

# **WOMEN OF ASSAM**

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RENU DEBI

# WOMEN OF ASSAM



By

RENU DEBI



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## PREFACE

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The Women's Studies Research Centre of Gauhati University established in 1989 has endeavoured to focus various issues and problems of women, in general and, of Assam in particular to initiate and encourage measures for improving the conditions of women. The centre aims at generating awareness among women for their empowerment and involvement in social, economic and political activities of the country. Education which is considered as an agent of social change is expected to play a positive interventionist role in the empowerment of women. Education has not reached out to the majority of women living in different parts of India. Ignorance of women about different developmental programmes and educational facilities, absence of motivating agencies, indifference to their low and social conditions and lack of awareness of their constitutional and legal rights etc. have tended to cause inequality between men and women. The National Policy on Education, 1986 laid emphasis on women's education in the thrust area on a priority basis and on the establishment of Women's Studies Centres in different Universities. The aims of women's studies are - : to find out means to sensitize educated women and men of their roles in building a positive self-image and self confidence among all women — to motivate illiterate women for education and training and to lay the foundation for establishing equality between women and men.

The Women's Studies Research Centre of Gauhati University organised several Seminars in different departments of Gauhati University, Colleges and Social Organisations of villages to create awareness of women's problems among men and women. Seminars like 'Constraints of women in their march towards equality', "Role of women in Politics — Attitude, Awareness and Participation", 'Problems of Girl-Child', "Role of women in changing society", "Women and development", 'Population Education in North East India' were organised.

Inter disciplinary approach was developed in all Seminars with the co-operation of members of different departments of this University. Several papers read in these Seminars dealing with different aspects of women were selected for this book. These papers deal with social, political, economic, educational and employment problems of women in Assam. This is our first endeavour to present the conditions of women in Assam inside and outside Assam. May it serve as the forerunner of many more works of this nature devoted to the cause of women and their role in the society.

We express our deep sense of gratitude to the Ex-Vice-Chancellor, Dr. D.P. Barooah who was the spirit behind the establishment of this Centre. We also thank the present Vice-Chancellor, Dr. N.K. Choudhury who extends full co-operation in all our activities.

We express our thank to Omsons Publication for taking the initiative in publishing this book.

**RENU DEBI**

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## CHAPTER-1

### *Introduction*

*Renu Debi*

Situated in the North-Eastern region of India, Assam has a hoary past with composite culture. It played a glorious role in the country's freedom movement and produced a host of martyrs—men and women. In the post-independence period, many changes have come but from the point of economic development, it continues to suffer the fate of classic *cindrella*. Though Assam is rich in minerals and natural resources, it is mainly an agricultural state where almost eighty percent population live in villages. Human resources are not fully utilized as most of them are illiterate and unskilled. The women folk who form half of the population did not have the opportunities to contribute their share in the developmental process.

Despite constraints, women are passing through a stage of social change. Traditionally, conservatism marked the social life but even before the inroads of modernism, Assamese society has been relatively free from many inhibitions as found in other states of India. Assamese women have been known as good weavers, preparing cloth for the members of the family. The indigenous people of Assam is composed of a number of ethnic communities and tribes in the plain and hills of Assam. Women in tribal areas enjoyed more freedom of movement and association compared to their counterparts in the plains. The evils of the *dowry system* and the *purdah system* did not plague the society. In the tribal society generally girls are married at a mature stage. Socially, divorce is allowed but rarely practised. No restriction was imposed on the life of the widow in regard to their food, clothes, etc. as it is found in the case of a widow from a Hindu family. A widow was allowed to marry again. In some tribes, the widow could marry the

younger brother of the deceased husband. Adultery was prohibited and severe punishment like death was inflicted in some tribes as found among Angami-Nagas. Among Lalungs, Garos (Boro-Kachari section) and Jaintia-Khasi (Indo-Austic section) matrilineal and matrilocal systems prevail where women are the heads of the families. Women enjoy better status in these societies as they are the inheritors of parent's property. Surprisingly enough, the Lalungs who followed matriarchal system in the past, have accepted gradually patriarchal social structure because of interaction and assimilation with the Assamese cultural heritage and conversion of a section to Vaishnavism. Such a change in family dominance has its effect on the position of women, lowering their status to a large extent.

But in matrilineal society, women dominate the activities of the family to a large extent as they inherit parent's property. Because of the practice of shifting cultivation, women are considered as assets to the families and partners of men in *Jhum* cultivation. Women used to take part in music, dance and other social functions. Most of the women of tribal families are good weavers, providing beautiful clothes to the members of the families. Gradual change could be seen in the social structure of the tribal people with modernisation. Techniques of cultivation have been changed from shifting *Jhum* cultivation to permanent cultivation which again has its effect on the gradual abolition of the dormitory system of youth and the practice of elopement of boys and girls. Spread of Christianity specially in hilly areas has contributed to the westernisation ways of living of the converted people undermining at times the cultivation of tribal culture and traditions and music etc.

One salient feature in the Assamese society was the absence of the dowry system. Assamese society (except those who came from Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and other places for business and commercial purpose) did not have dowry as a part of marriage, as is the custom found in other states. Dowry which was once considered as a kind of inheritance for the daughter who will have something to fall back upon in times of crisis and also for setting up her house in case of any need has been misused and created havoc in the bride's family. In the present Indian society, demand for dowry has been made enormously from the side of bride-groom's family. Greed for

more dowry has caused bride-burning, suspicious death and suicide of girls. It was reported in the press that dowry death cases numbered 4856 in 1991 compared to 990 in 1985.<sup>4</sup> Comparing to that, Assam was free, by far, from such a deplorable trend. But in the post-independence era as a mark of a curious 'modernising' process the evil of dowry system has stealthy been invading the Assamese society with the result that some dowry death cases have been reported. Mobility of people from other states, interaction and intermixing of customs and affluence of some families led to the dowry in some cases. Even in villages unemployed young boys wish to marry girls if job, land and property were assured by the parents of the bride. Assamese marriage which was simple before, is now a days celebrated in a pompous way imitating the marriage celebration of families of other states. Such a practice if not nipped in the bud would create a dangerous situation in the society, in future. As for tribal families bride price is a very common custom among the tribes of Assam. Generally, bride price, is paid to the bride's family in cash or kind or both as a compensation for the loss of a productive worker as a girl uses to work in the paddy field specially in Jhum cultivation alongwith men. As a productive worker, a daughter enjoys a status at home. The 'bride price' custom does not appear to have attracted the evils of the usual dowry system.

Among the Mishings, the bride price ranges from Rs. 100 to Rs. 500; among Lalungs from Rs. 100 to Rs. 200; among the Dimasas, Rs. 300 to 500. A century back, a bride-groom of Kabui-Naga clan had to pay seven buffalos, two daos, two speers, two strings of beads of conch shells, two ear ornaments, two black cloths, two eating vessels and two hoes to the parents of a bride.<sup>5</sup> Bride-price may be considered as an evil custom as boys fail to satisfy the demands of the parents of bride. The evil effect of this system was depicted very clearly in "Miri Jiyari", a literacy work by Late Rajani Kanta Bardoloi.

The economic dependence of women on men is an acknowledged reason for the low status of women. Even though illiterate women have to work hard for a longer period, their work remains invisible and marginal. Women's physical labour which remains invisible is not counted as work. Majority of women labour force is in rural and urban unorganised sector.

79.38% females of the working force, work as agricultural workers and 20.62% as non-agricultural workers. 90% of rural women are unskilled and 88% are found to be illiterate in 1981. Easy entry in informal sector like handloom, handicrafts, bidi factory, construction, garments, domestic work have made workers to remain stagnant in their jobs and uncertain of their services.

Education is considered as a potent instrument through which the process of modernisation of the society could be effected. Education exposes people to new thoughts and ideas and provides necessary skills. The National Educational Policy, 1986 placed women's education in the priority list. The revised programmes of Action on the New Policy (1992) on Education lays stress on the education of women. It stated very clearly that the problem of universalisation of elementary education is in essence the problem of the girl child.<sup>6</sup> The New EP justly gives importance to women literacy as the following table presents a sad picture of literacy in India.<sup>7</sup>

*INDIA*

	1971	1981	1991
Male	39.51	46.74	63.86
Female	18.44	24.88	39.42
Total	29.45	36	52.11

In Assam also, the rate of literacy of women is very low comparing to that of men as could be seen from the following table.<sup>8</sup>

*ASSAM*

	1961	1971	1991
Male	44.28	42.96	62.34
Female	18.62	22.31	43.70
Total	32.58	33.32	53.42

The powerful effect of education could be seen very clearly among the educated families. In a survey undertaken among

three hundred middle class families in different towns and city of Assam, several interesting factors are found.<sup>9</sup>

- (1) Parents are interested in the education of both, boys and girls.
- (2) They are anxious to give better educational facilities to boys and girls.
- (3) Educated women are interested in gaining economic independence by entering into jobs or income-oriented activities.
- (4) Girls are given in marriage at a mature age.
- (5) Parents are not hesitating to send their daughters in co-educational institutions even in rural areas.
- (6) Single family system is preferred to joint family system by educated women.
- (7) Though arranged marriage traditionally followed but love marriage is also accepted.
- (8) Inter caste marriage is accepted.
- (9) Educated working women claim equality with men in salary, treatment and promotion, and
- (10) Educated middle class families are less traditional than the un-educated ones.

The rapid increase in the number of english medium schools and also the increased number of students show clearly the concern of educator parents for better education of their children. The impact of education is seen in the life style and the size of family. Generally educated working parents prefer single family, wishing to enjoy greater freedom of association and movement. Educated boys and girls exposed to wider world are changing their views as regard to marriage and life-style. The effect of modernisation has been evidenced in the Assamese families also. Girls are given in marriage at a mature stage. A sizeable number of educated girls are against arranged marriage and prefer to select their own life-partners. In another study undertaken by the author among two hundred girls coming from urban and rural areas of Assam studying at the post-graduate classes of Gauhati University,<sup>10</sup> it was found that 90% of the girls wish to choose their own life-partners

and 80% of them want jobs to enjoy economic independence. They give equal importance to marriage and jobs and adopt a pragmatic view to social issues. This survey gives a general picture of educated girls who are interested in securing jobs to attain not only economic independence but to live a life, free from economic difficulties.

It is a truism that working women suffer from role-conflict in a conservative society and traditional family set up. It is found that persistence of traditional norms in regard to women's essentially domestic roles and the addition of new role in the wider society has created problems of adjustment for them. Most men maintaining a traditional superior position do not come forward to help women in domestic activities. Some working women have to bear unbearable burdens in the form of physical and mental strains in discharging duties at home and in jobs. In some cases, the husband's denial of the right of the wife over her own earned money or her privileges to relax or to move freely was found to be related to his domineering attitude towards husband-wife privileges and obligations. But such a situation has been changed to a large extent due to education of women. Generally educated working women could not tolerate injustice and inequality, and try to assert themselves in different situations. Vimla Mehta<sup>11</sup> has rightly stated that the concept of womanhood is not limited to home, marriage and reproduction of children but to various other important activities of life that are social, cultural, educational and political. Education gives women mental strength and self-confidence to face problems in life.

Unfortunately illiteracy of adults specially of women stands as a stumbling block in all developmental programmes for which so much importance has been laid in Adult Education Programme, non-formal and informal programmes. Generally illiterate women engaged in low-skill, low-wage, low productive and insecure unorganised sector which keep them in the marginalisation of occupation. Mere literacy will not solve such a serious problem which demands an environment with supporting services to improve the working conditions. Effective implementation of labour laws providing child-care facilities and infrastructure and flexible timing would

encourage women to attend literacy classes. The National Perspective Plan for women (1988-2000)<sup>12</sup> has recognised eight employment streams for rural women, — agriculture, dairy farming, cattle rearing, fishery, Khadi, handlooms, handicrafts and sericulture. Training of women in each stream to improve production would improve their marginal position.

In rural areas of Assam, programmes of literacy needs proper co-ordination with occupational training. A scheme of agro-industries for women's employment relating to rural development may be implemented in tribal areas. Training opportunities in agriculture and agro-based industries and non-traditional occupations may be offered to women at district and block levels. Reservation of seats for women in all kinds of training—pre-service and in service to improve employability will encourage illiterate women to receive education.

Revitalization of extension services with large number of women extension officers would help women to gain more benefits derived from different government or semi-government schemes and to help women to form — co-operatives and societies to avail such benefits.

Supportive services and other programmes need to be provided to adult learners, working mothers and young girls. A network of child care services under government initiative needs to be introduced in different villages to encourage women to attend adult education classes. Government should sanction grants to family based day care centres, women's organisation based day care centres supported by co-operatives, Mahila mandals and unions. The Report of the Commission on Shram Sakti stated<sup>13</sup> that the Anganwadi centres and Balwadi or child care centres with better facilities, better infrastructure and flexible timings, may be increased all over the country. The Commission recommended a three-tier structure in which the service should be at the local level entrusted to organisations like Balwadis, Anganwadies, mahila mandals, panchyats, cooperatives and unions. The supervision, funding, training and monitoring should at an intermediary level, be entrusted to organisations like voluntary agencies, district authorities, municipal authorities, charitable trusts and public sector undertakings. An autonomous body at the apex

level under the joint auspices of the Ministries/departments or women and child welfare, Education and Labour should be formed to provide funds drawn from the budgetary provisions made in the budgets of these departments. It mentions also welfare cess to be drawn from employers, contribution from unions and individuals contributions to be accepted at local level (Shram Sakti-p. 301) such a systematic proposal if accepted would help adult learners, women workers and young school going girls to attend their duties. This Commission also recommended proper provision to be made by government through various agencies to supply fuel, fodder and water as their basic requirements.

The national perspective plan for women (1988-2000) recommends 30% reservation for women for legislature, other administrative bodies and position of power, as a transitory measure. Such a step would definitely encourage women to participate in diverse fields of activities. But reservation is needed at the local level also. Thirty percent reservation for women including tribal women in Panchyati Raj Institutions and Planning groups at district and block levels would enable them to participate in effective implementation of women's programmes. Such a process would make women more responsible in discharging their duties and to make others accountable for the success or failure, of any development programme.

As education and development of women are associated with joint endeavours of different agencies, maintenance of a women's cell in every Ministry or department with definite resources and target for women development would help in arranging training and education programmes and support services for women. It is now recognised that eradication of illiteracy, a responsibility of every educated individual, teachers, students, retired persons and any other educated persons of the society should be motivated to educate illiterate men and women. Rural women may be exposed to modern development, new ideas and values by the proper use of mass-media, Radio, Television, films etc. Mobility of people from one place to another has its impact on their minds.

Endeavours to motivate adult illiterate women are to be made in an indirect way. As the village in tribal areas are

scattered, a welfare complex with government and voluntary agencies may be created covering several villages. This complex should include formal and informal educational institutions, agricultural extension service welfare societies, recreational and child development centres, rural health service, family planning service, child-centre and other supporting services. The main purpose will be to expose men and women to modern development and to initiate efforts to attain literacy. Adult classes for women will have to be organised at their convenient time so that more women join classes keeping their young children in child-care centres. Centres that are opened by different voluntary agencies and semi-government boards are to be equipped with proper material conditions and expert care-takers in order to keep their babies in these centres.

In order to ensure overall development of women an Act to form the National Commission was passed in 1990 in the Parliament to investigate and examine all matters relating to the safeguards provided for women under the Constitution and other laws. The National Commission on women has since been established but state level commissions except in Kerala and West-Bengal are yet to be set up in most of the states. Further as a process of decentralisation, branches should also be established. Such branches would strengthen the position of the National Commission to take effective remedial measures for different problems of women. Considering the backwardness of women in educational and other spheres, a separate Directorate of Women's Education and a state level commission for women with units in different Panchayats may be established in Assam also. But development of women will depend on the sincere efforts and devotion of workers and officers. Above all, empowerment of women is to be considered as an inescapable social responsibility. A women's component in all developmental programmes is to be considered as integral part of development as a whole.

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

The book is a compilation of selected papers read in different seminars held by the Women's Studies Research Centre, Gauhati University. Its main purpose is to give a clear picture of women of Assam discussing various aspects like social status, economic conditions, cultural participation, educational progress and political awareness. It has been tried to focus the problems constraining the progress of women at different stages. This is an honest effort to introduce women of Assam to Indian readers.

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## ABOUT THE EDITOR

Dr. RENU DEBI started her teaching profession with a brilliant career standing ninth in the Intermediate Examination in 1952 and first class first in M.A. Examination of Gauhati University in 1957. She is a Law Graduate also. She went to Institute of Education, London University for associateship and had her Ph.D. degree from Gauhati University. She is a versatile prolific writer with fourteen books to her credit and many research papers. She is now the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Head of Education Deptt. and Director of Women's Studies Research Centre of Gauhati University.



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