

# Women Emancipation

**Focus North East India**



*Edited by*

**Asok Kumar Ray  
Basudeb Dutta Ray**

**North-East India Council for Social Science Research, Shillong**

This book raises the conceptual issues of women emancipation vis-a-vis women empowerment focusing on the women of the northeast India. There is epistemic difference between the two concepts and therefore a distinction is made between the two. Empowerment in this book is however seen mainly as a trajectory for women's emancipation. The approach of the book is empirical with a realistic conceptual base.

This book highlights the roles of the state, civil society, community based organizations and the women agencies towards the wider cause of emancipation of women in the northeastern region and reflects upon the different initiatives towards the goal of emancipation of the women of the northeast.

Some of the articles in this book give useful recommendations that might be of strategic significance for the emancipation of the poor and the disadvantaged women in northeast India.

This book is an important addition to the literature on women studies in this region and has great use value to the academic community, social activists, women agencies, policy makers and to development administrators.

**Asok Kumar Ray** is a scholar on northeast India. He is engaged in researches on the northeast India's problems over the last 30 years. He has shown interest in political anthropology and has intensively worked on the political systems of the highlander tribes of the northeast. He authored three books and co-edited seven books on the multi-disciplinary themes of social science. Besides he has to his credit about one hundred research papers presented and published in different academic journals and books. Dr. Ray is a life member of Indian Sociological Society, North-East India Council for Social Science Research, Shillong and Indian Association of Social Sciences.

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## Editorial Note

The issue of women emancipation is yet to receive wider acknowledgement in the current debates on women development. The officially acknowledged and internationally accepted term is empowerment of women, not emancipation as such. Though these two terms are conveniently seen in continuum, there are differences between the two terms and have two different ideological and epistemological foundations. Emancipation is founded on the larger plebeian epistemology. Women's emancipation is an active process which enables women to understand their self-identity and powers in all spheres of life. Empowerment on the other hand has its roots in the post-liberal thought. The concept of empowerment specially emerged in the development literature in 1985 first as a metropolitan concept and this concept subsequently seeped into the developing and the less developed countries. The modernist or the enlightenment project aimed at freeing human beings from superstition, 'enchantment', chaos and unpredictability of nature, absolutism and from tradition and ascribed roles. The modernist critique opposed the privileged position of feudalism and the determinism of the traditional and hierarchical forms of authority emerging from feudalism and the church system. But modernization theories did not essentially appreciate the ideas of either emancipation or empowerment of women. Nor modernization theories did engage in the emancipation project.

The contradiction between the hierarchical social order and the democratic political system provided the context for the emergence of the concept of empowerment in the contemporary social theory of post-modernism. On the other hand the contradiction between the unequal relations of production provided the background for emergence of the ideology of emancipation of the human kind including the women. The

former approach segregated the women category in the process of empowerment and the latter subsumed the women category in the process of emancipation of the entire human kind. Whereas there have been much efforts to evince innovative approaches, methodologies and measurement tools for women empowerment, very little effort is so far made to systematically understand and conceptualise the issue of women empowerment in the present times. From a quick overview of the theoretical and conceptual properties of women emancipation we can broadly identify two categories of approaches. The first is the 'women-in-family' approach according to which the institutions of family and kinship-based inter-familial relations are regarded as the captive spaces for women, where they loose all their self-identities and individual rights. (Much of the non-emancipation of the women community therefore is attributed to the familial and kinship relationships. These are the spaces where patriarchy controls the thoughts and behaviour and regulates the sexuality of women. Similarly the reproductive roles also captivate the women within the portals of the home and the hearth. Even the matrilineal societies could not be free from this kind of captivity. Eventually both in the patriarchal and in the matrilineal systems, the women faced the common destiny of subordination, denial of personal choice, rights and social opportunities. The unequal power relations thus built between the male and the female were reflected not only in the family but also in the larger society.)

Retrospection into the history would show that from the time of Socrates (who only recognized reproductive role of women) down to Renaissance, John Locke, Thomas Hobbes and the Fascists, the women were considered as subordinates. In the Judaeo-Christian world women found themselves depicted in negative imagery by the religious leaders who would set the social norms. On the other hand Bechofen and Bancroft upheld mother right in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. The sociology of family found historic prevalence of matriarchy as the archaic form in the absence of a defined monogamous family. The history of family and private

property, later elaborated by Fredrich Engels, revealed that alongwith the institution of private property, the institution of family also became private sphere in which the women community lost the mother right and became captive. This captivation was institutionalized finally in monogamy. Therefore monogamous family became a superstructure of an exploitative economic relation created by feudalisation and privatization of property. Women-in-family approach in this sense might give us an useful insight into the nature of captivation the women suffer in the society. Women-in-family approach countervailed the inevitability of the patriarchal model. But the proponents of this approach did not go into the historical roots of family and kinship. The serious lacunae of this approach are found in its denial of philosophy of history and essentialisation of the surface institutions called family and kinship in explaining the captivity of women. Therefore one simplistic trajectory of women emancipation as propounded by the 'women-in-family' approach is to come out of the lasso of the familial ties. This approach did not hit the structural roots of family but became stereotyped and universal in the current literature on women empowerment.

It is also necessary to look into the women-in-family approach from the wide angle of the grand theories of liberalism and socialism. Liberalism brought about a major revolutionary change from the feudal mode of production and superseded a large number of erstwhile feudal social institutions and relations. Liberalism in this way put an end to the historical necessity of family. But so far as the question of emancipation of women was concerned, no major change was evinced except that (i) the labour force of women received cognition albeit it was grossly iniquitous in terms of wages and other benefits and that (ii) it historically deconstructed joint family and gave way to nuclear family. In the liberal frame the patriarchal model of revolution was found in the French, Mexican and the Iranian revolutions. On the other hand the socialist frame went with the model of women emancipation. The Bolshevik revolution and some other third world revolutions fell within this framework. The debate therefore polarized between women-

in-Family approach and emancipation approach. The liberal and socialist theories led to a new set of debate between gender and feminism. Since the 1970s, the feminists started distinguishing between sex as biological (chromosomal) classification and gender, as social and psychic constructs based on biological differences. Within this frame again we found two distinct approaches. One is the gender approach and the other is the feminist approach. Although there are commonalities between the two approaches, they differ on substantive grounds. The gender approach leans towards gender as social construction of the male-female roles and relationships. The feminist approach on the other hand is essentially based on biological construction of male and female. Gender approach finds family or household as hierarchical spaces and locates gender inequality within these spaces. This approach tries to capture the complex dynamics within the domestic space. The functional domain of household, according to this approach, centers on consumption, production and distribution that are institutionalized and are made obligatory. Drawing on the traditional model of power as repression, a section of the feminists assumed that the oppression of women could be explained by patriarchal social structures that secured the power of men over women. On the other hand some feminists tended to deny the assumption that the oppression of women is caused in any simple way by men's possession of power. But the first group of feminists could raise stronger voices and found domestic units as the spheres of inequality. A domestic unit according to them provides a framework for description of inequality in functional domains as well as in the dynamics of power relations. Among the three functional domains, distribution is considered as the key to intra-household inequality. Within the gender-based framework of inequality the roles of social and religious codes are immense to decide the "station and its duties". Following "Margolis's formulation, placement of individuals within the domestic unit is based on hierarchy". (Deepa Narayan)

In the era of globalisation, there has been progressive switchover from the emancipation model and the contemporary

discursive space is captured by the post-liberal social thought. Post-liberal thought made a difference from the liberal thought that was never concerned with the emancipation of women. Post-liberalism and feminist movements became the two significant political and cultural movements of the late twentieth century. The feminist approach found the body space as hierarchical and located within the female body the roots of inequality and discrimination. The approach tried to capture the dynamics of power relations within the body space. The functional domain of feminism centred on the body text in terms of consumption (sexuality); (re)-production; and distribution (of physical hazards). This functional domain was institutionalized on the body-hierarchy in which the female body became subordinate to that of the male. Therefore the contemporary theorist like Rubin (in line with Foucault) was of the view that masculinity and femininity are not innate and essential categories of human existence; they are social inventions and constructed categories with specific meanings that vary across cultures and historical periods. Foucault argued that sexuality is not a permanent, trans-historical human essence but rather a modern invention produced by discourse, or language systems such as religion, science, literature, and medicine. The lesbian, gay and queer theorists attempted to denaturalize the heterosexual matrix of western cultures. This distinction between anatomical sex-based male-female differences and the gendered, socially determined meanings ascribed to these biological categories provided the feminists an important tool to analyze the relations between women and men.

Foucault's treatment of relations between power, the body and sexuality stimulated extensive feminist interest. His idea that the body and sexuality are cultural constructs rather than natural phenomena significantly contributed to the feminist critique of essentialism and formed the feminist angle of women's autonomy. But the feminists at the same time critiqued Foucault. In the late 1980s the Binary Model of gender and the dualistic model were challenged both by the self-identified feminists of color and by the theorists working from an anti-

homophobic perspective. While the feminists refuted the masculinity and femininity as innate categories (in line with Foucault), they argued that, because male dominance was not based on biology but on culturally imposed and enforced norms, it could be changed. The feminists upheld the agency role for evincing such change. Here the feminists had a problem. They found that Foucault's account of relations between power and body constituted forms of subjectivity and left no room for resistance to power. Many feminists have rejected his works on the charge that he himself failed to understand or support some feminist perspectives and struggles. This account of power reduced the role of social agents to docile bodies and eventually stymied the emancipatory aims of feminism and feminist politics for women's autonomy. The feminists sought to challenge gender relations that emphasized domination and victimization and stymied feminist politics and women's autonomy. If individuals were as Foucault described them to be, it would be difficult to explain who then could resist power. Thus the feminists did not endorse Foucault's assertion that power always makes resistance incoherent. They also charged that Foucault failed to provide the normative resources to resist structures of domination and to guide programs for social change.

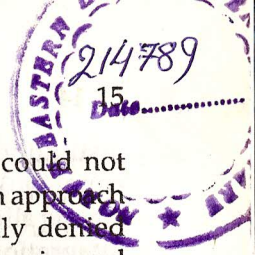
Others have argued that in his late work he develops a more robust account of subjectivity and resistance that, while not without its problems from a feminist perspective, nevertheless has a lot to offer a feminist politics. That he provided the seeds of democratic theory and a reconception of values of freedom and individuality that have such a fundamental role in feminist theory and activity cannot be ignored. (Shane Phelan)

Despite the feminist bandwagon to denaturalize the heterosexual matrix underlying the Western cultures, the binary theories could not be grossly superseded and the disagreements over the relationship between Gender and Sexuality could not be absolved. The feminists remained critical to the technical approach to assimilating gender within programmes and institutions without substantively addressing the dynamics of power and inequality in the society. As a loosely organized

approach to epistemology, feminism nevertheless could not build blocks of a sound social theory. The Foucauldian approach denied single source of oppression and eventually denied centralized and systemic grand theory. Its diversity mirrored the diversity of epistemology generally, as well as the diversity of theoretical positions that constituted the fields of gender studies, women's studies and feminist theory. The only valid point was the emphasis on the hitherto epistemic salience of gender and use of gender as an analytical category in discussions, criticisms, reflection and reconstructions of epistemic practices, norms, and ideals. Yet feminism did not stay on gender as the central axis of analysis. On the other hand feminism shifted the focus to sexuality (and Foucault went beyond sexual liberation) while used gender as an analytical tool in their explorations of modern conceptualizations of sexual identities.

However here we are concerned not so much with the gender-sexuality debate as with the emancipation approach which is not primarily rooted in the institutions of family or in the body-text but in the unequal structure of production. In the post-modern era there has been constant efforts to de-essentialize unequal structure of production and to divert the focus from emancipation towards 'othering' it through engaging in gender-sex discourse. Secondly if gender or sex is a distinct social construct then there are also other distinct social constructs in the society. These include the complex, multiple ethnicity, cultural groups, and caste divisions that make female identity inadequate and de-essentialize sex-gender constructs. Thirdly, the construction of distinct feminist consciousness divides the poor multitude and 'others' class-consciousness. The sex-gender dichotomy is reflected more in the dichotomy between biological essentialism (feminism) and social construction (gender).

The GAD/WID approaches appeared in the west first and then seeped into the other countries of the world. The UN Decade for Women focused on improvement of the status of women not only as a part of social development but also as an integral part of the project for establishment of a new



institutional economic order that talked of equity, sovereignty, equality, interdependence, common interest and cooperation among all the states. The approach intended to achieve women's integration in all aspects of the development process. The United Nations evolved the Women In Development (WID) approach. Formal policy approach of WID began in the early 1970s. Gender equality became the central theme of the United Nation's Human Development Report in 1995. The report found the disadvantaged state of the women by almost all the indicators of development. As an application of the post-modernisation theory the WID approach made the erstwhile institutions dysfunctional. Emphasis was laid on investment on women's human capital that could yield greater rate of return in labour productivity, child health and family welfare. Women's position in the industrial countries was upheld as a model for the women in developing countries. The WID approach was Pareto Optimal and efficiency-based. But the human capital of women in terms of job, wage, education and health and quantitative methodology of the WID Approach failed to address gender inequality in redistributive terms. The WID approach had to give way to GAD approach. The role of feminist movements against the patriarchal structure of decision-making was significant in this shift of approach. GAD approach methodologically relied on qualitative and descriptive data and historical narratives with the liberal application of the term 'empowerment'. The concept of empowerment demanded radical change in institutions that could enhance participation of the women. At the same time many schemes for social and economic empowerment of the women were undertaken by the states. In India the 10th Five Year Plan gave stress on inclusive growth that implicated women in a greater way. The 11th Plan carried the mandate of inclusive growth further and focused on gender balancing. It also went for feminisation of agriculture, menial employment and economic empowerment of the women from the marginal and minority groups.

#### **The scenario in the northeast**

Significantly however, the women in North Eastern region are

now emerging as major change agents. They are no more passive victims of destiny. But the central controversy lies in the gender egalitarian framework vis-a-vis the gender gap and eventual marginalisation and social captivity of the women community. Whereas patriarchy is conveniently held responsible for trivializing the gender egalitarian tribal society and for creating inequality and resource monopoly in the northeast, the controversy is not rooted in the dominant discourse on emancipation of women as oppressed class but in the twin foundations of family and social institutions. In fact the key strategy for international support to decentralized development is to place the gender concerns at the forefront. Therefore gender concerns could not emerge so much from the collective consciousness of the women community as from the global strategy of gender-based development.

In general phraseology emancipation of women means liberation from the socio-economic and political forces hindering their social upliftment, economic, legal, political and moral freedom. Empowerment implies a shift from subservient to successful and passive to active womanhood. In the broader context empowerment of women refers to questioning the oppressive social institutions and discrepancies and distortions arising from these institutions. Empowerment also talks about access to power and resources necessary to fulfill their strategic gender needs. It is the complex interplay of various factors like physical, social, economic, political, psychological, attitudinal and so on. In the Indian context the social and religious codes captivated the women in different ways and reduced them to second-class surrogate entity. On the other hand subordination caused by production relation, wrong imaging of women in the Indian classics and historiography constrained the process of emancipation. This is true also in northeast India. Although many women fought in the struggle for emancipation of the country from the colonial rule, they themselves could not break the social and normative constraints and the organization of production that were needed for their emancipation. The women eventually could not break the captivity of traditions, social and religious codes. The protective laws for women could

not by themselves address the issue of emancipation on the other hand all discourses of empowerment took place without challenging the basic structure of the society. This threw the question of emancipation to the backyard. The issue of emancipation of women need be understood in this broader context.

One opinion is that although the women of northeast India is relatively free from many of the social vices of the mainland India, discrimination is incipient in the patriarchal familial order. In the much known Khasi and Garo societies, male inheritance of political power and loss of women's control over resources and decision-making disadvantaged the women community. On the other hand in the economic front advanced agricultural technology and HIV seeds and fertilizers displaced women from shifting cultivation. This affected their economic relations. In the era of globalisation they were also displaced from the small-scale and household industries. Such displacement from the organization of production reduced value of women's labour. The gender blind agricultural policy, lack of state policy for women, lack of access and control over productive resources and downsizing of public sector investment for women development and gender insensitive health policy are some of the serious causes of concern. In Meghalaya for example, the matrilineal system could not safeguard women from being disadvantaged. Matriliney could not protect the women from being victims of universal discrimination. Matriliney became a misunderstood term as it led many people to think that in the matrilineal system the women are the owners of land. The women in the northeast have not been able to position themselves suitably in the institutions of local governance. Absence of reservation of seats in the institution of local governance (District Council), change in inheritance practices and emerging social structure broke down the myth of matrilineage. This is how the ascribed roles and relationships in a docile tribal society downplayed the women.

Inspite of these limitations a comparative study of the women in Meghalaya (matriliney) and Tripura (patriarchy) shows that in terms of relative economic independence, inheritance rights and in terms of modern facilities the women in Meghalaya stand ahead of those in Tripura. The Female heads have lesser tendency to be member of social organisations than their male counterparts in both the states. But the tendency to become members of such organizations and clubs is found more among the women of Tripura. In Meghalaya on the other hand such tendency is found more among the educated rather than the non-educated sections of population. Meghalaya's women are more advanced than Tripura's women in terms of participation in meetings and functions without the permission of the male members of their family though they are less interested to be members of any social organisation. In terms of remarriage on husbands' death there are differences of responses between the two states. In Tripura more females and female-headed households visit the institution of local governance than those in Meghalaya. There is also state level variation between the two states in terms of distribution of the Heads of the Households by their participation in outside activities, mobility, freedom of movement outside village and so on. In terms of certain psychological, behavioural and opinion-related parameters also there are state level variations between the two states.

### Education

In the country like India education is considered as the major trajectory for women empowerment. The place of education has been recognized in different religions in different countries and in different regimes. The colonial educational policies were also historically significant. But in all systems of education the women community was by and large marginalized and excluded. And even if some education scheme was designed for the women, these were designed in such a way as would suit the women as housekeepers. The missionary efforts to educate the girls were also made within the framework of family and kinship. It is found that the girls of south Asia are

largely passive, demure and docile. This disapproved girls' education in large way. It is only recently that girls' education has received major policy support from the state with a view to remove the gender-based inequality in the society and to bring well-being of the society.

In northeast India two contradictory viewpoints emerged on education of the women. The dominant view is that in the era of globalisation women's education in the region has not been translated into reality although it is an important agenda of development. Female literacy and education progressed at a snail pace at the beginning of the century and during the last fifty years the increase in female literacy was seen from 0.6 per cent in 1901 to 7.9 per cent in 1951, reflecting perhaps the least importance given to female literacy during those years. However, the rate of female literacy started showing slight improvement immediately after the Independence and a noticeable progress could be witnessed in the following decades. Barring Arunachal Pradesh, in all the states of the northeast, the rate of female literacy was always higher than that in the all India average indicating perhaps the less restriction imposed on women towards acquiring education. Comparatively reduced gender gap in literacy rate has featured the northeast India. But there is no reason of complacency. Much has to be yet done to increase literacy and education among the women who are much more disadvantaged and live in the most interior areas.

In northeastern India, the traditional Sikkimese society is perhaps an exception where there are gender-based equalitarian practices in the field of education. But as of now the Sikkimese girls are found to be under-privileged both educationally and socially. Despite larger public provisioning, the socio-economic constraints of the parents, topographic hurdles, poor communication, poor school infrastructure and poor quality of teaching made the drop-out rate of the Sikkimese girls very high. For the girls the added disadvantages are their early marriage and lack of awareness. This scenario could not attract more girl children to schools even with the provisions for mid-

day meal (in case of Sikkim it is dry ration). Male preference in education, lack of parental initiatives, irrelevant curriculum and medium of instruction further marginalized the girls. Although in the state there is district-wise variations in terms of educational attainment and enrollment ratio, those of the girls remained lower. Under this situation the open school system, Balika Samridhi Yojana, Indira Mahila Yojana, Kishori Shakti Yojana and other state-led schemes could help bring the girl children to the mainstream of education. Lack of education caused lack in management skill of the women community in this region. Gender discrimination, poverty, diminishing access and control over common property resources, lack of command over technology, cultural barriers and above all institutional biases towards men disadvantage the women in many ways. But the most critical situation has been invited by the new economic policy, global political economy and developmental policies. Liberalization has dislodged the women of the northeast from the traditional livelihood sources and made them much more vulnerable to displacement and poverty. The issues like inflation, displacement, deforestation, unemployment, poverty etc. became essentially the women issues. These issues are now being raised by the women organizations in this region.

The academic leadership of the women in this region is a unique trajectory for women empowerment. Academic leadership, unlike corporate and business leadership, is service oriented. It builds blocks of an enlightened, efficient and developed society. All over the world education has become more accessible to women than it was in the past. But women's leadership in academic institutions has not made any breakthrough. There is however growing realization of more leadership and management skills for women to make the institutions of education more effective. Academic leadership includes mobilization and management of resources, faculty and curriculum management, knowledge management, monitoring, evaluation and control. Academic leadership of women is both efficiency-based and value-based and can address the larger issues of gender-based inclusion in the

educational institutions so that the women can take leadership position in future. Academic leadership is acquired through educational institutions. It includes skill, capacity and motivation building that are not delivered by the ordinary institutions of education. In the northeastern context the women face a large number of personal, social, psychological and structural constraints in acquiring leadership in the educational institutions. There is therefore need for a sound social policy for empowerment and leadership building for women in educational institutions. Such policy in other words needs to be gender friendly and responsive to the specific needs for academic leadership. Things however do not depend only on policy formulation but also on the personal desires and commitments of the women themselves to become the role models of academic leaders. Women can prove to be better leaders and better managers of the educational institutions given the rightful opportunities.

#### **Women in professions**

In terms of professional education the women of the northeastern region show an interesting trend. In the professional courses of law, agriculture and veterinary, the number of women of the region is higher than the All-India figure whereas in engineering and medical courses they have lesser participation. Increased professional education of the women of the region and growing career consciousness among them gave them a sense of relief from the essentialism of kinship and family centric captivity. One significant thing is that male bias in higher education including professional education (like medical, engineering, law etc) in the states of the northeastern region often largely excluded the women community both from professional education and from the professional opportunities. At the same time in a very sensitive manner the women of the northeast did not wish away their reproductive roles. Combining the reproductive roles with the movement and professional roles is a unique feature of the women community in the northeast although this dual role is really challenging to them. On the other hand increasing professional choice of the

women made them vulnerable in the work place where most of them failed to survive with dignity and self-esteem. Compared to other regions the women of the northeastern region came in the public sphere quite lately. The women working in different professions usually become home sick after some years of rigorous life, they suffer from depression leading sometimes to suicide. This let loose one dilemma of the women-in-family approach that tends to reconcile their public roles with the reproductive roles. The other dilemma is let loose when professional life de-captivates them from family and kinship bondages.

✓ Higher education in Assam has however shaped the perception of the women about their marriage and career salience. The impact of higher education (provided by the increasing number of educational and professional institutions) on elite and middle class Assamese women's attitudes towards their career salience, marriage and motherhood is important to know in this context. Empirical study on the perception of educated urban middle-class women shows that the career aspirations of these women are embedded within certain aspects of their cultural, traditional and family values. The conservative value imposition on the girls and male preference in education hindered their achievement orientations. But as of now the Assamese women enjoy the benefits of their class position in different professions including in the non-traditional employments. These professions help them to come out of their strict reproductive roles. Significant changes are taking place among the young women in the contemporary Assamese society. The impact of western ideas on roles, career options and jobs on the educated middle-class women is increasing. Economic independence and high-skill jobs are in increasing preference. This led the women to come out of the confines of "women in family" towards a more socially useful and personally accomplished community. While modern education broke the career silence of the women, they were able to articulate new choices for late marriage and small family norms in a socially responsible manner. The choice for small family norm has shown both as an individual choice as well as a public

choice. Such empirical study however does not reflect the general trend of the lower middle class and poor women community of the state because of the very exclusive nature of the methodology and sampling. A cross-section sampling (random sampling) could perhaps bring out a different lesson from the empirical study.

Empirical studies also revealed reduced male-female differentials in work participation; substantial rise in women workforce participation in urban labour market; increased share of female marginal workers in the total female workers that contributed greatly to the rise in percentage of female workers in the total female population in the 1990s; increased share of female marginal workers and increased informal activities and under-utilization of workforce in the urban labour market. During the 1990s other trends include increase in the share of regular employment among the urban women workers; fall in under employment of women workers; low participation of female child labour and rising share of aged women workers in labour market showing the trend of 'double peaked' distribution. In northeast India the primary sector is the greater provider of employment even to the urban women. The 50th and the 55th Round NSS show the insignificant role of the manufacturing sector in employment generation to urban women in the northeast. In Manipur though manufacturing units could play a significant role, the share of the service sector actually came to play important role in providing jobs to women. One conspicuous feature of the urban women workers is their strong linkages with agricultural sector that provides bulk employment to them. In the tertiary sector distribution of total urban female workers made a significant improvement during 1981-1991 in the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Meghalaya. In Nagaland, Tripura and Mizoram on the other hand it reduced. Another trend is greater participation of the educated women in urban labour market in the states of the northeastern region during 1999-2000 and higher labour mobility among the urban educated women for better remuneration and job security. But such mobility is confined only to the establishment sector. Women labour

mobility is quite low in Meghalaya, Tripura and Manipur. However despite reduction of gender gap in socio-economic spheres, in the urban labour market more participation in the tertiary sector caused informalisation of women workforce in the region and mobility in such case could not bring change in the status of work. The more serious threat to the women labour is found in the handloom sector and household industries sectors in the region. It is well-known that in the northeast India the women workforce occupies a large space in the handloom and household industries sector. But no special attention has so far been paid to ensure that the larger number of women artisans in the villages get benefit from all the development schemes such as training, marketing related award, national awards exhibitions and so on. It is important that women's substantial labour is not just confined to crop production but also to the household industry sector. Besides they do invisible activities including live stock keeping, collection of firewood and weaving clothes. These activities constitute two-thirds of the labour time of women. Moreover women do make important decisions regarding crop production although they have lesser access to resources and income opportunities. They are also paid lower wages than their male counterparts. Such labour of the women community needs to be quantified in order to ensure social and economic justice to them.

### Social Evils

The NFHS-2 has found the incidence of wife battering and other forms of domestic violence against the women in the northeastern states. The NCBR Report 2000 also showed increased violence against women. This could not be reduced even with the spread of education and social legislations of different kinds. Though the crime against women is lesser in northeast India, the incidence of rape, custom-related and food-related violence and incidences of the missing female are increasing. The state of the upper caste woman in the region is better than that of the tribal woman because of their higher literacy rate. However in reality, the woman are subject to various forms of harassment in different ways. Under-

representation of women in the work sector, unrecognized labour, illiteracy, child marriage, higher MMR, CMR & adverse sex ratio, reproductive health hazards, AIDS, psychological repression, female foeticide and infanticide have emerged as major social issues implicating the women in the region. Rape, lack of gainful employment, exclusion from the system of governance and patriarchal mode of decision making disabled the women in northeast India to come out of the captive space. Globalization invited commercialization of sex and sex tourism became popular in northeast India. One serious problem is the growing trend of trafficking on women. The women from the poor communities fall easy victims of increasing trafficking. They also eventually fall victims of HIV/AIDS. The international funding agencies often encourage the development of tourism which would help the respective governments to repay their foreign debts. These agencies give support to sex-tourism that is gradually becoming an integral part of the tourism industry of today. The forces of globalization are operating with rampant poverty, illiteracy and unemployment and at the same time are playing wrong with the fair sex. Consumerism has aroused consumer culture to such a height that the women are forced to become commodities.

Many poor girls of the region are allured with job promises and modeling career and are made more vulnerable. According to the National Crime Records Bureau reports, violent crimes against women are on the increase despite presence of various laws to the contrary. In the northeast crime against women and the state of women in domestic and public domains are worsening. Domestic violence, family disorganization, divorce, conflict over inheritance and property rights, occupation and income, skewed work distribution at the household, lack of decision making power and adverse attitude of society towards women worsened the state of the women. Crime against women particularly in Assam is on the increase. On the other hand the belief systems in the Mizo, Naga Garo societies go against the women. The social and religious codes constrain the women in different ways. The wrong imaging of women in the Indian

classics and historiography constrained the process of their emancipation. Although many women fought for emancipation of the country from the colonial rule, they themselves could not break the captivity of traditions, social and religious codes. The protective laws for women could not by themselves address the issue of emancipation. Thus both in the traditional and in the liberal frame, the women community became subjugated. Many girls now chose the profession of model in which their body is exposed in objectionable manner. There is no censorship. In the era of marketisation, media projection of the women bodies became self-defeating for women themselves and the quest of emancipation remained far behind. Such media projection is partially responsible also for increased sex-related crimes and domestic violence against the women. Besides although occupational engagement of women is increasing in the northeast, adverse work environment and gender unfriendly relations discourage women in the new professions.

The state of the girls in the region is more serious. Exclusive dependency of the girls on fathers and brothers and consequent exclusion from education put them to perennial state of disadvantage. Despite expansion of educational facilities, sex difference in enrolment is conspicuous among the SC, ST, tea-tribes and other socio-economically backward communities. In some cases however the girls have shown better performance due to higher level of awareness, extensive campaigning, free distribution of text books, mid-day meal and alternative schooling introduced by Sarva Siksha Abhiyan. In Arunachal Pradesh there is district-wise variations in the ST boys' and girls' enrolment in primary schools. Most of the girls dropped out at primary stage and could not go to upper primary classes. In respect of enrolment position Meghalaya ranked the highest in gender parity index. Assam's GPI in 2004 was 96. Nagaland and Mizoram had similar picture. In Assam, a large number of dropout girls was found in the tea garden areas. Regular attendance of the girls in the school is affected by greater engagement of them in the household activities. In the tea garden areas inadequate creche facilities for garden workers'

children pull back the girls for baby-sitting and childcare at the family.

In terms of health indicators Assam including North East India has a life expectancy of 55-60 years just lagging behind Kerala with 70 years. Gender based discrimination in food taking, health care, lack of participation in public affairs and in the institutions of governance are common phenomena. The number of females to males had never been equal in any society. This theoretical understanding of this phenomenon has however always remained difficult. Large number of studies found that there is a shortages of women in every area, region and country. Though it is commonly believed that legal status, economic and social opportunities, nature of work and behaviour towards women make their status high- the norms, social institutions, religious ideologies, class position and family organization actually decide the status of women. The women often get trapped in the dilemma of do's and don'ts in society and their personal desire to ascent in the social ladder is lost on the way. Such norms are largely responsible for demographic shortage of women in the society.

### Political Empowerment

The processes of political empowerment and participatory decision making role of the women started in India in the late 1990s. This made the woman an important partner in development. This was the threshold of institutional reforms with focus on reservation of seats for women in the institutions of local governance. This was expected to involve the women in the decision-making process and to address the strategic gender needs. In Assam 38.9% women, in Manipur 36.5%, In Sikkim 38.2% and in Tripura 34.6% women were elected in the three tiers of Panchayati raj institutions till 2007.

The state election scenario in Assam from the 1985 onward has shown increased number of women contestants. The number of women candidate won in the election also increased over the time though the rate of increase was marginal. The debate over the women reservation bill lying in the parliament is also raised from different quarters. Different political parties

also nominated women candidates in Assam Legislative Assembly Election 2006. The Congress party nominated the highest number of women candidates followed by the BJP. Interestingly some of the progressive political parties did not nominate women candidates at all. Participation in franchise in all the polling stations also showed that the female voters outnumbered the male voters. But the participation of women in the election of the local bodies (Panchayats and Municipalities in which one-third of the seats are reserved for the women) remained low. In the institution of the District Council there was no provision for reservation of women. In the district council election the number of women representatives remained very low. In the traditional village organizations, the women were denied space.

Though political empowerment of women has become a buzzword in the recent times, in our country context political empowerment of women is constrained in many ways. The formal-institutional spacing the women in the political sphere may not therefore be the sufficient condition for their empowerment. While women's participation in the public sphere is quite significant, it needs to demystify the male-bias, unholy nexus and other social inhibitions. The complex dilemma in political empowerment of the women lies in their inclusion in the formal institution and their exclusion in the social institutions. That is why although the Constitution of India guaranteed political equality to all men and women alike and made provisions for protective discrimination in favour of the women through the 73rd and the 74th Amendments, these institutional measures per se were not able to make a breakthrough in the society. In the northeastern region, the institution of autonomous district council could not so far ensure protective discrimination in favour of the women. This disabled the women of the region to initiate a breakthrough in political empowerment of the women.

### The Struggle of Women Agencies

The history of women's movement in the northeast can be traced back to the colonial era. The focus of such movement

was to liberate the country from the colonial rule. Many such movements also aimed at eradicating the customs, norms and practices derogatory to the women community. Against all odds and structural constraints the women organizations in northeast India struggled for making a space for themselves on issues of public interest. The women community is now struggling for female education and professional career for self-reliance. The women movements in the northeast mobilized the women around common cause and gave voice to the voiceless. These movements were autonomous and non-political in nature and addressed large number of issues including oppressive patriarchal structure, socio-economic marginalisation of the women, regional disparity in development and peace building. In the social front these organizations stood against growing drug use and wrong practices prevailing in the society. Subsequently many such movements got politicized in the process. This was expressed in important struggle of the women agencies against the state violence affecting the women community most in the northeast region of India. In the conventional male dominated society, the organised movements of the women for emancipation and their contribution towards the process of democratization of the polity and society demand reassessment of the concepts of emancipation, political rights and social justice. In many conservative societies such role of the women agency has been down-played although a moderate section of the women community feebly challenged the male dominated codes and demanded reinterpretation of theological subordination of women. As against this some progressive groups of women across the country have raised voice against the theological subordination. Sisters - in -Islam from Malaysia challenged the orthodox 'Ulama from Malaysia. They have been even trying to get the concept of 'marital rape' be accepted as an offense in a valid law".

The predominant view on women emancipation has laid the focus on empowering the women socially, economically, and politically so that they could break away from male domination. In the post-1990s, the bandwagon of empowerment

got more popularity. The Beijing Conference of 1995 and other global conferences talked of empowerment that had four components: a women's sense of self worth; the right to determine choices; the power to control their own lives within and outside the home and their ability to influence the direction of social change and to create social and economic order nationally and internationally. In northeast India the 'New Social Movements' not only confined themselves to feminism, reproduction, media imaging and body-centric discourses but also branched out to other significant issues including civil liberty, ecology, identity, ethnicity, terrorism and state violence, displacement, deforestation and erosion of common property resources. Such movements often found market economy threatening to economic empowerment of the poor women.

In Manipur the scenario is unique. There are women organisations in every nook and corner of the state. These organizations are known as 'Nisha Bandis' or 'mera paibis'. The economic role of the women in the state is very high. Earning money is not essentially a male function. Women also have the ability to earn money and manage the family. Woman as a decorative piece is not the image of womanhood in the state. Emergence of the concept of SHGs gave the women in Manipur a new way of socio-economic empowerment. A case study on 12 SHGs in Manipur revealed success stories of organization, group savings, credit linkage, production, networking and marketing functions of those groups. Besides the women were trained to develop entrepreneurship qualities and specific training programmes were held in the areas of self-development, leadership, motivation, management etc. All these initiatives gave them the surest ways for economic independence. The SHGs became not only the spaces for economic empowerment but also the platforms for empowered women. Another study of the SHGs in Kokrajhar and Chirang district & of B.T.A.D. (Bodoland Territorial Area Districts) Assam shows transformative roles of the women community. A sample study on twelve SHGs in Kokrajhar and Chirang districts under the SGSY programme shows the socio-economic characteristics of the women SHGs, their income, education and

faith system. The study highlighted operational niceties of the twelve SHGs in two districts, including organization, efficient group management and motivation. It showed increasing cumulative group savings, bank linkages and income earned. The poor women through the SHGs could improve the asset base and received control over the resources. This led not only to their economic empowerment but also social empowerment in terms of improved awareness and better quality of life. The role of Anjali Sukhati SHG foundation both as facilitator and mediator of the SHGs is significant. The role of the SHGs and the micro-enterprise initiatives of the SHGs in restructuring the socio-economic set up and ensuring political stability of BTAD area of Assam is significant.

The other significant issues on which the women movement leaders fought were the growing state violence, terrorism and loss of democratic norms in the region. Such movements of the women agencies invariably became highly political and eventually these movements blurred the fissure-line between social action and political action. The roles of the women agencies in Nagaland, Assam and Tripura are similarly important in this connection. The 'public interest role' of the women organizations in this region and agencies is significant.

#### **Role of the state**

In the Indian context, the discourse in the liberal school evolves around the constitutional principles of "Equality" and public policy frame of "Protective Discrimination". In this context the women questions in India in general and northeast India in particular oscillate between the liberal and normative frames of reference and 'protective discrimination' and alienation-exploitation syndrome of the unequal structure of economy, polity and society. The dilemma remains in the realm of gender egalitarian framework of the constitution on the one hand and the gender gap, social captivity and marginalisation of the women within the un-egalitarian framework of the society on the other hand. The approach within the liberal frame has however shifted from the 1st to the 7th plan periods. The shifts were from welfare to development and from WID to

GAD. In the neo-liberal frame the focus was also laid on HRD. The 8th Plan did not focus on women and the disadvantaged groups. This was followed in the 9th Plan by empowerment and participation approach that could go with equity and social justice. Since then most of the development schemes followed this approach. Subsequently the 10th and the 11th plans focused on inclusive growth that critically implicated the women in a larger way. The 11th plan gave particular focus on violence against women, economic empowerment and women's health. The other focus was laid on feminisation of agriculture, menial employment and special attention for economic empowerment of the women from marginal and minority groups. The state also adopted a multi-pronged strategy for the empowerment of women including reservation of seats in the institutions of local governance; institution of a separate department of Women and Child Development (WACD) and establishment of National Commissions for women both at the center and at the state levels. The National Employment Guarantee Project gave priority to one-third women to benefit from it. But with the onset of globalisation there has been a growing trend of privatization of public space, downsizing of the social policy and lack of adequate safety net that largely denied proper redistribution. The policies and programmes designed by the Government of India and various State governments could not effectively address the needs of women in poverty. Although there is an optimistic view on the impact of globalisation on the women community, the market driven approach and the New Economic Policy largely affected the poor women community in this region adversely and featured the development scenario that was reflected in the NFHS-1998-1999. In the health sector the growing contradiction between the equity ground of public financing and efficiency ground of private insurance is found. The disadvantaged and the poor are doubly constrained on this contradictory value premises. By all the indicators of Human Development (HD1) the women stand as the poorest of the poor in India and a far worse situation is visible in North Eastern Region (NER) of the country. The state fails to provide adequate safety net to the poor in the face

of liberalization, privatization and globalisation. Thus failure of the state on the social front can usually be attributed to the inability of the state's policies to recognize the social groups with poor assets and capacities. In the neo-liberal frame there are three approaches of social policy. The first is the political economy approach that views social policy as a great bargaining between national government and society. The second is the humanitarian and cosmopolitan approach that recognizes GO-NGO-corporate- international financial institutions' responsibility to cushion the shock of liberalization through appropriate social policy. The third is the Incorporation of Social Policy approach in the management of international financial institutions. However, reduction of social spending has landed the country on a crisis of legitimacy and reduced the credibility of the state in providing safety net to the people and in creating debilitating dependence among the people in general and the women in particular. Within the matrix of liberalization the 'National Policy For Empowerment of Women-2001' professed gender equity and greater concern for women in terms of socio-economic and political empowerment. But such policy package did not challenge the centrality of the macro economic policy, structural inequality and skewed distribution system.

The National Policy For Empowerment of Women-2001 is based on gender equity with broad focus on socio-economic and political empowerment, girl-child right and dignified media imaging of women. The operational strategies include an action plan consisting: measurable goals to be achieved by 2010; identification and commitment of resource; responsibilities for implementation of action plan; structure and mechanism for monitoring; review and Gender Impact Assessment (GIA) of action plan and policies and gender perspective in the budgeting process: promotion of GDI, Gender audit and evaluation. Participation in local bodies, involvement of the voluntary sector, women organizations, trade unions, associations and federations and institutions of training and research are sought for formulation, implementation, monitoring and review of all policies and programmes affecting women. But the policy package for women did not challenge

the centrality of the global finance that masterminds the social policies and approaches.

The State Commission for Women in Assam made a number of recommendations for improvement of lives of the women and for addressing the critical issues faced by them. It also took other initiatives including institution of 'Lok Adalat', workshops on gender violence, observing 'Qami Ekta Week' etc. In Meghalaya Women Help Line was set up. Mizoram launched WHY. Arunachal Pradesh organised seminars and workshops and Tripura observed 'International Women's Week. But the policymakers of the northeastern region have all along been largely insensitive to the gender issues in this region.

In the northeast barring the two states of Assam and Tripura, the work participation rate of female population is better than the all India average. On the other hand between 1971 and 2001 across the states of the region a mixed pattern emerged. In Arunachal and Nagaland there has been a decline in female work participation rate and in the others states the difference in thirty years time remained almost unchanged. Thus increased literacy rate in the northeast did not automatically lead towards increase in female work participation. Hence there appears to have inverse relationship between sex ratio, female literacy and female work participation in the northeast. This has made it difficult to gauge the change in female work participation rate.

The eventual fall-out was lesser sex-ratio in Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim and Nagaland. But the overall scenario of the women in the northeast did not show promises. From the perspective of the macro political economy and within the socio-economic captivity, the question of women emancipation therefore remained a contradiction of the term. The state-made social policies could not be realistic because of the structural constraints. The women community particularly the poor who significantly contribute to the labour force, were hard pressed as a result of downsizing of state policy. The economic empowerment schemes and public policies on agricultural

wage, non-farm labour and agri-business stand on contradictory economic assumptions and contradictory policy premises. Regression of public spending for self-employment activities, failure of the state to provide safety net to the SHG produce and lack of clean market policy proved such initiatives largely ineffective.

At the social front, different social legislations including Hindu Widow Remarriage Act, Child Marriage Restraint Act, Abolition of Sati, Hindu Women's Right to Property Act, Anti Trafficking Act, Hindu Marriage Act, Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, Hindu Married Women's Right to Separate Residence and Maintenance Act, Dowry Prohibition Act, Family Court Act, Domestic Violence Act, Women Reservation Bill and constitutional provision of equality are made. Yet survival of women with dignity in the family and society continues to be a perennial problem. The woman's issues could not be successfully addressed through policies and legislations alone. Crimes against women are growing. Government of Assam has introduced Residential Bridge Course (RBC) centre under Sarva Siksha Abhiyan in nine districts. Under Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya Scheme, Assam has identified fifteen educationally backward Blocks in eight districts. Infrastructure building for the same and opening vocational centers in each school are being contemplated. Government of Assam is also planning to start creches in some selected areas where drop out rate is quite high due to sibling care by the girl children.

The demographic scenario of northeast showed decadal sex ratio in favour of women and in the last forty years it showed a fall well below the 1000 mark (Manipur, Mizoram and Meghalaya). Against the overall favourable change in sex ratio during 1991 to 2001, the state scenarios differed. In Arunachal Pradesh and Assam the sex ratio pattern had dropped right from the 1901 Census. Only the 2001 Census did show a slight improvement. Tripura falls in another category where the sex ratio went on improving in the entire 20th century. Nagaland showed improvement in sex ratio in the first half and a fall in

the second half of the 20th century. The region as a whole has shown a deteriorating scenario of female to male ratio across all the states. Arunachal Pradesh recorded the maximum male female difference. Manipur recorded the minimum. It shows that the share of female and male was sufficiently balanced in the pre-Independence period in all the hilly and tribal dominated states largely in the absence of any known discrimination against the female population. However, subsequently imbalance crept into the otherwise female-favoured states. Certain critical questions may well be raised in this connection: These are the questions of correlations if any, between relatively higher education and greater gender disparity; between strong son preference and gender bias and correlations between small family and female child loss and between sex-selective abortion and discrimination against the living girls.

Another issue is that of the single women in the region. Specific problems are faced by the single women either divorcee or widows in Assam. This problem is sharper in the urban areas. The social policy does not address the problem of single-women adequately. Difference in education and social opportunities of the single-women make differences in the socio-economic and psychological consequences. A case study on the single-women in the urban set up brought out the range of social, economic, legal and psychological hardships they face. They are vulnerable due to marginalisation and psychological trauma and face social stigma of different types. A more responsible social policy package needs to be holistic and sensitive to the specific needs of the divorcees and the widows in the single-women category. Women in Asom suffer differently in the urban and the rural settings. This difference is found also among the women in the tribal and the non-tribe societies. The women in urban setting apparently live a slightly comfortable life than those in the rural areas. And also there is evidence that tribal women can do harder labour than the non-tribal women. Yet the gender-based discrimination in both the societies is common. It is a fact that women of Asom suffer from evil social norms, prejudices, male-domination, torture, rape, exploitation,

domestic violence and sexual harassment. These are the responsible factors that hinder women empowerment and development. We also find vast gender gap in educational, political, social and economic fields. Gender differences in literacy, indifference of the government, public apathy, lack of proper meals and uniforms facilities, early marriage, poverty of the parents, bad communication, dearth of women teachers, absence of suitable curriculum, lack of adequate separate schools for girls, absence of opportunity for employment, parental lack of appreciation for girl child education and patriarchal structure are some of the factors responsible for the slow social development of the girls in Asom. The presence of women in the political fields is low. Crisis of shifting cultivation invited related crises of women labour particularly in the tribal societies. The Assam Legislative Assembly has passed the Assam Women (reservation of vacancies in services and Post) Bill 2005. DWCRA, Micro finance through self help group, Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme etc. are some of the steps towards raising consciousness and status of the women. The role of voluntary organizations in awareness building is also important. The practical gender needs of Assam might be addressed through gender friendly education and better economic opportunities. This could be better attained through informed participation of the women. Yet the neo-liberal policy frame made gender as a captive of ideology that romanticizes on the women community and wraps it with the mystified version of emancipation.

An empirical study on women labour in the emerging urban labour market during the post-liberalisation era in the northeast shows general socio-economic condition of the women in terms of certain socio-demographic indicators such as favourable change in sex ratio, reduced differential between male-female work participation, reduced differential in male female literacy and increased per capita government expenditure on education. In the states of Mizoram and Meghalaya gender gap in literacy is the lowest in the region. During the post-liberalisation era, there has also been reduction in the male-female differential in

work participation rate and increased new job opportunities for the women. During this period women's contribution to workforce increased in the urban labour market too. Also the share of female marginal workers in the total female workers increased substantially. This indicated increased informal activities and under-utilisation of the workforce in urban labour market of the region. The study also showed larger share of aged women in the workforce and lesser presence of child labour. There was also increase in the share of regular employees among urban women workers. Whereas casualisation of the women workers is comparatively low in Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Nagaland, there is a sharp rise in casual employment among the Mizo women during 1990s. It is also interesting that under-employment rate is higher in the states where urban women are mainly self-employed. There has been an overall fall in underemployment among women workers during 1990s. Increased tertiary activities reduced the under-employment rate among the urban women workers. Low Industrial development in the region is reflected in the employment pattern of the workers in the labour market. The percentage of employment in the secondary sector was much lower than that in the primary sector. The NSS 50th Round and 55th Round showed insignificant role of manufacturing sector in the employment generation for women in the urban labour market whereas service sector provided major employment to them. In Manipur, manufacturing activities played a dominant role but the share of manufacturing employment declined during 1990s. In North East India, urban women workers have a strong linkage with the agriculture sector which plays an important role in employment generation for them. Another conspicuous feature in the region is that more educated women work in the urban labour market mostly in the establishment sector. Labour mobility is higher among the educated females who work either due to better remuneration or due to loss of earlier job.

#### **Role of Civil Society**

Retreat of the welfare role of the state in the era of globalization

warranted voluntary action that through organization, social movement and constructive work might open trajectories for women emancipation. Self Employed Women Association (SEWA) in Ahmedabad is exemplary in this direction. SEWA built a successful model of voluntary action through a combined strategy of organization, movement, constructive work and education for emancipation of the poor and the disadvantaged women. SEWA was organised as a part of the Textile Labour Association and led the path of a unionist movement. As a part of constructive work SEWA established a bank called Shri Mahila SEWA Sahkari Bank Ltd. Subsequently it built institutional collaboration with Life Insurance Corporation of India and United India Assurance Company for providing self employment and social security to the poor women. As a part of educational work, SEWA Academy was established for providing training on various themes including, cooperative development, natural resource management, capacity building, leadership building, communication skill, health care and vocational training to the women.

Srema Mahila Samiti (SMS) in Nadia district of West Bengal is another example. It made a small beginning with organizing the women in thrift and credit groups (SHG) and through these it created a common fund for income generation activities. Subsequently these SHGs were bank-linked and as of now the number of these SHGs has gone up to 499. SMS also set up a micro finance division. Besides, SMS organizes need-based training and exposure, seminars and workshops etc. for capacity building of the group leaders. In the social sector the other activities of the organization include health, MCH, community sanitation, nursery raising and family counseling.

Sumangali Seva Ashram (SSA) in Bangalore is the third example of voluntary action for the cause of women development. The development initiatives of the organization focus on various income generation and livelihood based activities. This organization has promoted partnership with Karnataka State Women Development Corporation and as of now works in close cooperation with the corporation.

Organisation of women is a major activity of SSA. The women organizations gave platform to the women to voice their grievances and to raise their issues.

While the welfare policy of the Indian state is not emancipatory, voluntary work has the major constraint of being donor driven in general. This confines voluntary action to ameliorative activities. The constraints of voluntary action are many more. The collective action ethos of voluntary action often reduces to target –orientation. One way of seeing the role of voluntary action is the transformation from, what David Korten has said, the 'Third Party role' to 'First Party role'. The intrinsic values of First Party role are autonomy and democratic space. But the central dilemma of voluntary action lies in dependency and agency roles that stymie autonomy and independent space to a large extent. In such circumstance voluntary action needs be freed from donor driven agenda, go beyond constructive work and be engaged in movement for altering the structural hierarchies of the society. An ideological role like this might ensure autonomy and might provide a better trajectory of women emancipation.

Some of the operational trajectories of women emancipation are: capacity and political empowerment and legal awareness; holistic gender development including life skill education, health, nutrition, freedom from hunger and dignity; economic independence, access to productive skills and capital, inheritance right; change in value system; break the culture of silence and creation of social space for women; right-based approach for women emancipation; break the binary of public-private; organisation, solidarity and mutual support and pro-changer role of the autonomous peoples agencies and social movements; campaign against medical techniques to pre-birth sex-selection; more detailed enumeration of widow-headed households and creation of data base on widows' remarriage; increased income and employment opportunities for women in the off-farm sector and market promotion of hand made products.

It is a general feeling that women participation in public

life and decision-making process has a significant impact on deepening Indian democracy and development. However, merely increasing representation of women by itself may not lead to greater promotion of women's interest. Nevertheless, number should be large at crucial level for significant and effective exercise of power. Most of the women representatives in the rural and urban local bodies are guided by their husbands, male relatives or by their in-laws. Hence, the women need to free themselves from family control over their political choice and decisions. They should be made capable to shoulder public responsibilities on their own.

North-East India Council for Social Science Research, Shillong has organised a national seminar on the theme. This book contains some of the articles presented in that workshop.

To ameliorate this situation the policies must take cognizance of the needs, problems and choices of women and incorporate these in the design of programmes or schemes. There is need for wider campaign against all social evils including medical termination of pregnancy: civil society action and media sensitization are needed to holistically empower the women community; proper accounting of the women's labour need be initiated and the social movements of the women need be redirected towards emancipation of women.

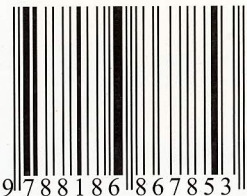


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