the topic. In a recent study by Bharali and Mondal (2021), the associations of early age at marriage, early childbearing, use of contraceptive methods and reproductive health consequences among

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Mishing tribal women were investigated. Results show that more than half of the Mishing women were encountering with various reproductive health related complications with higher risk associations found in age at first birth less than 18 years. A paper by Haloi and Limbu (2013) studying the influencing factors of the age at first marriage among the Assamese Muslim women of Kamrup district found the mean age at first marriage of Assamese Muslim women to be 19.40 ± 0.04 years. The mean age at marriage is likely to increase with increase in maternal education and household income. Another study by Nath et al (1999) among urban Hindu women in Assam found that factors such as education, age at marriage, role in decision-making, and household income significantly influenced the first-birth interval.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

Given the dearth of research on the topic in the context of Assam, the paper is expected to contribute to the literature. The primary objective of the study is to provide insights into the age at first birth among women in Assam based on data from a recent national survey, NFHS round 5.

The study addresses the following research questions:

- ❖ How does age at first birth for women in Assam differ across different socio-demographic/ socio-economic variables?
- ❖ How does women's decision-making autonomy associate with their age at first childbirth?

DATA AND METHODS:

This paper is based on data from the fifth round of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019-2021), a multi-round survey conducted across India. NFHS surveys have been conducted by International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), Mumbai as the nodal agency under the stewardship of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW), Government of India. NFHS-5

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fieldwork for Assam was conducted in all 33 districts.

In this paper, unit level data of NFHS 5 is used for the state of Assam. The Births Recode (BR) file is used. The BR file contains data for every child ever born to interviewed women up to 20 births. The Assam state level sample consists of 57,933 observations. The respondents are all interviewed women in the age of 15-49. The data extraction has been carried out using the STATA software. The data is then tabulated across several variable heads to carry out the analysis.

The outcome variable in this study is “age of respondent at first birth”. For the analysis, this variable has been converted into a binary variable such that the variable takes value 1 for age less than 18 and 0 for age equal to or more than 18. The World Health Organization defines adolescent pregnancy (AP) as “pregnancy in young women aged 10–19 years”. The use of 18 years aligns with India’s legal age of marriage and therefore is a critical benchmark for assessing adolescent pregnancy risks and related health outcomes.

The various explanatory variables expected to have an influence on the outcome variable is selected for the analysis based on the review of the literature of similar studies in the Indian context. These variables are categorized according to the original classifications provided in the NFHS-5 dataset, with some variables reclassified to make the analysis more meaningful and to provide more analytical clarity. The selected variables are: educational level, wealth index, place of residence, religion, caste and decision-making power on the women’s health.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

The median age at first birth (age by which half of the women have had their first child) among women in India is 21.2 years. In Assam, the median age of women at first birth is 20 years. Table 1

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shows the number of surveyed women bearing their children above and below 18 years of age. It is evident from the table that 24.94 percent of women still bear their first child at an age below 18 years.

Table 1:

Age at first birth among all women in the age of 15-49

Age at first birth	Frequency	Percentage
Above 18 years	43484	75.06
Below 18 years	14449	24.94
Total	57933	100

Source : Author's calculation, NFHS 5

The analysis of the NFHS 5 data of women in Assam reveals some important associations between various socio-demographic/ socio-economic factors and the age of respondents at their first birth.

a. Sociodemographic factors influencing age at first birth

The data tabulated in table 2 indicate that Muslim women have a higher prevalence of first births by age 18 at 31.35%. In contrast, Hindu women and Christian women have lower rates of early first births, at 21.91% and 19.56% respectively. In terms of residence, there is not much difference between the two categories of women living in urban and rural areas. 24.96% rural women report early first births compared to 24.80% urban women. Caste is also an important determinant of women's age at first birth. Interestingly, ST women in Assam have lower rate of early first births at 17.9% compared to the other social categories. This is in contrast with the all-India data as the age at first birth among tribal women is reported to be lower than that of non-tribal women in India as tribal women marry at younger ages and have higher fertility rates than non-tribal women.

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Table 2:

Sociodemographic characteristics by age of respondents at first birth

	Above 18 years	Percentage	Below 18 years	Percentage	Total
Religion					
Hindu	26711	78.79%	7191	21.91%	33902
Muslim	14766	68.65%	6743	31.35%	21509
Christian	1900	80.44%	462	19.56%	2362
Residence					
Urban	4240	75.20%	1398	24.80%	5638
Rural	39244	75.04%	13051	24.96%	52295
Caste					
General	4563	76.30%	1417	23.70%	5980
OBC	10843	77.99%	3060	22.01%	13903
Schedule Caste	5190	75.92%	1646	24.08%	6836
Schedule Tribe	8118	82.10%	1770	17.90%	9888

Source: Author's calculation, NFHS 5

b. Socioeconomic factors influencing age at first birth

The data tabulated in table 3 indicate socioeconomic characteristics by age of respondents at first birth. NFHS wealth index serves as a reliable proxy for household economic status. The wealth index shows variance among the quintiles. 25.55% of women in the poorest quintile had their first birth by age 18, compared with only 13.17% women in the richest quintile indicating a gap of 12.38 percentage points. Looking at the association with education, it can be seen that women with no education and primary education levels have a higher prevalence of first births by age 18, at 27.95% and 29.82%, respectively. In contrast, women with secondary education level have lower rate of early first births at 22.28%. This reduces further as level of education increases, with only 1.85% of women

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with higher education experiencing their first birth below the age of 18 years.

Table 3:

Socioeconomic characteristics by age of respondents at first birth

	Above 18 years	Percentage	Below 18 years	Percentage	Total
Wealth Index					
Poorest	19017	74.45%	6527	25.55%	25544
Poorer	13961	73.23%	5104	26.77%	19065
Middle	6268	76.51%	1924	23.49%	8192
Richer	3117	81.15%	724	18.85%	3841
Richest	1121	86.83%	170	13.17%	1291
Education					
No education	13251	72.05%	5141	27.95%	18392
Primary	7714	70.18%	3278	29.82%	10992
Secondary	20930	77.72%	6000	22.28%	26930
Higher	1589	98.15%	30	1.85%	1619

Source: Author's calculation, NFHS 5

c. Decision making autonomy and age at first birth

Women's autonomy is one of the indicators of women's empowerment and status. Decision making power in the hands of women themselves reflect their power and agency. It can be generally understood that highly empowered women who decides on their own can control their fertility behaviour which in turn can lower the early childbearing chances. The data tabulated in table 4 also shows this. Among women whose husband/partner alone decides on their healthcare 28.18% had their first birth by age 18. This percentage declines to 22.78% when both the women and husband together decides and further to 21.35% when the women solely decide and has full autonomy.

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Table 4:

Decision making autonomy and age of respondents at first birth

	Above 18 years	Percentage	Below 18 years	Percentage	Total
Person who decides on respondent's health care					
Respondent alone	523	78.65%	142	21.35%	665
Respondent and husband	5121	77.22%	1511	22.78%	6632
Husband/ Partner alone	752	71.82%	295	28.18%	1047

Source : Author's calculation, NFHS 5

These findings emphasise the critical influence of sociodemographic factors like religion, residence and caste; socioeconomic factors like education and economic status and women's decision-making autonomy regarding their healthcare on the age of first childbirth among women in Assam. The data highlights the complex nature of the factors influencing early childbirth and the necessity of addressing these factors to reduce early childbearing among women in Assam.

CONCLUSION:

Regional level studies are important in order to provide a picture of an issue particular to the region. This paper is important because although all India factsheets provide the data on age on first childbirth for women in India, state factsheets do not provide the data on this variable. As such it is justified to explore the unit level data to have an understanding of the topic in the context of Assam.

Globally, around 16 million girls aged 15 to 19 give birth annually accounting for roughly 11% of all births worldwide. Around 95% of these births occur in developing countries (WHO data).

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This average age at first birth varies across developed and developing regions. In the USA, the average age at first birth for women is 24.1 years (National Survey of Family Growth, NSFG data) while in India the average age at first birth is around 21 years. Among the states in India, there are notable variations too. This highlights the important influence of social, economic and demographic factors on the fertility choices of women. The findings of this paper provide significant insights into the influence of these factors on the age at first childbirth among women in Assam.

However, the analysis presented in this paper are only preliminary findings based on the unit level data. This paper has scope for an extended study where the significance of these determinants on age at first childbirth can be analysed using appropriate econometric techniques. Also, since the analysis is based on cross-sectional data from NFHS-5 (2019–2021) only, this has reduced the scope of making any comparisons or change in the variables under study over time. The associations studied refer only to particular point of time. This leaves the scope for future studies to consider other rounds of NFHS data and make a more temporal analysis. A more comprehensive study taking into consideration these suggested dimensions will be helpful to frame effective policy interventions and propose targeted solutions to reduce early childbearing among women in Assam and improve maternal and child health outcomes.

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Value Awareness in Rural Women

DR. PRANITA SARMA

ABSTRACT:

In India eighty percent people are from village and also dependent on agriculture. Rural Women plays a fundamental role in rural communities around the world such as providing care and being involved in number of economic pursuits that is subsistence farming, petty trading and off-farm work. It is observed that most parts of the world rural women work very hard and earn very little. Rural women faced insecure due to gender power imbalance, a lake of oversight and working in remote location. Hence there is a need of value orientation. The Educationists, Philosophers and Social workers etc have strongly stressed the need of the value orientation at the present society.

‘Value’ is one of the basic terms which cannot be fully defined. Different philosophers, thinkers defined the term value in different ways. Literally the term value means something that is precious, worthwhile. Everyone has its own value. That is why he or she always struggles to achieve his/her desire in a comfortable manner. It can be said that values are the indispensable part of human beings without which nothing can be done. Both men and women require values for their existence. Specially women must have some specific values for shaping the family and the entire society. There are different kinds of values that is *aesthetic* includes appreciation of

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beauty, joy; spiritual-includes meditation, religion, peace; *moral* includes honesty, benevolence; social includes civic sense, cooperation and sympathy. Thus the aim of all values is perfection, self realization, satisfaction, development integrity and cohesion.

This article is mainly trying to focus about the value awareness in rural women. It is known that women always take important role in society. Women plays important role in society as mothers, teachers, doctors, engineers and leaders. Without the effort of women society cannot be reformed. In this case we can mention that Gandhi was also a champion of the cause of women's upliftment. Because Harijans, women and the poor commanded his most tender attention. Women had become the equal partners in the fight for swaraj. Though the present age is the advancement of science and technology, parallaly people are facing crisis of value in society. As a result there is no peace in society. It is seen that rising corruption, increasing rape case, degrading ethics, degrading standard of human conduct or behavior, increasing violence in the present society. So there is a need of value orientation. The educationists, philosophers and social workers etc have strongly stressed the need of the value orientation in the present society. The United Nations Organization (UNO) recognized the protection of human rights in general and women right in specific. The International Bill of Human rights strengthened the emphasis on women. The UN commission made efforts to established the rights of women is important human right since its inception. It is observed that in most parts of the world rural women work very hard but earn very little.

In Assam the status of women is high as compared to the women of other states of India. There is no Dowry system prevalent in Assam. The litracy rate of Assam was estimated to be 77.85% male and 66.27% female. The Nijut Moina Scheme is a vital initiative designed to combat child marriage in Assam by promoting the

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education of girl student. Orunodoi Scheme is one of beneficiary scheme which is related to women is introduced in Assam. Assam Arogya Nidni Scheme was launched in Assam to provide financial assistance to BPL families. Sukanya Samridhi Account which encourages parents to build a fund for the future education of their female child. The early feminist movements in Assam emerged in the early 20th century when women started organizing themselves for their rights and empowerment. The Assam Mahila Samiti which is the earliest women's organization in Assam founded by Kamalabari Satyabrata in 1911.

The followings are the remarkable contributions of Assamese women to the society.

- ❖ **Kanaklata Barua**'s name is famous in Assam's history as a symbol of sacrifice and courage. In 1942 she was martyred while leading procession with the National flag during the Quit India moment. Today she is remembered as the 'Birangana' of Assam.
- ❖ Remembering the brave '**Sati Sadhani**' the legendary warrior queen of Assam whose death anniversary is celebrated on 21st April in every year.
- ❖ 27th March is observed as **Sati Joymati Divas** in Assam. Joymati was the wife of Ahom prince Gadapani. Joymati is known as Sati joymati because she endured torture and died at the hands of royalists under Sulikpha (Loraa Raja) which enabled her husband to rise in revolt and become the king himself.
- ❖ **Aideu Nitambar Handique** was the first film actress of Assamese cinema. She was the actress of the film 'Joymati' (1935) directed by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala.
- ❖ 29th May is marked as **Muta Gabharu Day** in Assam. Mula Gabharu's legacy endures as a symbol of patriotism and

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female empowerment in Assam.

- ❖ **Sayed Anwara Taimur** was an Indian politician from Assam was the first Chief minister of the State of Assam from 6th December 1980 to 30th June 1981.
- ❖ **Natini Bata Devi** is the first female Padma Shri awarded from Assam and she was also the first women to preside over the Assam Sahitya Sabha on 18th may 2023.
- ❖ **Dr. Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi** (1933-2004) was an Indian poet, song writer and folklorist associated with Assamese literature.
- ❖ **Dr. Mamoni Raisom Goswami** was an Indian writer, poet, professor, scholar and editor. She was the winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award, the Jnanpith Award.
- ❖ **Dipali Barthakur** was a legendary singer known for her soulfull Assamese melodious. She is the Nighting Girl of Assam.
- ❖ **IPS officer Sanjukta Parashrar** who was known as the ‘Iron Lady of Assam’ has made remarkable contributions in the fight against insurgency in the region.
- ❖ **Sara Shabnam** has own the Best Women Entrepreneur of Assam at the Women Entrepreneurship Summit, Guwahati on 15th September. Sara Runs to successful ventures- ‘Zaara Collection’ and ‘Zaara Hizab Hut’ on 17 september 2019.
- ❖ **Hima Das** from the state of Assam is the first Indian Athlete to win a gold medal in a track event at the IAAF World U20 Championships. She is the goldden girl of Assam.
- ❖ **Lovlina Borgohain** from Assam is an Indian Boxer. Borgohain is the first female Athlete and Second boxer from Assam to represent the state in the olympics. She became the sixth person from Assam to receive Arjuna Award in 2020.
- ❖ **Parbati Barus** from the State of Assam is India’s first female Elephant Mahout and awarded prestigious Padma Shri by

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the President of India, Droupadi Murmu at a ceremony held in New Delhi on 9th May.

The above mentioned remarkable contributions of Assamese Women shows that Assamese Women are very much aware about their value, status and also able to focus their talents, potentialities in the society. The above listed Women are mostly from village background. In these case we cannot deny the strong support and co-operation from their family members, society and Government of Assam to these Assamese Women. In Assam International Women's Day is celebrated on 8th March in every year by many educational institutions, Governmental organizations, Non-Governmental organizations etc. These celebration makes aware Assamese rural women for their up gradation of status, make aware about the new policies for rural women in all round development. It is true that Assamese rural women like other states also are not aware about the availability of opportunities for the development of entrepreneurship like financial assistance, training assistance. The women entrepreneur in rural areas are highly emotional attached with the home, their family members and their household task. Many rural women could not start business and many could not sustain the same due to unavailability of finance. Lack of scientific godowns, warehouse, cold storage, road communications, electricity problems, irrigation problems are creating obstacle in the growth of entrepreneurial activities. Assam has several implementation of empowerment scheme such as Self-help groups (SHGs), Women centric welfare schemes and micro finance programs. Though there are lots of problems for women entrepreneurship in rural Assam, the Prospects of growth can not be underestimated. The Government of India, Banks and Financial institutions are playing and important role for the development of women entrepreneur a few schemes are highlighted below –

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- Under the MSE Cluster Development Program by Ministry of MSME.
- The National Credit Fund for Women (NCFW) commonly known as Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK) assists women in informal sector.
- The SIDBI has also launched women special scheme. Under Mahila Udyan Nidhi, women entrepreneurs are been provided with equity finance for setting a new projects in small sector and rehabilitation of viable sick industry.
- & The NEDFI also provides women centered schemes like Women Enterprise Development Scheme (WEDS). Scheme for North East Handloom and Handicrafts (SNEHH) etc.
- Government of Assam provided different scheme for the generation of employment and entrepreneurs. The schemes like Kalapataru (Finance), Chief Minister Self Employment Scheme (Stipend while training with traveling expenses), CM Special Scheme (Power tiller), Handloom and textiles (Yarn) etc.
- Through different policies like Assam Industrial Policy 2008 and Assam IT Policy 2009, the Government of Assam has tried to develop the Women entrepreneurship by giving various assistance and incentives.

The two main developmental goals of rural women are – (1) Dignity in the household and (2) A safe and secure environment. Rural women faced insecure due to gender power imbalance, a lack of oversight and working in remote location. Women can be empowered by active participation in local institutions such as gram sabhas, gram panchayats and school management committees. Let us discuss about women specific policies of Government of India. The National Plan of Action for women (NPA) adopted in 1976 became guiding document for the development of women till 1988

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when a National Perspective Plan for women was formulated (Government of India, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1991). The National Expert Committee on women prisoner (1986) examined the condition of women prisoner in the Criminal Coffectional Justice System and made necessary recommendations regarding legislative and prison reforms about the rehabilitation of women prisoners. The National Perspective Plan for women (NPP) (1988-2000) by a 14 member committee, headed by Mrs. Margoret Alva, the Minister of State for women, Youth Affair Sports is long term policy document advocating a holistic approach for the development of women. This plan mainly emphasized on women education and also elimination of illiteracy etc. There are many more women related policies like National policy on Education (1986) which laid emphasis on women's participation in vocational, technical and professional education at different levels.

At Schools Education is very important for girls in rural areas. Parallely we cannot deny the barriers and enablers for accessing quality education for girls in rural areas. The barriers are due to the lack of Infrastructure most of the rural schools have limited access to basic resources like text books, libraries and digital tools which effect teaching and learning and shortage of qualified teacher; Child Marriages sometimes parents think that their daughters education as unwise. They believe that girls will marry and move to their husbands house and as a result the amount invested in their education will go to waste; Poverty in rural areas girls are engaged in labour work, keeping girls away from attending school and Gender Based Violence physical, sexual abuse, discrimination and bullying.

Education is Key to Women Empowerment. Because educated girls are more likely to make informed decisions about their health, leading to lower maternal and infant morality rates. Educated girls are more likely to challenge broader social change

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and progress towards gender equality. Educated girls contribute economic growth. Women plays a major role in guiding society to a positive direction. The society also receives proper values, attitudes, guidance and inspiration from the women. Hence to promote healthy society value awareness of rural women is very important.

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Woman in the Changing Society of Assam

DR. ANJANA MOYEE SAIKIA

Woman– the word itself speaks of profound Strength: with Grace and Beauty. I feel very lucky whenever I hear the word and feel its strength and overall power. However, many a times as a child I would wonder that, might be I would be luckier to be born as a boy than being a girl because of the inclination towards boy or a male in a society is very strong than that of a girl or a female or a woman. Society’s perspective that only a man is the sole earner of a family and hence he should get established, get a good job. While the woman has no such dominant and strong role to play, so her place in the society is also deemed low and of less importance. Being a small girl then with a very fragile and young mind, such things and perspectives of the society filled up my mind with many questions. Such as many a times I would question this to myself – “Are the benefits of being a Male or a Man is Superior than being a Woman?” My answer was a big “No”. Because the privilege of being a girl was no less in my life and my view was: I had my choices, my voice, my right to equality to educate myself as similar to the male in the society. My mind innocently held the beautiful feeling that only a girl can dress up beautifully and gracefully which the male gender could not. So, my list of blessings of being a woman was and still is very long. However, this scenario dates back to forty

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years ago. Today the society has widened its vision as far as the role of a woman is concerned. Society has grown from all the aspects: intellectually, technically, socially, emotionally, spiritually. Even as far as the education system is concerned, there has been a drastic change since last thirty years. In today's society, everyone has become work oriented irrespective of the gender. Women are allowed and encouraged to work equally like that of a man. Women have also made remarkable achievements and have occupied the front seats like that of a man in fields like Administration, Medicine, Science and Technology, Art and Culture, Sports and so on. But in spite of so much advancements, are women today really safe, really secured??

The harsh reality is that women even today are harassed, tortured, shamed and harmed in their various aspects of life, sadly in their workplace too. This brings to my mind the heart shattering recent incident of a Lady Doctor, who has been raped and brutally murdered in her workplace during the dark hours.

It is a matter of disgrace and shame for the society. It is very difficult to accept that such inhuman and heinous act against women has taken place in today's developed and advanced society. Specifically in a place like India, feminine energy is worshipped in form of Goddess and considering so, women seem to be held in a very high position by Indians. But in reality, a woman in the society is being mistreated, insulted, and humiliated throughout her life; in every sphere of her life. A glaring example is in a patriarchal society like India, women are always suppressed, their voice, their decision are always ignored. Even though they know or are aware of every single happening in and around their surroundings, women are not allowed to exercise their right to freedom to speak and express their views in form of decisions. The major decisions are always rested in hands of men where women silently accept all the decisions. As if, she is only a caretaker of the family and taking care of the

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household chores is her only job, as if she is meant only for domestic chores and nothing more than that.

In a fast-changing society today, not only women from cities but even from remote areas women are coming forward to make money and make them sound financially as well as contributing to run their families. But in order to play her different roles other hand than a homemaker, she must make different compromises, sacrifices and has to manage everything. Only after doing so, she is able to step out and make a special place for herself in the society and make an identify of her own. I offer my deepest respect and salutation to all those struggling women who has set an example for the entire society through their work, achievements and has inspired many with their dedication, commitment and devotion towards their work in their respective fields while equally balancing their home and families.

It is high time that keeping in mind all these factors, both men and women should change their perspectives, their pattern of thinking towards all the existing women in the society specifically when it comes to exercising their rights: right to equality, right to freedom of expression and so on. Let the mind of all men and women become positive for the greater good. Also not ignoring women as the weaker section of the society and granting her a dignified place in the society, and accepting the SHE role as a capable and active member. Even in administrative sector, there is a special seat reservation for women. Why is this so? Just because women are weak-physically or mentally not strong enough as men.

Not an exaggeration but from myself-felt experiences, what I have derived is that-women is no less than a multitasker. She looks after her family and children, takes care of household chores, drives to her working destination. Again, when back she gets herself engaged in various duties, at the same time directing others towards

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their goals and progress with endless energy. Again, waking up the next morning with a smile, with the same enthusiasm and energy and indomitable spirit, she dedicates herself to her duties, hiding all her tears and emotions only to motivate herself and those nearby her.

Belonging to a family which is culturally very sound and active, I grew up in an environment which nurture and nourish Art and Culture. In my student life, I never thought of establishing myself in a particular profession or that I would take up any field as my profession. But I was quite sure and determined to pursue dance and continue it for lifelong. Today I am an established Classical Dancer in the two very powerful and dignified Classical dance forms of India: Odissi and Sattriya dance. Having worked actively as a Classical Dancer, I have always been busy performing widely in various programs including highly esteemed National and International dance programs, festivals and so on. Along with my own Creative pieces of Dance, Dance directions, Dance & Dramas, I hardly have time to rest. Speaking about my profession –I am currently working in Government sector as a Faculty of Statistics in the Department of Community Medicine, Gauhati Medical College, the very age old and the most prestigious medical institution of Assam. During my service period along with dance activities and various performances, I had completed my PhD in Statistics at Gauhati University in 2017. Just after submission of my PhD thesis from the next day onwards I got engaged with one of my grand Choreographic Productions– “Shyama” written by Kabiguru Rabindranath Tagore. That was a challenge. Taking care of my family, my child, dedicating myself to my duty and pursuing passion as a Classical Dancer, today, I am also encouraging those around me to progress in their lives and in their respective fields. But this is not so smooth as it seems to be. Even I have been challenged by some critical thought patterns of

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the society. Challenges like– “How a woman can be so successful? How can she make it? She cannot go so ahead. Situation like Our Interfaith marriage and conservative interpretations-she cannot pursue dance or music, it is impossible. She has limitations and so on.” I agree that, a woman has limitations after all. On the contrary, what I feel here is that- as an individual we should not get distracted, discouraged and demotivated by such pull back forces of the society. Rather we should respect every other individual in his or her area of life and work. When we believe in ourselves, we can overcome our doubts, and can be confident in our work and other activities. Gender discrimination is not something that is required for success in a field of work. What is required is honesty, dedication, passion, consistency and a supportive and cooperative society and environment. If we are sure and determined to move and stand, nothing can stop us.

Assamese women have been playing an important role in the history of Assam at different times, in the development of civilization. There was a period when education for women was a big issue in Assam. Chandraprabha Saikiani, (1901 to 1972) who was one of the modern social reformers of Assam played significant role for woman’s education in Assam during early part of twentieth century. Chandraprabha and her sister went to a boy’s school to get their education as they had no schools then in their village. This escalated to a strong voice of dissent against the male dominated system of education. When she was in her teens, Chandraprabha Saikiani established a school only for girls. This was a makeshift school (under a shed) in the village. Meanwhile, she on her part used to go to the all-boys school to receive her education. After returning from school, she used to relay her learnings to the girls who came to her makeshift school. Chandraprabha Saikiani had also etched her name forever in Assam’s literary space as a revolutionary writer. Incidentally, she was credited to be the pioneer of the feminist

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movement in Assam. Chandraprabha and her sister Rajniprabha got scholarships for higher study. Thereafter, her sister became the first woman doctor of Assam. The 'Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samity' was initiated by Chandraprabha in 1926, after she had joined the Non-Co-operation Movement of India. She fought for girls' education, girls' rights, discrimination of women at the temples & other places, took steps against child marriage, polygamy and emphasized the relevance of our handicrafts and handlooms in terms of cohesive socio-economic and even political development. She strongly believed that education was crucial for the woman to break free from societal constraints. Her strong determination and her challenges towards women's right and education inspired many. She was a firebrand women's rights activist in Assam and was honoured with Padma Shree Award. Chandraprabha Saikiani - we bow down and confess you are the strong lady in this place, we bow down and confess you are the lord in Assam.

Another name in Assam, who played an important role in a renaissance in the society by gaining high positions in various fields was Indira Miri (1910-2004). The acclaimed Indira Miri was a campaign-oriented woman, a man-made, highly educated knowledge devotee, honest brave, an unopposed warrior of life struggle. Indira Miri made her mark in the society despite various restrictions and problems at a time when the society in Assam was very conservative, when women's education was not promoted and spread, at a time when child marriage was prevalent in Assam, there was no social acceptance of heterogeneous marriage.

Indira Miri got married to Mahin Chandra Miri in 1932 who was the first science stream graduate of the Mishing community of Assam, when there were various issues in the name of caste discrimination in the social life of Assam. The social system was very conservative in terms of marriage and religious reforms were

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emphasized in marriages. Unfortunately, just seven years after marriage, Indira Miri lost her husband, an extraordinary talented personality, a senior forest department official by profession died of a deadly fever at a young age. Even after premature widow she was not upset with her three-year-old son, one-and-a-half-year-old daughter and three-month-old unborn child. Instead, she faced every challenge bravely. Indira Miri then joined NEFA (North Eastern Frontier Agency) in 1947 as an "Education Officer" after pursuing higher education- a teacher training course at Oxford University during the challenging period. However, before starting her career as a top officer in the education department, Indira Miri served as head teacher at Shillong's Girls High School and as a co-principal at Panbazar High School. Indira Miri started her education at Bengali Medium School in Shillong and then Bethune High School in Kolkata. Then she studied in Scottish Church College, Kolkata; Calcutta University, University of Edinburg, USA and Oxford University. She was honoured with Padma Shri Award (1977); Srimanta Sankardeva Award (2004); D. Lit Title (Dibrugarh University).

Indira Miri, who played an important role in creating a new society by lighting up education in parallel with building an identity of herself in Assam, is a woman with a strong personality. We salute her for her contribution in the society of Assam.

Wayback in the year 1961, when the grass was much greener, and sky was blue, hundreds of men & women were assembled on the outskirts of Guwahati, that is Azara in Assam. They were watching the landing of a particular Aeroplane. While the landing of the plane was a common affair, on that day flight was being flown by a lady named Dhira Chaliha, the first Lady pilot of Assam. An Assamese woman Dhira Chaliha, the first woman pilot in Assam had made a history started a new journey.

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Her mother was not happy at all. It was her father who encouraged her to join the flying club. Times were different then, without support from family, Dhira Chaliha would not have joined the flying club. It was the era of the 1950s, an era in entire India when matrimony beckoned young women to forsake their aspirations and preside over domestic affairs. She was not bounded by the confines of society of the region Assam, because her father was her strongest support. One fine day Dhira found herself on her way for the scholarship interview to become pilot with the support of her father. Her ever-fulfilling desire was to do something, that her father could take pride in, little Dhira hence geared up to fly. Her training to become Pilot, was then started on two-seater propeller planes. It was far too high for a society in that colonial era to allow a woman to fly planes when women were not even allowed to step out of the kitchen, Dhira Chaliha made it possible through her ever-rigid perseverance. Dhira was dedicated to her job that involves hard work and high responsibilities such as navigating challenging situations and safely landing an aircraft etc. People say– “Aim for the moon, because if you miss it, you will at least land among the stars.” We respect the exhilarating journey of Dhira Chaliha Hazarika, the first Assamese woman pilot. Her profession as pilot at that era inspires many, has positive and motivating impact on a significant number of young women to pursue their goals.

In recent years women of Assam have come out to every field of work and able to make their unique identity. Rima Das is a name in Assam associated with creative world as a well-known successful filmmaker. A simple lady Rima Das, born in 1977 hails from the village Kalaridiya, Chaygaon near Guwahati in Assam is best known for her 2017 film ‘Village Rockstars’, which won several national and international awards and became India’s official entry for the 90th Academy Awards in the best Foreign Language

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Film category. Out of 28 other entries in India, Rima Das's film 'Village Rockstars' was the first Assamese film to be submitted for Oscars. The film won India's National Award for Best Film and Best Editor. Her second production 2018 film, 'Bulbul Can Sing', was premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival. Rima Das was recognised as one of the 50 most influential young Indians in 2018. It is a moment of pride for us that a woman of Assam got this honour. In 2022, her next film 'Tora's Husband' was premiered at Toronto International Film Festival, where it was selected to compete in the Platform section. It is the first Indian film showcased in that category. She directed a short film called 'For Each Other' in 2019, which premiered at the 3rd Pingyao International Film Festival, and she directed her first documentary fiction film, "Sunshine Dreamers".

Her desire to be an actor took her to Mumbai in 2003. She acted in plays in Mumbai. Later, she entered in the world of film making. She wanted to try something on her own, which was risky. She became an independent film maker, started her work from writing, directing, producing, editing, and shooting films as cinematographer, besides handling art direction and costume designing. She takes on the responsibility of managing the financial and logistic aspects of film production too. As a result, she is now best known as "one-woman crew". Rima Das's work has helped to bring Assamese cinema to a wider audience and has inspired many other filmmakers from the region. Her films often reflect the culture and life of the region Assam. It portrays the changing landscape and communities, particularly the impact of development and modernization on people's lives. She is a proper example of woman with strong determination. She has proved that, nothing can stop a woman from achieving goals if she has deep driven persistent desire, most required is patience, honesty and respect to others.

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To mark and celebrate the occasion of International Women's Day this year 2025, we presented the prestigious play BALA—a dance play depicting the life of Late Birubala Rabha. How Birubala has shown us the right path, illuminated with awareness and knowledge against witch-hunting is the theme of the dance drama. The very courageous lady struggled a lot in raising awareness in the society against witch-hunting which is prevalent in Assam since past many decades. It threatened the lives of many ignorant and innocent people, mostly women. Birubala Rabha fought with great deal of courage and bravery against this Superstitious Act. Although she was not privileged enough to educate herself, she had humanity which kept her continuing her fight for a very noble cause; that is saving people's lives. She saved lives of more than fifty women who were threatened to their lives in the name of witch-hunting. Unwavering courage, a fearless heart, and a spirit to serve humanity is all that fired up her acts. A strong determined mind and will power is all we need sometimes to tackle a very tough and challenging issue. This is what this great lady inspires us through her brave story. We all are aware of what we are doing, what we are acquiring and how we are learning and growing and serving those around us. To be a lady like Birubala Rabha, we should have strong self confidence, and unfailing courage. At times there might be conflicts and doubts in our minds regarding our capabilities. Only Courage and a strong mind set can serve as our weapon.

In the words of poet :

*“You are not weak, you are a Heroic lady,
You are not playful,
You fly in the sky's imagination.”*

I would like to conclude with the message that- Let the mind of every woman be strong and powerful and positive. Let's not get distracted by the various judging elements and judgemental thoughts

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of society. A positive and constructive mind set is the need of the hour. One's views should not be taken personally. Critics and criticisms are inevitable, but it should be for the greater good of an individual and of the society. Change cannot be brought in a day or by only a single person. It's a collaborative process going hand in hand. Honesty, trustworthiness, and supportiveness should be adopted by everyone. Be it success or failure, an empathetic nature is all we need. Be it a man or woman everyone should respect life, its beauty and its underlying meaning. Enjoy every moment, every bit of it.

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**Rural women Entrepreneurship
through traditional Hira Pottery of
Assam with Special Reference to
Kamrup (R) District – An opportunity
for self-employment**

DR. MRINMOYEE BHATTACHARYYA

ABSTRACT

Women constitute half of the Society and are said as half of the sky. But they do not get the equal rights and regarded as weaker section of the society. A nation can be as developed, if its all sections of the people irrespective of gender, cast & religion get the equal opportunity in participating all fields (economic, social as well as political). Once the weaker section; i.e. women are begun to feel that they are economically strong, they will begin to think that they will equal to their male counterpart in all aspects, which is the need of the hour.

There is a direct and closed interrelation amongst the economic consciousness and economic participation of women along with the women empowerment and women entrepreneurship. Women empowerment and economic participation are critical components of sustainable development and entrepreneurship has emerged as a

key driver of women's economic empowerment.

Rural entrepreneurship in Assam's Hira Pottery showcases the state's rich cultural heritage and economic potential. Hira pottery is a traditional Assamese craft which has been practiced by female in rural areas of Assam and also has been a source of livelihood for them. By leveraging this traditional craft, rural women entrepreneurs are crating sustainable business, generating employment opportunities and promoting local economic growth. This paper aims to explore the sustainability of Hira Pottery as rural women entrepreneurship, examining the factors that influence their success and the obstacles they faced.

(Keywords : *Women Empowerment, Rural Entrepreneurship, Hora Pottery.*)

INTRODUCTION

Rural entrepreneurs play a vital role in the development of the economy. The village is the backbone of the country. Nowadays entrepreneurs involved in many activities to increase the status of their living and also their standard of living. Land being limited is unable to absorb the entire labour force throughout the year leading to large scale unemployment and underemployment. Rural people, in search of jobs, often migrate to urban centers, creating unwanted slums and live in unhygienic conditions of living. A turnaround is possible only, if the employment opportunities are made available in rural areas along with basic amenities of life. The real solution of this economic problem in our country is not mass production, but production by masses as was suggested by Mahatma Gandhi. Rural industrialization through the development of rural entrepreneur seems to be the remedy to poverty, unemployment and back-wardens of our society.

Rural entrepreneurship implies entrepreneurship emerging in rural areas. In other words establishing industries in rural areas refers

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to rural entrepreneurship. So rural entrepreneurship is that entrepreneurship which ensures value addition to rural resources in rural areas engaging largely rural human resources Rural Entrepreneurship strategies aim at diversifying rural economic activities which include the development of non-farm economic activities, facilitating the transition of informal activities into the formal growth sector. In this context traditional Hira pottery may be paved the way for self-employment for rural people.

The present traditional Assamese pottery industry is under the grip of two Assamese Caste Groups—locally known as the Hira and Kumar. The Hiras make household articles using the compression method and the Kumar use their potter's wheel to make images for worship and clay dolls and toys.

The pottery is sole occupation of the Hiras. They usually make earthen wares for domestic use. The potteries made by Hiras are known for its beautiful designs and colours. They produce different shapes and sizes earthen pots, which are used for different purposes. The important earthen pots made by Hiras are Kolashi, Tekeli, Hari, Saru mola, Lota, Pot Saru, Musical instruments like drums called Nagara and Kurkuri lid vessels etc. Hiras means of living is handmade pottery since time immemorial. So, Hira's handmade pottery is an oldest cottage industry of Assam.

Hira community is one of the sixteen Scheduled Caste community. It is traditionally an occupational group who make pottery by hand. The people of this class use special type of clay which is found only in Assam and it is popularly called as “*HIRA CLAY*”, a principal raw material of the Pottery Industry of Assam. Therefore, this potters group is distinguished as the *Hira* Potters or *Hira* Community in Assam. They produce various kinds of earthen pots and utensils of the best quality for households and community uses. They usually manufacture the potteries as per the demand of the

locality.

Another interesting feature of this craft as practiced by Hira is that all the potters are invariably the females. The males never make pots. However, they play the role of helping hand in procuring and preparation of raw materials and also in marketing the finished product. Hira's pottery in Assam is used by all the section of people. This traditional craft is an indispensable aspect of socio-economic life of Hira potters in Assam.

Keeping this in view in mind this paper has an attempt to study how traditional Hira Pottery can promote rural entrepreneurship development in rural areas.

OBJECTIVES

To study whether the Hira Pottery lead to Rural Entrepreneurship.

To examine the problems and prospects associated with Hira Pottery.

Origin of Hira Potter, technique of handmade pottery of Hira potters in Assam

In Assam handmade pottery is an age-old industry having its origin many centuries ago. It plays an important role in the socio-economic life of the people.

In the absence of any systematic study regarding handmade pottery of Assam, it is extremely difficult to find the pin point of the date of its origin. However, it gathered from the history and other evident that use of pottery wares in Assam may be dates as far back as 5th or 6th century AD.

The Hiras are Scheduled Caste community found mostly in the Brahmaputra Valley who is considered as an original handmade pottery making community of Assam. Their principal place of inhabitation is the district of undivided Kamrup, Goalpara, Nagaon and Darrang. This traditional craft is practiced by the Hiras

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irrespective of the region and place where they reside or the economic status of the practicing households. Hiras in general, treat pottery as a definite source of income.

So far as technique of handmade pottery is concerned, that clay used by the Hiras is known as 'Hira Mati' which is differ from clay used by Kumar potters and collection from the places which are about 3-10 kms away from their house. The techniques applied comprise coil building, pressing and moulding, for making pots anvil, beater, stone, wooden plunk and moulds etc. are used.

They are manufacturing a number of types from long back without any specific change. The types include pitcher (Kalash) varieties of bowl (charu) miniature vessel (tekeli) basin on stand (Dhunadani), vessel on stand (Marriage ghat), Shallow Basin (Chaki) etc. Some special forms constitute toy and drums (Nagara and kurkuri, musical instruments) are also prepared by them.

The preference and the durability of the products depend upon quality of the clay as well as technique use for making this. It is observed that, the Hira pottery has more demand than Kumars for its utilitarian value is concerned.

STUDY AREA

Kamrup district having a total area of 2740.74 sq km, is populated by 13,21,839 number of local inhabitants (2001 census). Among them Hira population is only 55,106. The latest position of the population of the said class would be more than 70,000 as demanded by the organization "The All Assam *Hira* Sanmilani" constituted by the *Hira* people.

The study is conducted on the area of Rani Development Block under Kamrup (Rural) District. There are 15 blocks and 2 sub-divisions in Kamrup District. The Hira potters are concentrated only 8-9 block. In Rani Block, there 3 main Hira potter villages i.e. Dhupguri, Azara and Noapara. This block is economically poor in

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comparisons to other blocks because most of the people are belongs to SC, ST and OBC and literacy rate is very poor.

METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected by self-structured in interview schedule. The heads of the family and female members of the household were interviewed for collecting relevant data, as handmade pottery is a female dominant craft. Secondary data were collected from published and unpublished research documents and survey of some well experienced persons belongs to Hira potters.

SAMPLE SELECTION

In the present study simple random sampling method was used in Dhupguri, Azara and Noapara villages of Rani Development Block. There are 117 households belong to Hira potters group. They are belonging to SC and out of 117 only 81 households were practiced handmade pottery. Again, out of 81 households 40 households were randomly selected from 3 villages for the study.

DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY

1. The study is mainly designed and executed from the collection of data about the households of the villages.
2. It does not provide any theoretical background of the Hira potters that live in the area.

Analysis and Interpretation of the study

Table – I show the pottery practicing household of the villages of Rani Development Block

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Table– I

Sl. No.	Name of the village	No. of household	No. of potters Practicing households	No. of sample handhold taken
1	Azara	60	42	20
2	Dhupguri	35	31	15
3	Noapara	22	8	5
	Total	117	81	40

Source: Compute field data

Table – II shows the demographic profile of the surveyed area.

Table – II

Sl. No.	Name of the Village	No. of households	Male	Female	Total
1	Azara	60	158	143	301
2	Dhupguri	35	88	79	167
3	Noapara	22	58	52	110
117	304	274	578		

Source : Compute field data

Table-I shows the total No. of Hira households are 117. Amongst them only 81 households are still practicing Hira Pottery for their livelihood. Remaining 36 households shifted to other occupation. Against out 81 only 40 households have taken for the study. Table – II shows the demographic profile of the surveyed villages. In the surveyed villages, persons are 304 No. male and 274 No person are female. Total population of the surveyed villages is 578.

COST AND RETURN ANALYSIS OF HIRA PRODUCTS

The cost and return analysis of any product or business is crucial for any industry. Cost and return of a particular product is a systematic impact analysis which is vital for any trade. It examines the behaviour of total revenue and total cost and operating income. It also compares costs or potential risk associated with transaction and deliverables.

It has been already observed that Hira potters are socio-economically poor and have very low capital of their own and also, they have been carrying out this trade on unorganized manner. Barter system is still prevailing in some areas. Thus, due to the absence of proper and organized market and inadequate information it is very difficult to analyse the cost and return of Hira trade. However, on the basis of respondents' information a cost and return analysis has been made for Hira pottery industry.

Table - 3

Estimation chart of cost and return in pottery industry to make 500 (pottery, e.g. Mola soru at wholesale price) items in 7 days (as per information given by the respondents)

Sl. No.	Description of cost/return	Rate (Rs)	Rupee
1	Instruments (various sizes Stone, Pitani or Gayan)	400.00	400.00
2	Bhatti	200.00	200.00
3	Colouring material	100.00	100.00
	Total	700.00	700.00
1	Soil (per puller) three puller	150.00	450.00

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Sl. No.	Description of cost/return	Rate (Rs)	Rupee
2	Sand (per tin) one tin	25.00	25.00
3	Rice husk (per bag) four bags	30.00	120.00
4	Fire woods (approx.)	1000.00	1000.00
5	Transportation cost (Auto van) one auto vans	200.00	200.00
	Total		1795.00
Return			
Gross return from 500 (pottery, e.g. Mola soru at wholesale price of Rs. 10/-) items in 7 days			5000.00
Total costs for 500 (pottery, e.g. Mola soru at wholesale price) items in first 7 days (FC + VC)			2495.00
Net return for first week is			2505.00
Gross return for a month			20000.00
Total costs for first month is (1795 X 4 + 700)			7880.00
Net return for first month is			12120.00
Net return for a month			12820.00

Source: Computed field data

The cost and return analysis relating to Hira pottery industry reveals that their first 7 days cost for producing 500 (pottery, e.g. Mola soru at wholesale price) items is more because it involves fixed costs and variable costs i.e. Rs. 700 + Rs.1795 = Rs. 2495/- and the gross income for first 7 days if they sale their product at whole sale price e.g. Rs. 10/- per mola soru is Rs. 5000/-. Hence, the net income or profit of a potter for first week would be Rs.2505 (Rs.5000 – Rs. 2495). But, the net income for next week estimated to be Rs. 3205. Similarly, the net income or profit of Hira trade by a

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family would be Rs.12120 for the first month, while the same for other months would be Rs.12820 subject to the condition that a pottery family would produce and sale minimum 2000 units of Mola soru (a pottery item). Most of the potters reportedly do not have incurred any significant expenditure for procurement of clay, firing and tempering materials etc. and as such margin of profit is reportedly quite high. From this analysis it reveals that the age-old traditional occupation has much bearing on their domestic income and as a matter of fact it may lead their standard of living also. So, we can say that little intervention on the part of the government and NGO and other organisation, this pottery occupation would be a better income generating rural industry for rural people.

MARKETING

All the elements regarding Hira trade e.g. feasibility or economic viability, profitability, future prospect, innovation and entrepreneurship etc. are solely depend on the process of marketing. So marketing of Hira trade is essential for those potters who are exclusively associated with pottery occupation for their livelihood. But it is a matter of serious regret that in the absence of organized market, the Hira potters of Kamrup District are not able to make better advancement in their craft and attain better economic condition. The marketing and distribution systems of Hira pottery products and their bearing on the economic condition of Hira people is discussed in following paragraphs.

Pottery industry, one of the oldest cottage industries of Kamrup district, is now in inclement condition as far as its economic status is concerned. This situation has occurred due to rapid industrialization which has brought use of cheap and durable metallic, plastic and aluminum products and thus in the long run these are estimated to be much cheaper. This has become the greatest impediment for the potters and Hiras in particular because the

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products of Hiras lack exquisiteness. This may be due to their low tenacity, inferiority complex and lack of innovativeness. Due to this temperament or nature of Hira potters, they are often exploited by middlemen and traders. Hence, they are compelled to sell their products at throw away prices which often even below the cost of their production. It often happens in some villages as they take money from the Mahajons in advance and thereby they are forced to sell the pottery at Mahajon's price. However, there are considerable numbers of channels through which the finished products are disposed by the potters. These are described below:

- (i) **Sale at residence:** In this system the buyers come to the potter's residence and the potters directly sell their products to them. As this process seems to be advantageous from potters point view with a view that it is not possible for potters themselves to directly supply their products to the market as they have to work on pottery production and they have no extra person in their families to undertake direct sale of their products, but often it is seen that as clients come to their residences they are unable to claim high price and sale their products at very low price. Therefore, this system of sale is not profitable one for the Hiras.
- (ii) **Hawking :** Hawking is another important avenue of sales resorted to by a number of potters. In a number of villages there are some families with manpower adequate for hawking activity. In this process of sell, potters carry their products from village to village and sale items directly to the customers. Usually, this practice is prevalent within their walkable distances (20 kms approx.) which they could cover in a day.
- (iii) **Local Market :** This is the most common channel of marketing of the potteries in the Kamrup district. Potter takes their products to the respective local markets or village market

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by pull cart, bullock cart or Bhar or today by auto-van. There they arrange a temporary stall by displaying the vessels and sell their products. The customers purchase their required potteries from them usually after some bargaining.

- (iv) **Fair and Melas :** In Kamrup district fair and melas generally take place on certain religious occasions or festivals. The craftsmen living in nearby villages participate in these fairs and melas and dispose of their products directly to the customers. Besides, in urban areas particularly the potters of surveyed villages attend various trade fairs held in Guwahati city (Fair in Sankardev Kalakshetra, NEDFi Hat, ARTFED Mela, KVIC Mela and Fair in Gandhi Jayanti).
- (v) **Weekly or Biweekly Hats :** Weekly and bi-weekly hats are held in almost all the studied villages of Kamrup. The potters living with adjoining areas carry their products to these hats and dispose directly to the consumers.
- (vi) **Mutual Contract or order Basis :** Sometimes Potters dispose their articles on contract or order basis. For this they come into mutually accepted terms with the dealers, traders, contractors/Mahajons for the supply and sale of pottery products according to latter's notification. It is observed that some potters often receive some amount of money in advance for purchasing the raw-materials or for some other purposes.
- (vii) **Paikari System :** Paikari or whole sale system is another mode of marketing through the middlemen. The potters make potteries in accordance with the order of specification of buyers or middlemen. These traders collect the pottery from the potters' house or the potters themselves carry the products to the traders. Particularly the potters of Azara and Noapara villages in Rani Block of Kamrup district regularly supply their products in different permanent pottery stalls and in some

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sweet makers stall at different areas of Guwahati city availing order for their products. In fact it is considered as easy outlet for the disposal of their products, usually the potters receive comparatively low price but it has an advantage of selling the whole lot at a time and thereby getting a sizeable amount.

- (viii) **Barter System** : Barter system or direct exchange system is also an accepted form of marketing of potteries in Kamrup. Sometimes potters exchange their potteries for food grains, cloth, pulses and other household requirements. But it is difficult to assess the criterion of exchange among them as there is no measurement or standard of exchange of potteries. Besides, it depends upon the potters requirements and demand. However, habitually they do it by resolving the market price of different commodities. The women folk often exchange the potteries for rice, vegetable and other edible items. Sometimes potters exchange their products for procurement of some required raw-material like rice-husk, fire woods, stover etc. for firing or burning the potteries as the cost of firing raw-material is very high.
- (ix) **Jaota System** : This is a contractual and long-term practice of barter extended over a year known as “Jaota System”. In this practice potters supply the requirement of all kinds of potteries for the whole year to the peasants and in turn, they acquire sizeable quantity of crops soon after the harvesting without maintaining any strict accounts from both sides. This is in fact a beneficial practice for potters because they meet their requirement of rice for consumption for the whole year. Besides, they also procure straws / Stover and other kinds of firing material by this system. However, now this system is almost absent among Assamese potters.

PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF HIRA POTTERY

In spite of general willingness among Hira people in favour of keeping alive the traditional pottery occupation for future life, this traditional industry has been facing severe problem in terms of low demand. According to the opinion of the respondents, lack of demand is due to the introduction of cheap articles manufactured in plastic, aluminium and still. It is also already mentioned that most of the people of rural areas show a distinct liking for these cheap metal and plastic products. Only a few percentages of people and in festive and ritualistic occasions use earthen vessels. As a matter of fact, production of potter is gradually decreasing. Though there is demand for pottery items of common utility, the finer products find little encouragement from the customers. Following table shows the distribution of responses according to the problems in Hira trade.

Table – IV shows the major problems faced by the potters. The seriousness of these problems have been ranked according to their gravity. Spreading of plastic ware and other disposable utensils reduced the importance of earthen ware, although they have environmental effect. Similarly, increasing cost, scarcity of raw materials (Hira clay, fire wood, rice husk etc.) and impact of globalization and modernization affect adversely on the Hira pottery industry. In the survey, another important problem is reported by the respondent that the artisans do not enjoy the advantage of having any proper platform to display their products which can draw the attention of prospective buyers. Moreover, considering the interaction among the Hira potters of the surveyed area, it is clear that the educational level as well as entrepreneurial ability is not encouraging this trade. All the potters of the surveyed households still use traditional pottery making technique. Due to these reasons, they are not aware of today's new marketing avenues and govt. policy.

Table – IV

Distribution of Respondents according to the Rank wise problems faced in Hira Trade

Sl. No.	Problems	No. of Respondents	Rank
1	Competition of factory made goods	162	1
2	Unavailability of raw materials (Hira clay, sand etc.)	157	2
3	Lack of marketing facilities	150	3
4	Shortage firing materials (rice husk, fire woods, Stover etc.)	100	4
5	High price in transportation than earlier	98	5
6	Lack of storing facility	92	6
7	Changes of consumers preferences	88	7
8	Lack of skilled manpower	8	8

Source: Computed field Data

PROSPECTS OF HIRA TRADE

In spite of number of problems suffered by the Hira craftsmen over the decades, they still opine in favour of developing craft. Because they think by practicing this craft they are keeping alive their traditional occupation and their ethnic identity. It is quite encouraging and positive aspect of the pottery industry that despite of all hurdles in pottery industry the artisans still adhere to the age-old craft as a primary source of income. All the members of the Hira households in the surveyed areas are still found engaged in this craft in one way or other. So, this traditional craft always plays a significant role in the village economy in general and in Hira community in particular. It is found that more than 80% households want to carry pottery work for future life and more than 92.06% of

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Hira potters show interest in having their children sticking to their traditional occupation.

CONCLUSION

The present condition on the basis of above discussion reflects that although the handmade pottery industry of Assam has faced many problems, the study also show that pottery can emerge as the most income generating entrepreneurship in the study area. It is the least resource intensive activity, which also does not require high level of education, high-tech technology and women can gainfully utilize their leisure time at home. In fact, a very low investment leads to high return.

SUGGESTIONS

It has been observed that the potters have to face a lot of problems in regards to the procurement of raw materials (clay, firing material, etc.) which may be the causes of abandonments of the craft by Hiras. To remove these problems following suggestions are put forward:

- (1) The problem of the non-availability of Hira clay could be resolved by leasing clay bearing lands to the representatives of Hira community. Some potters groups have identified such clay bearing lands and sought access to them. A general policy of allotting clay bearing lands to them should be made by the district administration.
- (2) Some sales space with limited number of shopping sheds should be constructed and provided to the full-time potter families at the vicinity of Bus Stands/Railway Stations/other public places.
- (3) Whenever large regional, national and international conferences, conventions are organised by any agency, some provisions should be made to display these pottery items near those types of gatherings. This will not only help potters in

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selling their items, but also will win the appreciation of the participants of the conferences and boost the morality of the Hira potters.

- (4) Suitable potter villages may be developed as tourist centres.
- (5) All government departments, public sector organisations, and educational institutions should purchase the pottery goods needed by them only directly from potter – producers through a proper price fixation formula which can be worked out through the govt. offices of the Assam Industrial Development Corporation (AIDC), District Rural Development Agency (DRDA), North Eastern Development and Finance Institution (NEDFi), or Khadi and Village Industrial Commission (KVIC) and Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship (IIE).
- (6) One of the most useful measures for the removal of the problems faced by the pottery industry is the formation of the well-organized co-operative societies in almost all the Hira villages. They can easily solve the problems of capital, raw materials and the sale at the reasonable price.

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Weaving the Golden Thread: The Indispensable Role of Women in Assam's Silk Industry

DR. JAYASHREE CHOWDHURY

ABSTRACT

Assam's silk industry, renowned for its Muga, Eri, and Pat silks, is a cornerstone of the state's cultural and economic identity, with women at its heart. This chapter examines the pivotal contributions of women in sericulture, weaving, and market engagement, highlighting their role as artisans, entrepreneurs, and custodians of tradition. Through a blend of historical analysis and contemporary data, it explores how women sustain this heritage industry while navigating economic, social, and structural challenges. The chapter also identifies opportunities for empowerment through government initiatives, technological innovation, and cooperative models. By presenting a detailed case study of Sualkuchi, it underscores women's resilience and potential to shape the future of Assam's silk industry.

(Keywords : *Assam silk industry; Women weavers; Sericulture; Handloom weaving; Economic empowerment.*)

INTRODUCTION

In the lush landscapes of Assam, India, the silk industry weaves a vibrant tapestry of tradition, artistry, and economic vitality. Celebrated for its unique Muga, Eri, and Pat silks, Assam's handloom sector is a cultural cornerstone, with women as its driving force. From nurturing silkworms to crafting intricate textiles, women have shaped every facet of this industry for centuries. This chapter explores their multifaceted roles, examining their contributions to sericulture, weaving, and economic development, alongside the challenges they face and opportunities for empowerment. Grounded in scholarly research and recent insights, it offers an original analysis of women's indispensable role in sustaining Assam's silk legacy.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: A LEGACY WOVEN BY WOMEN

The silk industry in Assam traces its roots to the Ahom dynasty (1228–1826 CE), which elevated sericulture and weaving to a revered craft. Under Ahom patronage, Muga silk—known as the “golden thread” for its lustrous sheen—became a symbol of royalty (Baruah, 2016). Women, residing in the rural areas are aware of sericulture and weaving, which is evident in their skills entrenched in Assam's cultural fabric. British administrator Francis Hamilton's focuses on the expertise of women in silk producing which is used for both domestic and royal use in early 19th century (Shaieka, 2023).

Competition from imported textiles was one of the many challenges faced by The British colonial era (post-1826). However, women weavers in Assam has thrived towards the survival of Muga, Eri, and Pat silks through resilience and adaptability and have tried to preserve Assam's silk. Their untiring efforts mark their role as stewards of a vibrant heritage, a legacy that thrives today.

WOMEN'S MULTIFACETED CONTRIBUTIONS

Women in Assam's silk industry are integral to every stage

of production, from sericulture to weaving and market engagement. Their contributions span technical expertise, artistic innovation, and economic agency.

SERICULTURE: THE FOUNDATION OF SILK PRODUCTION

Sericulture, the cultivation of silkworms to produce raw silk, is predominantly a female domain. Women undertake meticulous tasks such as cultivating host plants (Som and Soalu for Muga, castor for Eri), rearing silkworms, and harvesting cocoons. Women play a pivotal role in sericulture industry. At present, women occupy around 60% of total working force contributing in sericulture as worker and are involved in raising food plants, leaf collection, silkworm rearing, along with reeling/spinning. (Directorate of Sericulture, Govt. of Assam, 2024). Their ecological knowledge ensures the sustainability of non-mulberry silks, unique to Assam's biodiversity.

Muga and Eri silk, which are the two exclusive types of silk are produced particularly in Assam, India, and has its own unique characteristics and production methods. Muga silk is particularly famous for its golden yellow colour and is widespread to Assam. Eri silk, which is a non-mulberry silk produced from the cocoons of Eri silkworms is also known as 'ahimsa silk'. Muga silk production requires utmost precision, where silkworms are nurtured in outdoor conditions. These efforts along with a blend of tradition and environmental stewardship form the foundation of Assam's silk industry.

WEAVING: ARTISTRY AND CULTURAL PRESERVATION

Weaving acts as the heart of Assam's silk industry and women are the master artisans behind it. In Sualkuchi, dubbed the "Manchester of the East," women dominate the handloom sector, crafting iconic textiles like the Mekhela Sador. A 2024 study reports

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that over 80% of Sualkuchi's 19,530 weavers are women, operating 16,975 handlooms. The Sualkuchi handloom cluster covers 340 weavers working devotedly towards their progress. (Prayas, 2023). Their designs, inspired by nature and Assamese folklore, feature motifs like the Jaapi or Gos, preserving cultural narratives.

Women balance tradition with innovation, creating products like Muga saris and Eri shawls that appeal to modern markets. Their adaptability ensures the industry's global relevance, with Assam silk gaining traction in urban India and abroad. This artistry underscores women's role as cultural ambassadors and economic drivers.

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND SOCIAL IMPACT

The silk industry is a vital livelihood source for women in rural Assam, where employment options are limited. In Sualkuchi, women weavers earn ¹ 8,000–12,000 monthly, bolstering household incomes (Singha and Singha, 2020). Community development can be enhanced through financial independency of the women. This can be done as women can support their families in facilities such as healthcare and education.

In addition, the contribution of Self-help groups (SHGs) and cooperatives towards enhancing economic empowerment towards women is immense. This group can be backed by Assam Government Marketing Corporation and the Central Silk Board. These organisations can help the women to access the markets through e-commerce and trade fairs. In this way the women can bypass the middlemen who are involved in the process. Women can empower themselves by utilising their rights and thus SHGs can help the women to achieve social consistency.

INCOME GENERATION:

Sericulture industry is indispensable to the women of Assam. It provides a source of income for the women concerned. It is an integral part in the lives of many women. These women can

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work from their own households in the production of Eri and Muga silk. They are also involved in the rearing of silkworms and the weaving of Eri and Muga silk. They can balance their household responsibilities by working from home. In addition, it can be a financial support to their families as they can contribute towards their children's education to an extent.

UNIQUE PRODUCT QUALITIES

Assam silk, i.e. Eri, Muga, and Pat varieties, have unique product qualities and is natural in nature. This quality makes it stand tall in the global textile market. The natural lustre of Muga silk grows richer and richer with the passage of time along with added beauty of its golden sheen. Moreover, it is highly durable in nature which makes it a heritage fabric. Eri silk, is also known as “peace silk,” has a very soft texture and is known for its warm fabric. The anti-bacterial and hypoallergenic qualities of this fabric make it suitable even for sensitive skin. Therefore, it enhances the comfort of both the wearer as well as the weavers. Moreover, it meets the growing global demand for sustainable and eco-friendly textiles. Such unique attributes can be used in lime lighting the brand of this fabric. It can, hence, capture the niche markets, which shall help in strengthening its position in both domestic and international markets.

AT A GLANCE: Why Women Matter in Assam's Silk Landscape

Role Area	Women's Contribution
Weaving & Sericulture	Traditional expertise in handloom-based and sustainable silk production
Economic Empowerment	Earnings from weaving and rearing bolster household finances and independence

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Role Area	Women's Contribution
Cultural Preservation	Passing down motifs, techniques, and traditions across generations
Entrepreneurship	Leading cooperatives, ventures, and innovation in production & marketing
Support & Outreach	Benefiting extensively from NGO and government schemes that boost training and access

CHALLENGES: NAVIGATING A COMPLEX LANDSCAPE

Women in Assam's silk industry face significant hurdles that limit their potential, spanning economic, social, and structural domains.

ECONOMIC VULNERABILITIES

The industry is also affected by factors such as low wages, high raw material costs, and market volatility. Moreover, there have been tremendous disruptions in the post-COVID supply chain. The yarn prices have shot up tremendously and the women are mostly affected from it. The women being the most vulnerable ones are the ultimate sufferers. The seasonal challenges also affect the extent of productivity of the weavers. The presence of middleman also acts as a barrier towards the income earnings of the women as they take a high share for the products.

LACK OF KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS:

The lack of knowledge and skills stands as an obstacle for the women for the production of silk products in the Assam's silk industry. Due to limited access to formal training and a lack of exposure to modern techniques, the weavers cannot meet the quality standards required in competitive markets. Undoubtedly, they have sufficient skills in traditional methods of rearing silkworms and

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weaving, but still there exists gaps in knowledge regarding the maintenance of quality, proper grading of silk, in addition to the efficient use of reeling, spinning, and weaving machinery. As a result there is a reduction in productivity and product value. The growing demand for Assam silk in national and international markets is disrupted because of the lack of knowledge in addition to reducing the income potential of the women engaged in this sector. Thus, to bridge the gap the focus should be made on targeted training programs, workshops, and access to modern equipment as it can help in empowering these women to enhance both quality and profitability.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONSTRAINTS

The Assam's silk industry is characterised by social and cultural constraints. Women are restricted to travel for various training, exhibitions, or market access as they are busy with their household responsibilities. Also, there exists lack of exposure to new skills. Knowledge about modern designs is limited. Eventually, these constraints limit the personal growth of the women and also the industry's capacity to innovate and compete in the market.

GENDER INEQUALITY

The role of women is limited to labour-intensive roles although they women form the backbone of production in Assam's silk industry. Greater positions like leadership, marketing, and decision-making power are particularly given to the male and not to the women. Moreover, what act a barrier to women's mobility is the cultural expectations and household responsibilities. It also obstructs their exposure to markets, and participation in training or networking opportunities. As a result, despite having an expertise in this particular field, they maintain a low profile in policy discussions regarding matters relating to the silk industry. Hence, for appropriate innovation and inclusivity, there should be equal opportunities for both male

and female which will further enhance the professional growth and create a conducive working environment for the women involved.

STRUCTURAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL BARRIERS

The industry's reliance on traditional handlooms limits productivity and scalability. Access to modern amenities like looms or design software are still lacking in the Silk industry. This stands in the path of global competitiveness. Dependency on traditional handloom affects the productivity of this sector. Moreover, this sector is unorganized in nature of the sector and with limited government support; the industry's overall output level stands affected.

Opportunities for Empowerment: There is immense scope of empowerment of women with appropriate training, access to modern tools, and institutional support. Advancement in design and production can open up new income avenues for them. Through this, the market can be enlarged and opened up in the global context. Furthermore, education and leadership initiatives can to a great extent strengthen the decision-making power. This can result in greater economic independence and social acknowledgement.

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT AND POLICY INTERVENTIONS

Strong institutional support such as access to training, better quality inputs, facilitation of credit, and modern advanced equipment can to a great extent transform the livelihoods of the people. Policies that emphasize the involvement of women like reserved spots in cooperatives, financial support for women- owned businesses, and promotional aid can contribute to closing gender disparities. Ensuring fair pricing, safeguarding against counterfeit silk, and promoting Assam silk on a global scale can significantly increase women's income, improve their skills, and establish their role as equal participants in the industry's development.

MARKET FLUCTUATIONS

The rise of affordable, machine-produced clothing and the distribution of counterfeit items like Varanasi silk falsely labelled as Assam silk diminish the worth of genuine handwoven silk. It is because of this unfair competition, the demand for such products diminishes and also the prices are depressed.

INNOVATION AND GLOBAL MARKET ACCESS

Besides weaving traditional items, the Women weavers are now aiming to diversify their products, by producing modern items like Eri face masks, Muga home décor, purses etc. The market in the modern times can be expanded through training in digital design and expansion in digital platforms. Cultural awareness of Assam's heritage can also help in expanding the market in the global context.

EDUCATION AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Specialised vocational training can be provided to the women as it can enhance their skills in addition to traditional weaving. Organisation of financial literacy camps can enable them to manage and utilise their earnings in an appropriate manner. Also, in order to target the global market a systematic planning for expanding their business has to be made. Proper training in digital marketing can help them to connect directly with the buyers. Advanced weaving techniques can improve in the product quality can allow the women to compete more effectively.

CASE STUDY SUALKUCHI'S WOMEN WEAVERS

The women of Sualkuchi, which is 35 km from Guwahati, represent the backbone of Assams silk industry. Assamese culture is defined by the Muga and Pat silk textiles made in Sualkuchi, a town of 19,530 weavers, more over 15,600 of whom are women. Crafts keep womens livelihoods and cultural identities alive. Nevertheless, the use of intermediaries and low pay continue. A paradigm change is being signalled by the Central Silk Boards seed

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units and SHG-led marketing, which are enabling women to become entrepreneurs.

CONCLUSION

Women are the golden thread of Assam's silk industry, weaving tradition, innovation, and resilience into its fabric. Their roles in sericulture, weaving, and economic development sustain a vital sector while preserving cultural heritage. Despite economic, social, and structural challenges, opportunities through institutional support, innovation, and education can empower women as leaders. As Assam's silk industry navigates globalization, women weavers remain its greatest asset, crafting a legacy of artistry and empowerment for future generations.

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The Gendered Scars of Land Loss

PRAJNA BORAH

“The gender gap in command over property is the single most critical contributor to the gender gap in economic well-being, social status and empowerment.”

The landscape of land rights discourse in South Asia has notably evolved over the past twenty years. What was once an unacknowledged query—***“Do women need independent rights in land?”***, now occupies a legitimate, albeit debated, position within public policy discussions. This shift underscores a vital, ongoing struggle: the initial acceptance of women’s entitlement to independent land rights is merely the **precursor to the more arduous task** of materializing these rights effectively in practice¹. This chapter attempts to problematise the interplay between land and women, which is a general attribute in many agricultural societies and seeks to bring to our understanding of the domestic mode in which patriarchy operates and gets reinforced in the question of women’s

¹ *‘Independent’ land rights are defined here as rights that are formally untied to male owners hip or control, in other words, excluding joint titles with men. By effective rights in land I mean not just rights in law but also their effective realization in practice*

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relationship to land.² Inheritance practice in society is highlighted to bring out the gender relationship within Advocating for women's independent land rights necessitates acknowledging new claimants to a scarce and highly valuable resource that fundamentally shapes economic well-being and power dynamics, especially in rural contexts. This paradigm shift inevitably extends existing conflicts over land, traditionally confined between men, to encompass men and women, thereby introducing these tensions into the household's most intimate sphere.

The evolution of thought, which has progressively challenged both the assumption of a unitary household and the broader notion of gender-neutral development over the past two decades, is a complex process. While not detailed extensively here, its progression has been characterized by negotiation and struggle involving a diverse array of actors. These include academics and researchers, women's activist organizations, government policymakers and bureaucrats, and international agencies. This transformative process was propelled by at least three interconnected factors:

1. The accumulation of gender-specific empirical evidence and rigorous analysis since the mid-1970s, which systematically revealed a significant gender disparity in the distribution of development benefits and burdens.
2. The proliferation of women's organizations, coalescing into a burgeoning women's movement since the late 1970s.
3. Changes within the international context, notably the declaration of 1975-1985 as the United Nations (UN) Decade for Women. This declaration spurred significant developments, including increased research funding and dissemination,

² <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/640986> Ph.D Thesis; *Researchers: Sitlhou, Hoineilthing. Guide: Visvanathan, Sujan. Completed year: 2011. School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University.*

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heightened media coverage, and intensified pressure on member countries to generate gender-specific data and produce comprehensive reports on the status of women³.

North-East Indian tribes are often portrayed as egalitarian societies unlike the mainstream Indian society where subjugation of women is evident in socio-cultural practices. Most of the tribes of the North-Eastern part of India (except for the matrilineal Khasis and Garos), follow the patriarchal system of family structure (ibid). The Karbis and the Adivasis practice the line of descent, law of inheritance and law of residence is appointed to the male line only. The offspring follows the clan name of the next closest or nearest male relative of the family. There has been undisputable rule about the transfer of the immovable property especially the ancestral land even in the case of families having lone daughter as contender. Like

³ *Documents (Reports, Action Plans, etc.) from various international and national Conferences, Symposia and Working Groups, that met during 1975-85 to focus on rural women, provide interesting insights into the changing nature of concerns over this period. For a selected compilation of such documents (international, and those relating to India). We can refer to CWDS (1985) too. CWDS (1985). The Report, Towards Equality, on the status of women in India, was also a significant landmark (Government of India (GOI) 1974). Brought out by a Committee set up by the Indian Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, the Report compiled evidence of gender gaps in virtually every sector and made recommendations on how to bridge them. The issue of women's land rights, however, was not raised in the Report, although it included a discussion on gender inequalities in inheritance laws. On the role of international aid agencies in pushing the gender question, see especially White (1992) for Bangladesh. In India, I understand, international organizations such as the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) played an important role in pushing the government to set up review committees on rural women, such as the 1979 National Committee to Review and Analyse Participation of Women in Agriculture and Rural Development, set up by the Ministry of Agriculture (personal communication, Vina Mazumdar, 1992).*

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This chapter critically examines and meticulously constructs the foundational argument for securing robust land rights for women. It elucidates, with compelling clarity, the profound significance of land as a multifaceted form of property, extending beyond mere economic value to encompass social standing, security, and empowerment. Building upon this analysis, the chapter offers nuanced insights into the intricate dynamics of gender relations, both within the private sphere of the household and across broader societal structures. ‘Sex’ refers to the biological divisions into female and male; ‘gender’ refers to the parallel and socially unequal division into femininity and masculinity (Oakley, 1981, p.41). Theories stressing on the social construction of gender emphasized on how we learn the gender roles that relate to our biological sex through our interaction with social structures, such as the family, schools, the media and so on. Women’s status in society remains defined by their family functions (both actual and supposed) in a way that does not hold for men. In the family role of women, ‘mothering’ is thus seen as an essential ingredient, its absence pathogenic, threatening the whole purpose of the family- the production of health children (Oakley, 1974, p.69).

Women experience a more concealed form of displacement, losing access to shared resource, traditional knowledge, and decision-making power. This ‘hidden dispossession’ is just as damaging force but often overlooked. To understand this, we need an intersectional approach, recognizing that gender interacts with caste, class, and ethnicity. Women from marginalized groups face compounded discrimination, intensified by land alienation. In the context of network convergence, men often dominate formal networks related to land, while women’s networks, centered on informal resource sharing, are less visible.

The chapter systematically delves into the gendered dimensions of various compromises women are compelled to make,

alongside the specific vulnerabilities they face stemming from insecure land tenure. It critically analyzes the resultant shifts in women's social status and, notably, enhances the visibility of tribal women's experiences within academic discourse. In doing so, this chapter establishes a crucial methodological and theoretical foundation for understanding the 'tribe-caste continuum,' thereby enriching and diversifying academic discussions surrounding the often-marginalized visibility of tribal women's perspectives and realities.

IMPACT OF AGGRESSIVE GROWTH

The impact of the process of alienation is not the same in terms of the karbi people and the adivasis of Mikir Bamuni Grant village. The adivasi experience of land alienation is quite different than that of the karbi people. Adivasi women experience on land alienation again is very different. Having a small field of their own makes a huge difference. Women's virtual exclusion from property rights is something which is a matter of focus in South Asian countries.

The situation of women concerning property rights in Mikir Bamuni Grant village, and by extension, many rural communities in Assam, is a complex interplay of legal frameworks, deeply entrenched socio-cultural norms, and systemic power imbalances. The points you've raised highlight critical barriers to women's access to and control over property. The acquisition of approximately 276 bighas of agricultural land for the solar power project directly led to the dispossession of indigenous Karbi and Adivasi farming communities. For women, who are intrinsically linked to subsistence agriculture in rural Assam, this constituted a profound loss of their primary livelihood source and threatened their food security. Reports indicate the destruction of standing crops, further illustrating the abrupt and forceful nature of this displacement. The alleged

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fraudulent land acquisition practices, which disregarded the established occupancy rights of tenant farmers, particularly disadvantaged women. Their often informal or secondary land tenure status within patriarchal societal structures rendered them exceptionally vulnerable to economic disenfranchisement and displacement without adequate compensation or recourse. This disruption also undermined the traditional agrarian economy, a sphere where women historically play a central and vital role.

HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AND GENDERED VIOLENCE

The resistance to the project by local communities was reportedly met with state-sanctioned violence. Accounts detail instances of police brutality against both men and women, highlighting a direct infringement on their physical integrity and right to peaceful protest. The terrorization of women and children by security forces and company representatives created an atmosphere of pervasive fear and insecurity, severely impacting their psychological well-being. Such incidents underscore how aggressive development models, when confronted with local opposition, can lead to gross human rights violations, with women often bearing the brunt of the violence due to their perceived vulnerability and active participation in community resistance.

ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND INDIRECT IMPACTS

The project's location within a documented elephant corridor raises significant environmental concerns. While not directly targeting women, environmental degradation and the disruption of local ecosystems invariably affect those who rely on natural resources for daily sustenance and well-being. Such changes can alter traditional resource collection patterns, often a female responsibility, indirectly increasing their labor burden and exposure to environmental hazards.

Although not explicitly detailed for Mikir Bamuni, large-scale industrial projects frequently introduce environmental pollutants and associated health risks, which can disproportionately impact women and children due to their roles in domestic care and greater physiological susceptibility.

EXCLUSION FROM GOVERNANCE AND DECISION-MAKING

The land acquisition process reportedly bypassed direct engagement with the cultivating communities, including women, instead negotiating with descendants of the original land grant holder. This process exemplifies the exclusion of marginalized groups, particularly women, from critical decision-making processes that directly determine their socio-economic future. In a region where patriarchal structures often limit women's public and political participation, their voices were effectively silenced in a development initiative with profound community-wide implications. This lack of inclusive governance exacerbates existing power imbalances and undermines principles of equitable development.

ABSENCE OF INTER- AND INTRA-COMMUNITY CONVERSATION ABOUT PROPERTY RIGHTS

The lack of open dialogue about property rights, both within and between communities, is a significant impediment to women's empowerment. When property rights are not openly discussed, especially concerning women's entitlements, it perpetuates existing patriarchal norms. The assumption that property inherently belongs to men remains unchallenged. Women often remain unaware of their legal rights to property due to this silence. Without conversation, they don't learn about statutory provisions like the Hindu Succession Act (amended in 2005 to grant equal rights to daughters in ancestral property, and the Assam Hindu Women's Rights to Property (Extension to Agricultural Land) Act, 1943). This ignorance prevents

them from asserting claims. Without a collective understanding and discussion, women lack the social capital and communal support to negotiate for their rights, especially when confronting resistant male kin or community leaders. The absence of formal discussion means that customary practices, which often disadvantage women, continue to implicitly govern property matters, overriding statutory laws.

PATRILOCAL RESIDENCE

Sherry B. Ortner (1996) discusses the tendency to associate women with ‘nature’ and ‘domestic unit’ and men with ‘culture’ and ‘the public entity’. As the role of mother is linked to the family, the family itself is regarded as closer to nature compared to activities and institutions outside the family. Thus, activities such as politics, warfare and religion are seen as more absent in nature, as superior to domestic tasks, and therefore as the province of men. She wrote, “Since men lack a ‘natural’ basis (nursing, generalized to child care) for a familiar orientation, their sphere of activity is defined at the level of interfamilial relations. And hence, so the cultural reasoning seems to go, men are the ‘natural’ proprietors of religion, rituals, politics, and other realms of cultural thought and action in which universalistic statements of spiritual and social synthesis are made” (Ortner, 1996, p.33).

While Bina Agarwa’s primary focus (as discussed before) is on gender and land rights, her work implicitly and explicitly addresses aspects of development-induced land alienation. When large development projects displace communities, the gendered impacts on land access and control are often severe, disproportionately affecting women who may lose customary or informal rights that are not formally recognized in compensation processes. Patrilocal residence, where a bride moves to her husband’s family home after marriage, profoundly impacts women’s vulnerability regarding property rights.

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Upon marriage, women are often considered to “marry out” of their natal family. This weakens their claim to ancestral property in their birth village, as they are no longer seen as direct inheritors or co-sharers of that lineage. While legally they may have rights, social pressure often dictates otherwise. In their marital home, women typically hold only usufructuary (right to use) rights to property, rather than ownership rights. They are dependents within their husband’s patrilineal family, and their access to resources is often mediated through their husband or in-laws. Asserting property rights in their natal home could be seen as an attempt to “take away” resources from their brothers or male kin, potentially damaging their relationship with their birth family. Conversely, asserting rights in their marital home could lead to social ostracism, harassment, or even violence from in-laws, who might view it as a challenge to their authority. Moving to a new village often means a woman loses her established social networks and support systems, making it harder to access legal aid or community support if she decides to pursue a property claim. Male kin often view women’s claims to property as a direct reduction of their own share, especially in land-scarce rural areas. This perception fuels resistance. Even when women legally inherit property, male kin often continue to manage or control it, treating women as mere nominal owners. Deeply ingrained gender roles dictate that women are primarily responsible for domestic work and childcare, not property management or economic decision-making, leading male kin to believe women are incapable or undeserving of direct control over property.

DEPENDENCY NARRATIVE

The social construction of women as inherently dependent on men (father, husband, son) for their economic well-being undermines their claim to independent property ownership. Dowry, for instance, is often seen as a woman’s share of property, precluding

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further inheritance claims. Social norms that restrict women's mobility and participation in public life (e.g., attending village meetings, engaging with land revenue officials) prevent them from actively managing property or pursuing legal avenues. Even with legal parity, land is still culturally perceived as "son's property" for lineage continuity and security, while a daughter's primary claim is often relegated to movable assets or dowry. Lower educational attainment among women significantly compounds their vulnerability. Education provides foundational literacy skills necessary to understand legal documents, government schemes, and the intricacies of property laws. Low education means women are often unaware of their rights or how to claim them. Education generally fosters greater self-confidence, critical thinking, and agency. Women with low education may lack the confidence to challenge patriarchal norms or navigate complex administrative and legal processes. Lower education limits women's access to formal employment and alternative income sources. This economic dependence on male family members makes them less likely to assert property rights, fearing loss of support. Less educated women are more susceptible to misinformation or manipulation regarding their property entitlements.

LOCAL ADMINISTRATION

The effectiveness and impartiality of local administration (gram panchayat, land revenue departments) are crucial. The process of registering land, transferring titles, or initiating partition can be complex, time-consuming, and corrupt, posing significant barriers for women, especially those with low literacy and limited networks. Local officials may themselves hold patriarchal biases, leading them to be less responsive to women's claims or even actively collude with male kin to deny women their rights. The administrative machinery may not be adequately sensitized to the specific challenges

women face in accessing property rights, leading to an unresponsive or intimidating environment. Despite progressive laws, their implementation at the local level can be weak due to a combination of bureaucratic inefficiency, corruption, and social pressure.

CULTURAL NORMS

Deeply ingrained cultural norms form the bedrock of the challenges women face. Most communities in Assam, like much of India, follow patrilineal inheritance systems where property primarily passes through the male line. This cultural practice fundamentally undermines women's claims. There's often immense social pressure on women not to disrupt family harmony by demanding their share of property, especially from brothers. Upholding family honor and tradition is often prioritized over individual rights. In many rural areas, customary laws and traditions, which often predate and contradict statutory laws, continue to hold significant sway, particularly in land matters. These customary laws often provide women with limited or no inheritance rights.

The rural women's struggle for effective land rights will not be easy one. They are subject to contestation, change and accordance

In summation, the "aggressive growth" manifested by the Azure Power project in Mikir Bamuni Grant village has demonstrably imposed severe and multi-faceted detriments on women. These impacts span economic marginalization through land dispossession, direct human rights violations including gendered violence, indirect environmental burdens, and a systemic exclusion from governance. This case serves as a critical illustration of how development initiatives, when pursued without due consideration for human rights, environmental sustainability, and gender equity, can precipitate significant social crises and deepen the vulnerability of marginalized populations.

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Epistemic Injustice and Gendered Credibility

ANANYA SHARMA

ABSTRACT :

This paper builds on Miranda Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice to examine how gendered credibility operates across science, publishing, and everyday life. It explores how testimonial and hermeneutical injustices shape who is believed, whose knowledge is dismissed, and how these dynamics intersect with caste, class, and other social structures. Through global and Indian examples, the paper highlights forms of epistemic resistance, from feminist publishing to anti-caste writings; ultimately, it argues that feminist epistemology is not just a critique of exclusion but a transformative practice that re-imagines knowledge, credibility, and authority from the margins.

INTRODUCTION

Who gets to be believed, and why? Who is granted the authority to speak, and whose voice is dismissed before it can even be heard? Knowledge production, and the ways in which it is shared, are deeply embedded in social structures that often mirror and reinforce existing power imbalances. These problems are central to *Miranda Fricker's* groundbreaking work *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (2007), where she introduces the concepts of *testimonial and hermeneutical injustice*.

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Women, especially within scientific institutions, often deal with what's called *credibility deficits*, meaning their knowledge and skills are questioned more than men's. Which means that women have historically faced systemic biases that downplay their contributions and expertise. This shows up in different ways: their research is scrutinized more harshly, their discoveries are sometimes credited to male colleagues, and their authority in their respective fields is often undermined. Such biases are built into the structures of scientific institutions, making it harder for women to advance in their careers, secure funding, or take on leadership roles.

In the floodplains and hills of Assam, women have long held knowledge shaped by land, language, and memory which is a kind of knowledge that rarely enters textbooks or policy reports, yet quietly sustains entire communities. But these ways of knowing are often pushed aside by being dismissed as backward, folklore, too emotional, too regional, or simply invisible within dominant systems of authority. This quiet erasure is not accidental; it is what Miranda Fricker calls as *epistemic injustice*, a form of harm done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower. Across India and the world, women, especially those from marginalized communities, face this injustice daily.

FEMINIST FRAMEWORKS OF KNOWING

Feminist epistemologists, however, have not only identified these injustices but also developed alternative frameworks for understanding and producing knowledge. *Sandra Harding's standpoint theory* posits that knowledge is socially situated and that beginning inquiry from the lived experiences of the marginalized offers a more reflexive and potentially less distorted understanding of the world. In a related move, *Donna Haraway's* concept of *situated knowledge* critiques the illusion of value-free objectivity in dominant epistemologies. She challenges the "god trick" of

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detached, universal vision that often underpins scientific knowledge production, arguing instead that all knowledge is partial, embodied, and contextually grounded.

Building on these foundations, philosophers such as *Kristie Dotson* and *José Medina* have examined the dynamics of *epistemic resistance*. Dotson's work draws attention to forms of epistemic oppression such as testimonial quieting and epistemic violence, where speakers from marginalized groups are silenced, misinterpreted, or required to self-censor in order to be heard. Medina, in *The Epistemology of Resistance* (2013), emphasizes the importance of pluralistic, collective resistance to dominant epistemic frameworks and offers a vision of knowing that foregrounds the political and ethical responsibilities of both speakers and hearers.

Understanding these frameworks is essential to any critical engagement with *the gendered structures of knowledge production*. Feminist critiques have consistently shown how dominant epistemologies have been shaped by masculine norms, privileging abstraction, detachment, and emotional restraint. *Elizabeth Anderson's* work draws attention to these symbolic and material consequences of these hierarchies. As she notes, femininity and masculinity are constructed differently across disciplines, influencing what is recognized as legitimate knowledge and who is authorized to produce it. The result is an ideal of the "knower" as autonomous, impersonal, and rational, which is an ideal historically coded as male and sustained through the exclusion or devaluation of ways of knowing associated with women. This is evident not only in institutional practices but also in disciplinary hierarchies, where fields like science and mathematics are masculinized and valorized, while those associated with care, embodiment, and affect are often feminized and marginalized. Feminist epistemology, therefore, does not simply call for greater inclusion of women in existing structures,

but rather demands a reconstruction of epistemic norms to account for the diverse, situated, and embodied nature of knowledge. These ideas don't stay abstract, they take shape in the real world, in how people are believed or ignored in places like science, publishing, and everyday life.

PUBLISHING AS EPISTEMIC RESISTANCE

For a long time, publishing has acted like a gate with a lock that decides whose voices deserve to enter public conversation and whose stories should be forgotten. And more often than not, it's been men, especially white or upper-caste men (in India), holding the key. Women, particularly those from marginalized communities, have had to fight to be heard, to be published, to be believed. But they haven't just waited to be let in. They've built their own doors, their own platforms, and in doing so, they've transformed publishing into a space of resistance. From literature to journalism, women have used writing and editing not just to tell stories, but to make space for knowledge that was long dismissed, which is the knowledge rooted in experience, memory, pain, rage and joy.

Feminist thinkers have long asked: what does it mean that we've mostly read the world through men's eyes? *Simone de Beauvoir* pointed out that women have always been written as "the other," never the default, never the full subject. *Virginia Woolf* wrote about how a woman needs money and a room of her own to write fiction but that was actually about more than just space; it was about the right to think and speak freely. *Toni Morrison* didn't just write Black women's stories with extraordinary care but she also made sure others got to tell theirs, too, as an editor lifting up unheard voices. And *Gloria Steinem*, through *Ms. Magazine*, turned women's everyday realities that were so often silenced into political conversation. These women weren't just producing texts; they were cracking open the limits of who gets to be seen as a thinker, a knower,

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a storyteller.

In India, these critiques and interventions take on additional layers, shaped by caste, class, religion and language. *Ismat Chughtai*, writing in Urdu, broke social taboos with stories like *Lihaaf*, which explored female desire, same-sex intimacy and the suffocating lives of middle-class Muslim women. *Mahasweta Devi* wrote powerfully about tribal women and subaltern resistance, foregrounding lived experiences and oral histories often dismissed by academic or state narratives. *Urvashi Butalia's* *The Other Side of Silence* compiled testimonies of Partition survivors, particularly women, challenging state-produced histories with deeply personal, gendered accounts of trauma and survival. *Zubaan Books*, a feminist publishing house she co-founded, continues to publish writing that centers women, queerness and resistance. *Kalpana Sharma's* journalism shifts urban and environmental discourse by placing women, often invisible in policy, in the foreground. They didn't ask for permission. They trusted that their stories mattered, even when no one else did. In doing so, they didn't just tell stories but they reshaped what counts as knowledge.

These acts of epistemic resistance are not limited to metropolitan or mainstream feminist spaces. In Northeast India, like *Assam*, women writers have long been carving out spaces of articulation by pushing back against silences imposed by regional conservatism, nationalist neglect, and patriarchal literary traditions. *Indira Goswami* (Mamoni Raisom Goswami), one of the most powerful literary voices from the region, refused to separate the personal from the political. Her works, such as *The Blue-Necked Braja* explored the inner lives of women, widows bound by temple orthodoxy, women caught in insurgent violence, not as background details but as sources of situated knowledge that exposed the complicity of religion, patriarchy and the state. Similarly, *Arupa Kalita*

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Patangia centers her fiction on women navigating the trauma of socio-political conflict, ethnic violence, and displacement. Her narratives do not present women as passive victims but as interpreters of their own conditions, often resisting silently and enduring with quiet strength. These stories, rooted in memory, emotion and survival, challenge both the gendered exclusions of Assamese literary spaces and the erasures of dominant mainland narratives. Their writing becomes a form of epistemic resistance, insisting that pain, silence and embodied experience are not only valid but necessary ways of knowing.

In the context of feminist epistemology, these contributions exemplify a radical challenge to dominant knowledge systems. Publishing becomes not just a medium of storytelling but a site of epistemic resistance, where testimonial and affective knowledge, often dismissed as “subjective” or “soft,” are reclaimed as legitimate and powerful. Women in publishing don’t merely seek inclusion within existing structures; they rewrite the structures themselves. Through memoir, fiction, reportage, and oral history, they reveal how credibility, authorship, and authority are socially distributed and how reclaiming these can reshape collective understanding. In this sense, feminist publishing in both global and Indian contexts serves as a vital political and epistemological act: one that insists that women are not just storytellers, but knowers. These moments of resistance are what Kristie Dotson calls ‘epistemic resilience’, where the act of storytelling itself becomes a refusal to be erased.

GENDERED BIAS IN SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

Science often presents itself as neutral, claiming to uncover facts about the world without bias. But feminist thinkers like *Sandra Harding* and *Evelyn Fox Keller* have shown that this isn’t entirely true. Harding argues that science needs “*strong objectivity*,” which means we should pay attention to the perspectives of those pushed

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to the margins, especially women, because they notice things the dominant view often ignores. Keller points out how even the language of science is gendered: in biology, for instance, sperm are described as active and eggs as passive, mirroring traditional gender roles. These critiques reveal that so-called objective truths often carry hidden biases shaped by power, patriarchy, and culture.

These biases aren't abstract since they've affected real people in very real ways. *Rosalind Franklin's* DNA images were key to one of the most important scientific discoveries of the 20th century, but she was barely credited. *Lise Meitner* helped uncover nuclear fission but her male colleague got the Nobel. *Jocelyn Bell Burnell* discovered pulsars, but the award went to her supervisor. *Chien-Shiung Wu* proved major physics theories but was left out of recognition. In India, *Janaki Ammal's* groundbreaking work in botany was largely forgotten, and Kamala Sohonie had to fight just to study science at IISc. *Asima Chatterjee*, who developed anti-epileptic drugs, and *Indira Hinduja*, who pioneered IVF in India, both made landmark contributions with little acknowledgement. Anthropologist *Irawati Karve* used science to challenge patriarchal ideas, yet is rarely cited. Even today, women like *Gagandeep Kang*, a key Indian virologist, face the quiet but persistent undermining of their authority. Trans neuroscientist *Ben Barres* once said his work was taken more seriously after he transitioned—proof that credibility in science often depends not on what you say, but on who people think you are.

These patterns haven't vanished. In labs and institutions around the world, women are still fighting to be heard, believed, and taken seriously. The *MeTooSTEM movement*, both globally and in India, has exposed how harassment and silencing are deeply tied to credibility and access. Studies like Vishalakshi Gautam's show how Indian women scientists face everything from subtle exclusion in hiring to the expectation that they'll "step back" for family. But

feminist epistemology doesn't call for abandoning science. Instead, it calls for remaking it. It asks us to build a version of science that's fairer, more self-aware, and genuinely inclusive. One that doesn't just allow women in, but listens to them when they speak.

INTERSECTIONALITY AND KNOWLEDGE MARGINALIZATION

Feminist epistemology begins by questioning who gets to speak and be believed. Intersectionality, as theorized by *Kimberlé Crenshaw*, pushes this question further. It asks: Which women? And under what specific social conditions? Crenshaw's framework reveals how systems like caste, class, race, gender, religion, and sexuality do not operate in isolation, but intersect in complex ways to shape one's experience of the world and one's access to epistemic credibility. A Dalit woman's voice, for instance, is not simply silenced because she is a woman, but because she is positioned at the sharp edge of caste and patriarchy together. Feminist epistemology, then, cannot afford to treat gender as a singular or isolated category. To take knowledge justice seriously is to account for how multiple axes of oppression affect who is heard, who is dismissed, and whose knowledge is rendered invisible.

This is powerfully evident in the work of Dalit and anti-caste feminist writers. *Bama*, in her landmark autobiography *Karukku*, writes about growing up as a Dalit Christian woman in Tamil Nadu, navigating both religious and caste-based discrimination. Her storytelling is both a personal and political act, refusing to filter her experience through the lens of savarna respectability. Similarly, *Baby Kamble*, in *The Prisons We Broke*, recounts the daily humiliations of caste and poverty, offering a view of Indian womanhood that sharply contrasts with upper-caste feminist narratives. *Meena Kandasamy*, through poetry, fiction, and activism, brings attention to the violence embedded in caste hierarchies and institutional

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silencing. These women are not just telling stories—they are performing acts of what philosopher *Kristie Dotson* calls epistemic resistance: speaking out despite knowing they may be disbelieved, ignored, or misinterpreted. Dotson's concepts of testimonial quieting and epistemic violence describe the subtle and overt ways in which speakers from marginalized groups are pressured to censor themselves or are rendered unintelligible by dominant norms. Resistance to this silencing is not only individual but also collective.

Likewise, in *Assam*, the intersection of ethnicity, gender, language, and indigeneity generates unique forms of epistemic marginalization. For instance, the voices of indigenous women from Bodo, Karbi, and Mising communities are often excluded not only from mainstream feminist discourse but also from local political movements that prioritize male leadership. Indigenous women's testimonies about environmental degradation, displacement due to dam projects, or militarization in border areas remain under-reported and under-valued. Yet, their knowledge, passed through oral traditions, songs, and community memory, offers rich epistemic insights into survival, resilience and ecological care. Platforms like *NEthing* and *Feminist Collective Northeast* have begun to document and amplify these voices, highlighting the importance of intersectionality in understanding whose truths are consistently dismissed. Here too, Dotson's concept of epistemic violence is vividly at play, as these women are often not only silenced but rendered unintelligible within dominant frameworks of nationhood, development and even mainstream feminism.

Online platforms like *Dalit Camera*, *Feminism in India* and publishing initiatives like *Zubaan's imprint for marginal voices* have become crucial spaces for sharing knowledge rooted in lived experience and political urgency. These platforms refuse the narrow gatekeeping of traditional media and academic institutions, asserting

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instead that feminist knowledge must be built from below, from pain, memory, survival, and solidarity. In this spirit, philosopher José Medina emphasizes the need for *epistemic friction*—the productive tension that arises when dominant knowledge systems are challenged by subaltern ways of knowing. This includes Adivasi oral traditions, queer and trans zines, community archives, and testimonies that speak to trauma and resistance. These alternative modes of knowledge not only disrupt dominant narratives, they invite us to imagine what more just, more inclusive epistemic communities might look like.

Across science, publishing, and testimonial practices, women, especially those situated at the intersections of multiple marginalizations, have not only resisted silence but created transformative knowledge. Feminist epistemology, therefore, is not merely a critique of exclusion; it is a call to remake the very foundations of how we understand, share, and trust knowledge. Across all these spaces, whether it's a lab, a bookshelf, a courtroom, or the streets, *feminist epistemology* doesn't just uncover what's been silenced. It also shines a light on what's managed to survive, often quietly, against the odds.

FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY AS A TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE

Feminist epistemology doesn't just ask who gets to speak—it asks us to look deeper and question how we've come to define knowledge in the first place. What do we call valid?

Whose truths do we trust? Thinkers like Sandra Harding, Donna Haraway, and Elizabeth Anderson have helped shift our focus from simply including women in dominant institutions to radically rethinking the terms of participation altogether. Harding's standpoint theory teaches us that those pushed to the margins often see the world more clearly and not just because they are naturally more

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virtuous, but because they've been forced to notice what dominant perspectives overlook. Haraway reminds us there's no such thing as a "view from nowhere"—every act of knowing comes from somewhere, someone, with a body and a history. Anderson helps us notice how we've built entire academic systems around values coded as masculine, rationality, abstraction, emotional distance, while discrediting those associated with care, feeling, and connection.

This isn't just an abstract intellectual concern but it shapes lives and futures. In *Assam*, indigenous women carry generations of knowledge about shifting cultivation (*jhum*), riverine ecosystems, healing herbs, and seasonal cycles—knowledge that is intimately tied to land, body, and survival. Yet, this deeply ecological wisdom is often dismissed as unscientific, backward, or irrelevant by dominant systems of development and policymaking. What is lost in that dismissal is not only practical expertise but entire ways of seeing and relating to the world. These women notice the soil changing, the river behaving differently, the plants flowering at odd times and they understand what it means, even when official science looks away. Feminist collectives like the Mising Women's Association, or grassroots educators working in places like Majuli, are pushing back against these exclusions. They are not just documenting women's knowledge for the record but they are defending it as vital, living epistemology. In doing so, they challenge the extractive logic of top-down development and assert that expertise doesn't only reside in labs or reports, but also in lived experience, inherited memory, and community care. These women are not asking simply to be included, they are calling for a different way of valuing knowledge altogether. One that begins with listening, with respect and with the understanding that truth can flow from the margins, from the rivers and from the hands of those who have tended them for generations.

Reimagining knowledge means changing not just who gets to

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speak, but the structure of the room itself. It means designing research and education systems that don't just tolerate difference, but are built around it. It means valuing community archives, oral history and experiential knowledge just as much as data and theory. In India, we see this happening when grassroots women's collectives collaborate with scholars to produce research that reflects lived realities; when Adivasi women's testimonies are preserved in multilingual digital spaces; when survivors of violence shape the language and law that tries to protect them. These are not just stories but are powerful claims to knowing, claims that unsettle the idea that knowledge belongs only to a trained few.

Feminist epistemology doesn't want a seat at the existing table. It wants to reshape the table altogether. Across science, publishing, activism, and everyday life, women, especially those from historically silenced communities, are not just asking to be heard. They're offering new ways to listen, to understand, to make sense of the world. In doing so, they remind us that knowledge isn't just about getting things right, it's about building a world where more people get to speak, to matter, and to be believed.

CONCLUSION :

At its core, feminist epistemology is about listening - *really listening* to people's voices that we've learned to trust or dismiss along the way. In science, publishing, and public life, the struggle for epistemic justice is about more than just inclusion; it's about transforming the very frameworks that define knowledge and credibility. Not just about injustice, but about survival, about care, about seeing the world differently. These voices, long silenced or sidelined, have never stopped speaking. They've been building archives, telling stories, challenging systems and imagining better futures. And listening to them isn't just an ethical responsibility; rather it's a way to remake the world with more honesty, more complexity,

and more care.

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Role of Commerce Education in Women Empowerment with Special Reference to Assam

DR. AJOY MITRA

ABSTRACT

Women empowerment is a multidimensional concept encompassing economic, social, educational, and political dimensions, with education being its most critical driver. Among various educational disciplines, commerce education plays a pivotal role in promoting economic independence and entrepreneurial capabilities among women. This paper explores the role of commerce education in empowering women, with special reference to Assam, a state in Northeast India marked by cultural richness and socio-economic challenges.

Commerce education provides women with essential knowledge in finance, trade, management, and entrepreneurship, thereby enabling them to participate more actively in the economy. In Assam, women are increasingly pursuing careers in commerce-related fields, engaging in small businesses, self-help groups and digital ventures, especially in sectors like handloom, handicrafts, and local enterprise. Despite this progress, various challenges such as social constraints, lack of infrastructure, and financial barriers still

hinder women's full participation.

The paper also examines existing government initiatives and suggests policy interventions to make commerce education more inclusive and impactful for women in Assam. It concludes that strengthening commerce education and promoting financial literacy can significantly contribute to achieving gender equity and sustainable development in the region.

(Keywords: *Commerce Education; Women Empowerment; Financial Literacy; Economic Independence; Entrepreneurship; Skill Development; Self-Help Groups (SHGs); Gender Equality; Digital Inclusion.*)

1. INTRODUCTION:

Women empowerment refers to the process of increasing the social, economic and political strength of women. Education plays a crucial role in this process and within that, commerce education has emerged as a key driver, especially in today's market-oriented economy. In the context of Assam, a northeastern state of India, commerce education is increasingly seen as a tool for empowering women by opening up avenues for entrepreneurship, financial independence and participation in the corporate world.

Women empowerment is a multi-dimensional process aimed at granting women the power to make life-determining decisions, enhancing their position in family, society and the economy. It encompasses social, educational, economic and political upliftment. In this context, education emerges as the most vital catalyst for change. Among the various streams of education, commerce education plays a uniquely transformative role, particularly in a rapidly globalizing and economically-driven world.

Commerce education, which includes the study of business, finance, economics, accountancy, entrepreneurship and management, is more than just academic learning. It provides practical knowledge

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and skill sets that directly relate to employability, entrepreneurship, financial literacy, and economic self-reliance. These competencies are essential for the empowerment of women, especially in regions where traditional norms and economic constraints have limited their advancement.

In Assam, a state in the northeastern region of India, women have historically faced challenges such as limited access to higher education, early marriage, unemployment, and gender-based discrimination. However, the landscape is slowly changing. With the rising importance of commerce education and an increase in awareness among the population, women in Assam are increasingly pursuing commerce as a career pathway. They are using their knowledge to step into the corporate world, start their own businesses, participate in the digital economy, and manage financial affairs both in households and workplaces.

This study aims to explore how commerce education contributes to the empowerment of women in Assam. It examines how such education equips women with the tools necessary to overcome social barriers, attain economic independence and participate in decision-making processes, thereby enabling them to lead more confident and self-reliant lives.

2. RELEVANCE OF COMMERCE EDUCATION:

Commerce education includes the study of subjects like accounting, business studies, economics, finance, banking and entrepreneurship. It equips individuals with the knowledge and skills required to manage resources, run businesses, understand market trends and make informed financial decisions.

Commerce education refers to the discipline of education that deals with the study of trade, business activities, financial markets and economic systems. It equips individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary to understand and participate effectively in

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commercial and economic activities. The core subjects under commerce education typically include:

- ❖ Accountancy– Understanding and maintaining financial records
- ❖ Business Studies– Studying the structure, operation and management of businesses
- ❖ Economics – Analyzing the production, distribution and consumption of goods and services
- ❖ Banking and Finance – Learning about financial institutions and money management
- ❖ Entrepreneurship – Developing the mindset and skills required to start and manage a business
- ❖ E-Commerce and Digital Marketing – Engaging in online trade and digital business practices

Thus, commerce education goes beyond theoretical knowledge; it fosters practical skills like decision-making, analytical thinking, budgeting and leadership— all of which are crucial for personal development and societal contribution.

3. ROLE OF COMMERCE EDUCATION IN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Commerce education plays a pivotal role in the empowerment of women by equipping them with the knowledge, skills and confidence to participate actively in economic, social and professional spheres. Empowerment is not just about gaining employment— it’s about having control over resources, making informed choices and contributing meaningfully to society.

In this context, commerce education becomes a key enabler of change, especially for women in developing regions like Assam.

- ❖ Economic and Financial Empowerment.

Commerce education teaches women how to manage money, plan budgets, save, invest and understand financial institutions. In

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Assam, where many households rely on agriculture or informal sources of income, such knowledge allows women to make better financial decisions, support their families and contribute to household income.

Example: Women who complete basic commerce education are now managing accounts for Self-Help Groups (SHGs), participating in microfinance programs and even accessing government subsidies for small businesses.

- ❖ **Enhancing Employability and Career Opportunities -** Commerce graduates can pursue careers in areas like accounting, taxation, business administration, banking and retail management. These sectors are steadily expanding in Assam, creating new employment avenues for women.

Example: The growth of cooperative banks, rural branches of nationalized banks and financial literacy missions in Assam has increased demand for commerce-educated women, both in urban and rural areas.

- ❖ **Promotion of Women Entrepreneurship–**Commerce education promotes entrepreneurial thinking. It provides women with insights into market analysis, product costing, financial planning, and business laws. This knowledge enables them to confidently start and run their own enterprises.

Assam Context: Women entrepreneurs in Assam are increasingly involved in traditional crafts (like handloom and pottery), tea packaging, food processing, ecotourism and digital platforms. With commerce education, they are able to brand their products, maintain accounts, use digital payment systems and market online.

- ❖ **Leadership and Decision-Making Abilities-** Through studying business management and economics, women develop leadership skills and critical thinking abilities. They become more confident in voicing opinions, taking initiative and leading

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groups or businesses.

Example: Many women-led cooperatives and SHGs in Assam are now chaired or managed by commerce-educated women who take active roles in planning and executing development projects.

- ❖ **Increased Awareness of Rights and Responsibilities**– Commerce education also includes knowledge of labor laws, consumer rights, corporate ethics and business regulations. This awareness empowers women to protect their rights, demand fair treatment and advocate for justice in the workplace and in society.

In Assam: This is particularly important for women working in the informal sector (like tea plantations) who often face wage disparities or exploitation. Educated women can help organize and demand lawful treatment.

- ❖ **Reducing Gender Disparities**– By providing equal opportunities for professional growth, commerce education helps break traditional gender roles. As more women enter the corporate world and business sectors, the gender gap in employment and income begins to narrow.

Current Trend in Assam: Girls are increasingly opting for commerce streams in higher secondary schools and colleges, indicating a shift in perception that business and finance are not male-dominated fields.

- ❖ **Building Confidence and Self-Reliance**- Perhaps the most significant impact of commerce education is psychological. It builds a sense of self-worth, boosts confidence, and enables women to dream bigger. Financial independence often translates into greater freedom in personal choices— be it marriage, mobility, or parenting.

Example : Many women in Assam who have studied commerce are now the first in their families to work outside the

home or to start a business, becoming role models for others in their communities.

4. COMMERCE EDUCATION AND WOMEN IN ASSAM:

A Special Focus Assam, though rich in culture and natural resources, has long struggled with gender inequality in education and employment. However, recent developments indicate positive trends:

- ❖ **Rising Enrolment in Commerce Streams** More girls in Assam are opting for commerce in higher secondary and college education, thanks to growing awareness and changing societal attitudes.
- ❖ **Entrepreneurship among Assamese Women** With support from government schemes like “Udyam Sakhi”, NEEDS and Women Entrepreneurship Platform, many educated women from Assam are starting businesses, especially in agro-based and handloom sectors.
- ❖ **Women in Banking and Finance** There has been a notable rise in the number of women working in banks and financial institutions across Assam, many of whom come from commerce backgrounds.
- ❖ **Government and NGO Initiatives** Several programs aim to promote vocational and commerce-related education for girls, especially in rural and tribal areas of Assam, to bridge the gender gap.

5. CHALLENGES TO WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH COMMERCE EDUCATION IN ASSAM

While commerce education has great potential to empower women in Assam, there are still significant barriers that limit its reach and effectiveness—particularly in rural and underdeveloped areas of the state. Identifying these challenges is crucial to formulating effective solutions.

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- ❖ Limited Access to Quality Education - In many parts of Assam, particularly in remote tribal and rural areas, access to good educational institutions offering commerce education is inadequate. Girls from these regions often have to travel long distances or migrate to urban centers, which discourages many families from sending their daughters to study commerce.

Impact: A large section of female students either drop out after school or opt for streams seen as more accessible (like arts) due to lack of exposure or institutional support.

- ❖ Socio-Cultural Barriers and Gender Norms– Despite progress, deeply rooted patriarchal values continue to affect women’s education in Assam. Many families prioritize boys’ education over girls’ and expect girls to fulfill domestic responsibilities rather than pursue professional careers.

Impact : Girls may be discouraged from studying commerce or from taking up careers in finance and business, which are often viewed as male-dominated fields.

- ❖ Economic Constraints - Poverty remains a major issue in many parts of Assam.

Families with limited resources often cannot afford to support higher education for all children, and girls are more likely to be deprived of educational opportunities.

Impact : Even when commerce education is available, financial burdens like tuition fees, books, or transportation costs prevent girls from enrolling or completing their studies.

- ❖ Lack of Practical Exposure and Skill-Based Training– Commerce education in Assam, especially in government-run institutions, is often limited to theoretical knowledge. There is a lack of hands-on training, internships, industry exposure, and entrepreneurship development programs that are crucial

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for real-world success.

Impact : Many commerce graduates, especially women, find it difficult to transition into jobs or start businesses due to insufficient practical experience.

- ❖ Inadequate Career Guidance and Mentorship – Most students, especially girls in rural areas, are unaware of the various career and entrepreneurship opportunities available through commerce education. There's a lack of mentors, role models, and guidance services to help young women chart career paths or start ventures.

Impact : Girls may drop out after basic education or choose unrelated fields due to lack of direction and inspiration.

- ❖ Safety and Mobility Issues– Safety concerns, inadequate transportation and lack of hostel facilities in educational institutions often discourage families from sending girls to distant colleges, especially those that offer commerce at higher levels.

Impact: This limits the ability of women to pursue commerce education beyond secondary or higher secondary school.

- ❖ Digital Divide and Technological Gaps– In the digital era, commerce education increasingly involves the use of computers, the internet, accounting software, and ecommerce tools. However, many girls in rural Assam lack access to digital devices, internet connectivity, or training in digital skills.

Impact: This puts them at a disadvantage compared to their urban counterparts and limits their ability to participate in online business or modern financial systems.

- ❖ Language and Curriculum Barriers– Commerce education is often available primarily in English, which creates barriers for students from Assamese or tribal medium schools. This can make learning difficult and discourage students,

particularly girls, from continuing in the commerce stream.

6. SUGGESTIONS AND WAY FORWARD

To realize the full potential of commerce education in empowering women in Assam, a multi-dimensional and inclusive strategy is essential. This involves strengthening infrastructure, changing societal attitudes, introducing policy reforms, and creating practical learning opportunities that align with the unique socio-economic context of the state. **Improve Access to Commerce Education in Rural and Remote Areas**

- ❖ Establish more commerce colleges and departments in rural districts, especially in tribal and tea-garden communities.
- ❖ Introduce distance learning and online commerce courses through open universities and digital platforms to reach girls who cannot attend regular colleges.
- ❖ Provide free transportation and hostel facilities for girl students in higher education.

Provide Financial Support and Scholarships

- ❖ Offer scholarships, stipends, and fee waivers specifically for girls pursuing commerce education at higher secondary and college levels.
- ❖ Promote access to government schemes such as NSQF (National Skills Qualifications Framework), PM-YUVA and Stand-Up India for commerce students and women entrepreneurs in Assam.

Include Skill-Based and Practical Training

- ❖ Revise the commerce curriculum to include entrepreneurship development, digital accounting tools, e-commerce platforms, and banking simulations.
- ❖ Encourage internships, apprenticeships, and industry visits for girl students in collaboration with local businesses, banks and cooperative societies.

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- ❖ Integrate vocational training programs related to bookkeeping, GST filing, digital marketing and small business management.

PROMOTE ENTREPRENEURSHIP AMONG WOMEN

- ❖ Establish business incubation centers and women entrepreneurship cells in colleges offering commerce courses.
- ❖ Conduct training workshops on business planning, market research, branding and digital sales, especially in rural Assam.
- ❖ Create linkages with SHGs, NGOs and microfinance institutions to support commerce-educated women in launching and scaling their enterprises.

STRENGTHEN CAREER COUNSELING AND MENTORSHIP

- ❖ Organize career guidance programs for commerce students with a focus on professional courses (CA, CS, MBA) and business careers.
- ❖ Invite successful women entrepreneurs, accountants, and bankers from Assam as mentors and motivational speakers.
- ❖ Create state-level mentorship networks for young women in commerce.

INCREASE DIGITAL ACCESS AND LITERACY

- ❖ Distribute laptops/tablets to girl students under digital inclusion schemes.
- ❖ Set up computer labs in commerce colleges, especially in rural Assam, and provide training on Tally, MS Excel and digital finance platforms.
- ❖ Encourage the use of Assamese and regional languages in online commerce education content to improve accessibility.

CONDUCT AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS TO SHIFT MINDSETS

- ❖ Use media, community leaders, and school programs to challenge gender stereotypes about commerce and financial

careers.

- ❖ Highlight success stories of women in commerce from Assam through documentaries, articles and school visits.
- ❖ Conduct parental counseling programs to encourage families to support girls in pursuing commerce education.

POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

- ❖ The Assam government should introduce state-level policies promoting women in commerce education, such as dedicated funds and performance-based grants to institutions.
- ❖ Make gender inclusion and women's empowerment a key evaluation metric for colleges offering commerce education.
- ❖ Partner with central agencies like Skill India, NITI Aayog, and NABARD to fund innovative programs for women's commerce education and entrepreneurship in Assam.

7. CONCLUSION, SUGGESTIONS AND WAY FORWARD

Empowering women through commerce education in Assam is not just an academic goal; it is a strategic investment in the state's socio-economic development. With coordinated efforts from the government, educational institutions, civil society and the private sector, the barriers that hinder women's participation in commerce can be systematically dismantled. A future where women in Assam actively lead businesses, manage finances and contribute to the economy is not just possible—it is essential for inclusive growth.

Commerce education serves as a powerful tool for women empowerment, particularly in Assam, where socio-economic barriers have historically limited women's progress. By providing the knowledge and skills necessary for financial independence and career success, commerce education enables women to play a more assertive and productive role in society.

With continued support from government and society, it can become a transformative force for achieving gender equality in

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Assam. In sum, commerce education acts as a powerful tool in the journey of women's empowerment by providing them the means to achieve financial independence, assert their rights and build sustainable livelihoods. In Assam, where socio-economic structures are evolving and the government is focusing on inclusive development, commerce education is increasingly recognized as a catalyst for empowering women and driving grassroots-level progress.

Though Assam has made progress in promoting women's education, several systemic, cultural and economic challenges continue to restrict the full potential of commerce education in empowering women. Unless these barriers are addressed through focused policy intervention and community participation, the impact of commerce education will remain uneven and limited in reach.

SUGGESTIONS AND WAY FORWARD

❖ **Enhancing Access and Infrastructure**

Establish more commerce colleges in rural Assam with scholarships for girls.

❖ **Vocational Training and Skill Development**

Introduce commerce-related vocational programs focusing on accounting software, digital marketing, banking, etc.

❖ **Encouraging Start-ups**

Promote incubators and financial support for women-led start-ups in Assam.

❖ **Mentorship and Awareness Campaigns**

Organize seminars and mentorship programs with successful women entrepreneurs and commerce professionals.

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Scenario of Women Education in India with Special Reference to Assam Past and Present

TULIKA CHOWDHURY

ABSTRACT :

Education has always been a foundation for social and economic development of a nation. Lack of education and illiteracy creates many problems in the society like population explosion, poverty, unemployment, child labour etc. Educating women is essential for empowerment, challenge societal norms, aware their rights, and also for economic development .But the female literacy rate is low in India and Assam as well than the male literacy rate. So, this study tries to focus mainly on the past and present scenario of female literacy rate in India as well as in Assam. It also endeavours to highlights the importance of female's education, analyse the causes of low female literacy rate and provides suggestive measures to increase the number of literate women in India with special reference to the state of Assam.

(Keywords : *Women education, gender gap, literacy rate.*)

INTRODUCTION:

Education is the act or process of imparting or acquiring general knowledge, developing the powers of reasoning and judgement and generally of preparing oneself or others intellectually for mature life. It may also be defined as the transmission of

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knowledge and skill and the development of character traits.

Education is not only important for males, but education is essential for all genders. Educating women has unique and significant benefits for a nation's progress, including improved health outcomes, economic growth, and social development.

Girls who receive education are less likely to marry at young age and more likely to lead healthy, productive lives and build better futures for themselves and their families. Girls' education strengthens economies and reduces inequality. Education helps to challenge traditional gender roles, leading to greater acceptance of women in leadership position across various sectors.

Women who are educated are more likely to advocate for their rights and rights of their children, fostering a culture of empowerment within communities. So, it is important to impart education to female for the development of the country

Mahatma Gandhi, the father of nation strongly advocated for women's education. He believed that education was essential for women to understand their status, achieve self-respect and independence. He also believed that women's education was vital for social reform and the overall progress of the society.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, an Indian educator and social reformer, was also in favour of women's education and played a significant role in promoting in Bengal. He established numerous girls' school for female.

Napoleon Bonaparte, a French military leader and emperor said "Give me an educated mother, I shall promise you the birth of a civilized, educated nation." Napoleon made this statement because he believed the significant impact of the mother's education on the development and future of her children and consequently, the nation.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

- 1) To discuss about the need and importance of women

- education.
- 2) To know the past and present scenario of the women education in India as well as Assam.
 - 3) To analyse the challenges of female education and suggest measures to overcome the challenges in India as well as Assam.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE:

Ahmed Sahidul and Sultana Najn in did work in participation of Muslim women in higher education on the basis of the gross enrolment ratio in higher education.

Aparna Samudra, 2014, has recognised Women Empowerment as one of the Millennium Development goals given by UNDP. Aparna has made an attempt to evaluate the educational development among women and the impact of socio-economic factors on female literacy.

Badri Yadav and Dr. Shri Krishna Mishra, in 2013 discussed about the problems faced by the government girls' high school. They also talked about the importance of education in India for all and girls especially.

Bhat Rouf Ahmed in the Empowerment of women in India 2015 discussed about gender discrimination, preconceived conception and male-dominated jobs.

Dahal Chironjib, 2021, discussed about the women education in Colonial Assam. The author also discussed about the contribution of the native elites in the process of the development of women education.

Hazarika Dhruvo, in 2011 explains the true sense of women empowerment. The author has discussed about the place of women in the early period and after various Reform Movements. Issues of child marriage, infant mortality of girl child, dowry etc have also been discussed by the author.

Moran Niharika in 2019, in the paper History of female

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education in Assam, stated that people should eliminate the thinking that women as commodity from the society. The author also explained the barriers of women education.

Sharma Rupali and A fro z Zia, 2014, in the paper Women Empowerment through Higher Education mentioned that literacy is not only a primary factor, but the only factor that will sustain the empowerment process.

METHODOLOGY :

This paper s basically descriptive and analytical in nature. The study is entirely based on secondary sources such as research journal, books, internet, research paper and different websites etc.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS:

India's Scenerio on Women Education :

In ancient India, it has a rich tradition of education and culture. In the Vedic period women were allowed to pursue education. Various women's educators and scholars were also there at that time.

In British India Women Education and employment was first acknowledged by East India Company in 1854. The first girls' boarding school was set up in Tirunelveli in 1821, during the British period. Later on, the Scottish Church Society, set up a girl school by 1840 with a strength of 200 Hindu girls. In the British era, women's education was growing slowly, as at that time access of education was only available to upper cast and rich families.

Savitribai Phule, along with her husband Jyotirao Phule is credited with starting the first school for girls in India. They opened this school in Bhide Wada, Pune in 1848. Savitribai Phule also became the first female teacher in India.

Savitribai Phule's role as the first female teacher was a significant step in empowering women and breaking down social barriers, because in the 19th century women's education was severely restricted, especially for those from lower castes. The Phule

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established several more schools and night schools in and around Pune between 1848 and 1852.

The women's literacy rate has increased from 0.2% in 1882 to 6% in 1947. The constitution of independent India in 1950 gave a special shape to women's education. Article 14 provides or equal rights for all children up to the age of 14.

After independence, in 1956 an educational commission was established named as University Grants Commission in India and in 1958, a women's education committee was established to enhance the women's literacy rate. In early India, there were no provisions for women's higher education. In 1849, first girls college was planned called Bethune School in Kolkata and later on it was converted into Bethune College which became the oldest women's education for higher education in India and Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey (SNDT) Women's University is the first women's university in India established in 1961 and the university was founded by Maharshi Dr. Dhondo Keshav Karve for a noble cause of women's education.

After independence women literacy rate has increased because Government has taken different measures for increasing female literacy. In 2001, the female literacy rate in India was 54.16%. This represents a significant increase from the 39.29% in 1991. Again in 2011 census the female literacy rate in India is 65.46% and it is lower than the male literacy rate of 82.14%. In 2021, the rate of female literacy was 91.95%. While there has been significant progress in female literacy since independence, still a gap persists between male and female literacy rates. The gap between male and female literacy rates narrowed from 24.84% in 1991 to 21.69% in 2001. Kerala had the highest literacy rate among all Indian states in 2001 Census. The rate was 87.86%. And in 2011 also, Kerala had a female literacy rate of 91.98% while Rajasthan had a rate of 52.66%. Kerala consistently ranks high in female literacy, while

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states like Bihar, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh show lower rates. In Bihar had a female literacy rate of 51.50%, while Rajasthan had a female literacy rate of 52.12% and in U.P. the rate was 57.18%, according to 2011 census.

Kerala has the highest female literacy rate in India because of well-developed educational infrastructure with a large number of schools, colleges and universities making education readily accessible to all citizens including women, gender equality, significant investment in educational infrastructure, different programs and policies of the governments to promote literacy and gender equality, social awareness towards education etc.

Indian government has also implemented various policies and programs to promote female education in the country. Beti Bachao-Beti Padhao, National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level, National Scheme of Incentives to girls for Secondary Education, Sukanya Samridhhi Yojana, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, mid-day meal yojana etc. are the different programmes of government of India.

ASSAM'S SCENERIO ON WOMEN'S EDUCATION:

During the Medieval time in Assam, woman enjoyed very dignified status and played a very important role in political, social, economic, religious and the cultural affairs in the state. They were the backbone of the family. They were the main preserver of a family economy. Women were the creator of poetry, music and literature at that time period. They were considered as energy, strength and wisdom. Women also played a prestigious place in political and religious matters. The queen played a special role to assist the king's in court matters. Rani Phuleswari of wife of Siva Singha (1714 -1744) established the first school in Assam. But the education system was purely indigenous.

After the treaty of Yandaboo, Assam came under British rule in 1826. East India Company did not take any step for promoting

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education, they came only to rule and exploit Assam. But David Scott, the first agent of the East India Company tried to develop education in Assam.

Charter Act of 1813 stated that providing education to Indian people was one of the moral responsibilities of the country. In 1836, American Baptist missionaries came to Assam. They have a great contribution in pioneering and promoting women's education in Assam. They established schools, and utilized media like the "Arunodai" magazines to advocate for women's education. Nathon Brown and Mrs. Cutter, were among the first two Baptist missionaries established girl's school in Sadia, Assam in 1839. This school is considered one of the earliest attempts at formal education in the state. Missionaries also trained female teacher for the development of women's education. They also established residential school for accommodation of girls. Initially they focussed on primary education, but later on they laid the foundation for further advancement in women's education where the missionaries established schools in Nagaon, Sivasagar and Guwahati in 1841, 1840 and 1850. In the middle of the 19th century some progressive men made efforts to spread female education. Anandaram Dhekial Phukon, Gunabhiram Baruah, Jaganath Boruah, Hemchandra Baruah were in favour of women education during its early period. The Wood's Despatch of 1854 gave importance of women's education, but the progress was not satisfactory. According to their commendations given by Hunter Commission, some schools were opened with government grant in 1882.

After India's independence, Assam witnessed significant expansion and development of women's education. During the post-independence era the number of women in education naturally increased specially in the primary education. Different government schemes were also launched to strengthen the position of women in secondary stage also. Female literacy rates in Assam have

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consistently increased since independence. In 1951 the literacy rate was 7.58% and it rose to 66.27% in 2011. The number of girls' colleges and co-educational institutions and universities are also increased. In 1948, the Gauhati University and in 1965, the Dibrugarh University were established for providing opportunities for higher education. The establishment of medical and engineering colleges have also increased since independence. The first female graduates in Assam were Sudhalata Duara and Sukhalata Duara, who were sisters of each other. They both earned their degrees from Calcutta University. Sudhalata Duara also obtained the master degree of arts (M.A.) in 1923. The first women's college in Assam is Handique Girls' College, established in 1939 in Guwahati. It was founded by the late Rajabala Das and initially it was called Gauhati Girls' College. Rajabala Das was the first woman graduate from Assam and a pioneer in advocating for women's higher education. She actively worked towards the movement to promote female education in higher learning with the support from Radha Kanta Das. She was involved in All India Women's Conference (AIWC) and served as its secretary in Guwahati.

The total literacy rate of Assam is 72.49% according to 2011 census study. The male literacy rate is 77.85% and the female literacy rate is 66.27% in Assam(census report:2021). The rural female literacy rate was slightly lower at 63% (Assam State Portal)

The female literacy rate has shown a significant improvement since the 2001 census, increasing from 54.61% to 66.27% in. It is also important to note that in 1991 census, the female literacy rate in Assam was only 39.29%.

According to the 2011 census, Kamrup Metropolitan district has the highest female literacy rate in Assam. The female literacy rate was 85.07% whereas in 2001 the female literacy rate was 77.51% (source-state profile of Assam).In Assam Dhubri district had the lowest female literacy rate according to 2011 census and

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the rate was 53.33% whereas the male literacy rate was 63.10%. The overall literacy rate of the district was 58.34% (census report 2011).

The government of Assam has implemented various policies to support women's education and literacy rates. In 2024, the government of Assam has launched the 'Nijut Moina' scheme to hinder child marriage and support girl students in pursuing higher studies and it also aims to empower girls. The scheme provides monthly Rs.1000 for 11-12 students, Rs.1,250, for degree students and Rs. 2,500 for postgraduate students.

IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN EDUCATION :

- 1. Self-Reliance :** An educated woman does not depend on anyone for her survival. If she is educated or financially independent can raise her voice against injustice and exploitation.
- 2. Gender Equality :** Women have the same right to get education as in the case of men. Education of women is most important for gender equality. By empowering women, they will be able to compete with their male counterparts in all places as politics, administration, educational institutions, health sectors etc.
- 3. Better Standard of Living :** An educated woman always tries to live in a better standard of living. She knows about the health and hygiene of people. She tries to earn income to lead a happier life.
- 4. Economic Empowerment :** Educated women are better equipped to participate in the work-force, earn a livelihood, and achieve financial independence.
- 5. Social Progress :** Educated women are more likely to participate in community development and can contribute to a more progressive society.
- 6. Stronger Leadership :** Education provides women with the

skills and confidence to take on leadership roles in various sectors, contributing to better governance and decision – making.

7. **Improved Family Well-Being** : Educated women tend to have smaller, healthier families and are more likely to invest in education of their children which leads to stronger families.
8. **Increased Self-Esteem and Confidence**: Education empowers women by providing them with knowledge, skills and confidence. Education also enabling women to make own decisions, participate more fully in society.

CHALLENGES OF FEMALE EDUCATION :

1. **Lack of Awareness** : Lack of awareness among families about the importance of education for girls and prioritize boys' education are also the contributing factors.
2. **Early Marriage** : Early marriage is also responsible for low female literacy rate. Many girls are forced to leave school at a young stage to marry and hindering female literacy rate.
3. **Poor Infrastructural Facilities** : Many schools particularly in rural areas have this problem. Lack of proper buildings, especially for girls, lack of transportation facilities which creates the problem for girls to reach school or it also discourages the parents from sending girl child to school particularly during the time of flood. Lack of toilets, sanitation facilities are also creates problems which discourage the girl students to go to school.
4. **Poverty** : This is a very important problem for low female literacy rate. India is an agricultural country. So, here the girls are forced to work in household's income or they are also forced to work in agricultural fields. Family responsibilities often fall on girls which prevent them for attending school.
5. **Gender-Discrimination** : Due to deeply ingrained gender biases that prioritize boys' education over girls particularly in

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poorer households. Generally, it is seen that sons are regarded as the future bread earners and inheritors. While daughters are viewed as temporary family member. This leads to a prioritization of sons' education over girls.

SUGGESTIONS TO MEET THE CHALLENGES;

To enhance female literacy rate we must follow the following steps-

1. The first and foremost efforts should be made on promoting awareness about the importance of girls' education. Efforts must be made to train female teachers who can act as role models. Social media and other online platform can be used to disperse information about the importance of girls' education. Motivational program can be adopted by the teachers to motivate both the parents and students, which can increase the number of girl students in the school. We must raise awareness among the females about the negative consequences of early marriages which may combat child marriage.
2. Secondly, investment must be made in early childhood to build a strong base. Text books and other study materials should be provided free particularly for rural poor. Offering scholarship, free uniform, free food can alleviate the financial burden on families and encourage them to send their daughters to school.
3. Provide career guidance and vocational training to help girls and they will become financially independent. The educated women can showcase how education empowers women and contributes to their families. Required resources should be providing to help women so that they can start their own business.
4. Steps should be taken for counselling and support services to control anxiety, depression, stress that may affect girls' ability

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to learn.

5. Teachers can use different digital learning tools and platforms to reach remote areas and other teaching options. Online resources access to educational materials especially for those who lives in backward areas.
6. Huge investment by the govt. must be made on the development of infrastructure like the safe transportation, separate toilets for girls particularly in rural areas.
7. It must be ensure that a safe and secure environment in and around the school for girls .This step is very important for encouraging girls' attendance in school.
8. Steps must be taken to create opportunities for adult women to become literate that can break the cycle of illiteracy among women.

CONCLUSION:

Though the female literacy rates has seen improvements in India as well in the state of Assam, still there is a significant disparities and challenges remain, particularly in rural areas .In urban areas female literacy is increasing compared to male literacy. Lack of required infrastructure, social–cultural norms, ignorance and lack of awareness, financial constraints etc. always continue to impede girls' ingress to education. Dealing with the issues requires government initiatives (such as free books, uniform, food, transportation facilities etc), communities participation, NGO'S initiatives (such as counselling of the parents and girl child, motivational workshop etc). A multi –pronged approach is needed for addressing the situation, otherwise gender disparities in educational sector and low female literacy rate may prevail in the country which will remain a major problem of the country.

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