

Status of Women and Higher Education in Assam

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Abstract - Education is the key yardstick by which the growth and development of a country can be delineated and as such, it has occupied an honoured place in the society. Women education and empowerment is the indicator of development. Women education ensures the holistically and all-round development of the society. It should include both equitable access to higher education and training and employment. However, it is seen that there is a gender disparity in education across the socio-economic spectrum of the state. A great number of girls especially from the rural areas drop out before reaching any higher education. Therefore, there is need to develop a flexible, accessible and equitable education system in which women along with the men counterpart can easily fulfill their aspiration, overcoming their social obligation and to create a responsible develop society. In this paper, I will try to present a picture of higher education in Assam and Women participation in it. I shall also mention the causes and factors responsible for women participation in higher education in India as well as in Assam. Finally, an effort will be made to give some suggestion, which can help to accelerate women participation in higher education in Assam.

keywords - Status, Women, Higher Education, Assam

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education means education beyond the level of secondary education. It is often assumed that education imparted by colleges or universities is higher education. It has varied significantly in varied countries. Different arguments justify the value and necessity of education from the viewpoint of individuals as well as society. These views have changed from time to time according to the needs of the society and stages of its development. In India, considering both the sheer size of its population and the nature of its development potential, it is in its process of becoming exceptionally powerful forces for determining the social economic political dynamics of higher education. Higher education in India has witnessed tremendous growth in the last few decades. As per a report by University Grants Commission (UGC) published in 2012, from 1950 to 2011, there is an 18.8-fold increase in the number of colleges in India. The number of students enrolled in higher education has also increased exponentially during this period, 42.76 times. Despite its impressive growth in higher education, Indian education only maintains a small base of the quality institution at the top. There is a need to eradicate the gender disparities in higher education.

2. WOMEN AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

In India, female education has its roots in the British Regime. In 1854, the East India Company acknowledged women's education and employment. Initially, this education was limited only to primary school level education and only the richer section of the society enjoyed this facility. it was confined only for a small section of people in society so the literacy rate for women increased from 0.2% in 1882 to 6% only in 1947.

During the first four decades of after independence in 1947, women gained access to higher education. It was because higher education was fully state-funded and highly referred to the problems of women's education and occupations. The **Educational Panel of the Planning Commission**, on July 1957, recommended that a suitable committee should be appointed to go into the various aspects of the question relating to the nature of education for girls at the elementary, secondary and adult stage and to examine whether the present system was helping them to lead a happier and more useful life. In "**Towards Equality – Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India**" it was argued that there was a need in the modern society to expand higher education to women considerably because it was believed that the spread of higher education among women was still restricted, whether general or professional. It was emphasized that the proper policy would be to see that the talent of the women is fully utilized for social and national development. **This committee recommended that:**

- I. Development of more employment opportunities, particularly of a part time nature to enable women part time nature, to enable women to participate more in productive activities.
- II. Development employment information and guidance services for women entering higher education.

These investigations lead to a broader perspective of the various issues of women and it was reflected in the Sixth Five Year Plan where it linked education to the participation of women in the development process. In this plan, it was stated that the institution of higher learning would be encouraged and enabled to involve themselves with the development activities in the community and provide requisite support through extension services of students and faculties. Such extension work would be considered as part of the normal academic work of the students and teachers and not as social service. In the early 1980s, UGC support to stimulate concern for women's issues was evident by their attention to the need for universities to involve themselves in women's problem through their research, teaching and extension activities. The National Seminar on Education for women's Equality held in 1985, as it was conveyed by the Ministry of Education, which was finalized in 1986. Based on the recommendations to facilitate women's equality and development at the national, state and institutional level. In 1986, the UGC

issued the first guidelines to universities and colleges for the women's studies programme in the form of women's studies cell in the colleges and as centers within the colleges. All these activities lead to women participation in higher education in Indian universities. On the eve of the independence, the women enrolment was less than 10 percent of the total enrolment but in the academic year 2010-11 women enrolment increased up to 41.5 percent.

Table 1.1 Enrolments of Girls and Women in Colleges and Universities in Pre –Independence India

Year	Percentage of Literacy of Female	Colleges and University
1881-82	0.02	6
1901-02	0.07	256
1921-22	1.8	905
1946-47	6	23207
No of girls enrolled per 100 boys		12(General Education)
		7(Vocational Education)

Source: Ministry of Education, Govt of India towards Equality

The table 1.1 observed that female literacy during 1881-82 was only 0.02 percent. An increase to 6 percent of literacy of female was observed just before independence and during that period of time the number of colleges has also increased to 23,207. These were substantial increase in the establishment of institution of higher education since 1920 from 905 to 23,207 in 1946-47. However, the proportion of women enrolled in general education was 12 percent and was lesser in vocational education, 7 percent.

Table 1.2 Enrolments of Girls and Women in Colleges and Universities in Pre –Independence India

Year	No of female students (in Lakhs)	No of girls enrolled per 100 boys
1946-47	0.2	12
1950-51	0.4	14
1955-56	0.84	17
190-61	1.5	22
1965-66	3.24	28
1968-69	4.32	30

Source: Ministry of Education, Govt of India towards Equality

The enrolment of women in higher education gradually increased since independence. It increased from 12 percent in 1946-47 to 30 percent in 1968-69, which is double fold growth. More than four lakhs female were enrolled in colleges and universities in India during 1968-69.

3. WOMEN AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN ASSAM

Education is the agent of basic change in the status of women. It is the key factor in overcoming the barriers that women face and the basic tool for empowering women. However, the educational status of women in Assam is lagging far behind as compared to the other states of the country. To see that girls' education received proper attention of the Government and the public, the Assam Women's Education League was formed in May 1940 with Lady Reid as its President. The objects of the League were: (i) To invite all women in the province who were interested in education to join the League. (ii) To further the cause of Women's education in the province- (a) by pressing for reforms in the legislature, (b) by helping to create an informed public opinion. Its membership was open to all women on payment of 8 annas annually.¹³⁶ In the first year itself, 223 women joined the League. The Director of Public Instruction welcomed the League, as he believed (iii) that it had immense potentiality in furthering the cause of women's education in Assam. it can be said that the establishment of British colonial rule in Assam saw for the first time the entry of girls into formal educational institutions. Prior, to the coming of the British, female education was informal and largely limited to acquiring practical household skills. It was a sex-segregated world; men and women did different work and occupied separate spaces. The collective efforts of the Christian missionaries, the British Indian Government and the social reformers of the age led to the opening of educational facilities for women. Progress was manifest in terms of an increase in the number of all types of schools and colleges for girls and an increase in the numbers of girls and women literates in the province. For instance, in 1911, only 20,753 women in the province were literate whereas, in 1921, the number had risen to 46,002.

After independence, the educational attainment of women of Assam at the district level can be analyzed through the female literacy rate and female enrolment rate at different stages of education. The female literacy rate is highest in upper Assam 60.35% which is quite higher than state average 54.61%. Central Assam and lower Assam show the poor performance in the field of final literacy rate compared to the upper Assam. These rates are 52.61 percent and 52.53 percent respectively. The proportion of female enrolment in different stages of education is very poor. In almost all the district of the state, in primary level enrolment rate is almost fifty percent in middle and high school level, the percentage of enrolment is around 45 percent. However, in higher secondary and junior colleges the female enrolment is much lower i.e. below 40 percent.

With the Establishment of Gauhati University in 1948, just after the independence had opened up a new chapter for the Higher education of the girls. In 1963, the Assam Government had set up the Assam State Council for Women's Education, which had made valuable suggestions for improvement of women education at the Higher education level also. Such as offering Post-Graduate & foreign scholarship for girls, the establishment of at least one (1) college in each district with provision for both Science & Arts, appointment of lady Joint-Director at Head – Quarter at all levels including Higher education. Another boon to the field of women education is the establishment of Women's Studies Centres in different central and state universities following the XI Plan Guidelines. Accordingly, in Assam, Chandraprabha Saikiani Centre for Women's Studies was established in Tezpur Central University in 2009, Department of Women's Studies under Gauhati University was established in 2010, Assam

Women's University was established in Jorhat, in 2013. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of the male population is 21.6% as against 18.9% of the female population at the all India level (AISHE, 2011- 12). The literacy rate of India for the women is only 65.46% against 82.14% of men (Census, 2011). While in Assam, the female literacy rate was 67.3% as against 78.8% male literacy rate (Census, 2011). These statistics show that education of female at different levels is still lagging when compared with the male population.

4. CONCLUSION

Education is the only answer for women empowerment. Women down the ages have always had to demand equal status for themselves in society. The women enrolment in higher education is also increasing. However, the rate of increase is slow in almost all the states of India. The enrolment is dependent on women teachers. The establishment of higher educational institutes for women especially in rural areas are still in dearth and women enrolment is still low as compared men enrolment. The rate of disparity of male and female participation in Higher education can be attributed to various sociological, psychological and economic factors. To remove these hurdles, focus need to be given on the core issues concerning women education in a particular locality. To empower women in all spheres, efforts have to be taken to break the age-old myths about women's helplessness, lack of drive and motivation to reach the heights of glory. Hence it is important to provide women with nurturing support and guidance psychological security to enable them to become progressive.

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