



Gender And Society In Northeast India: A Study Of Women In Assam

Debajit Boruah¹, Krishna Kamal Khaund², Sonam Yangden Pradhan³

Email: boruahdebajit2015@gmail.com

Abstract

In the 21st century, gender studies have emerged as a critical discourse against socially, politically, economically and culturally determined performances of femininity. It examines the differences between masculinity and femininity based on sexual or biological differences and involves the study of both men and women to analyze their roles in a particular society. Gender studies also analyze the institutions, processes and practices through which women have been subordinated to men, and it explains the most appropriate and effective ways to challenge this subordination. Therefore, this study aims to explore how gendered ideology leads to gender suppositions in Northeast Indian societies and how it shapes social values and relationships. The study also explores how gender issues intersect with other social issues such as class, caste, ethnicity and religion. Since Northeast India is a region with diverse ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups, the study takes into consideration the complexities of the region and the different ways in which gender roles and stereotypes are constructed and reinforced. The study applies Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) as a theoretical framework to explain gender inequality and women's suppression in Northeast Indian societies.

Keywords: Gender, patriarchy, masculinity and discourse.

1.1 Introduction

Gender study refers to an identity that is socially and culturally constructed by our society based on certain myths and narratives about men and women, their capabilities, sphere of involvement, role, and code of conduct. Gender study sees patriarchy as a social, political and cultural institution which is responsible for women suppression in the society. Most of the classic discourse sees women as a deformed man and there is always a discourse of something that is lacking for women equal status in the society. Gender study always questions, what the root causes of the gender inequality are, and how the biological difference is converted into social discrimination against women in society. Gender study

always believes that patriarchy as a social and political institution causing suppression of women in the society. Sometimes, suppression against women is not necessarily perpetrated by men alone but is also women who are collaborators, where women themselves accept their own victimhood.

The dominant idea of gender inequality and Northeast India societies is a kind of misinterpretation. There are several myths about lives of the women in Northeast India. People from outside of the region make general comments that women in northeast India enjoy high and freedoms and also cited being made about matrilineal system. However, this is not the reality. The myths about matrilineal system which operates in Meghalaya (A state in the Northeast India) is as system, where youngest daughter in the Khasi family (called Kadu) considered to be someone who own the property but the truth is she only a custodian. Most of the time, the actual decision regarding this property happens through the intervention of maternal uncle. Also, in matrilineal system of society lineage after mothers name does not make empower of women. Therefore, myth about matrilineal structure of society being point of empowerment of women in Northeast India is actually a misnomer, and women experience patriarchy even within matrilineal in a very subtle manner.

1.1.2 Objectives of the study

The primary objectives of this study are

- To examine origin of root cause behind the gender inequality and its role in Northeast India societies.
- To provide an in-depth analytic explanation of how patriarchal structure of society institutionalized women suppression in Northeast India societies.
- The study explores the socio-political status of women in Assam and how gender ideology affected the values and social relationships in their day to day life.

1.1.3 Expected contribution of the study

The study will be useful in gaining a better understanding of gender based violence in Northeast India with special reference to Assam. The study will have a broader scope for Indian policymakers to understand the root cause of women suppress in Northeast India. Further, the study will also have broader scope in academic research to explore and extend the debate on gender and society in Northeast India in the upcoming days.

1.2 Gender and Society in Northeast India with special reference to Women in Assam

Gender and society in Northeast India is a complex topic that requires a nuanced understanding of the region's history, culture and social dynamics. Assam, one of the seven

states in Northeast India, is home to a diverse population comprising different ethnic and linguistic communities. Women in Assam have had a unique history, marked by social, cultural and political struggles, and have played a significant role in shaping the region's identity. One of the critical factors that have shaped gender relations in the Northeast India is the region's matrilineal system of inheritance. While the system has been largely replaced by the patrilineal system prevalent in the rest of India, it has left an indelible mark on the region's social fabric.

The erosion of the matrilineal system has also led to the marginalization of women in many areas, particularly in the domains of education and employment. Another factor that has influenced gender relations in Assam is the region's colonial history. The British colonial administration introduced new laws and institutions that transformed traditional social structures and brought women into the public sphere. However, these changes were not uniform, and different communities responded differently to them. For example, among the Ahom community, women continued to enjoy a high degree of autonomy even during the colonial period, while among the Muslim communities, women's mobility and visibility in public spaces were curtailed.

The post-independence period has been marked by a renewed focus on gender equality and women's empowerment. The Indian Constitution guarantees equal rights to men and women, and the government has implemented various programs and policies to promote gender equality. However, the reality on the ground is often different, with women facing discrimination and violence in various forms. For example, women in Assam have been the victims of ethnic conflicts and insurgency, with rape and sexual violence being used as weapons of war.

Despite these challenges, women in Assam have played a vital role in shaping the region's identity and development. Women's organizations, such as the Assam Mahila Samata Society and the All Assam Women's Federation, have been at the forefront of various social and political movements, advocating for women's rights and challenging gender-based discrimination. Women in Assam have also excelled in various fields, including literature, music, and sports, and have contributed significantly to the region's cultural heritage.

1.3 Root Cause behind Gender Inequality and Its Role in Northeast India Societies

Gender inequality is a pervasive issue in many societies around the world, including Northeast India. The root cause of this inequality can be traced back to a variety of historical, cultural, social, economic, and political factors. Here are some of the key factors that contribute to gender inequality in Northeast India:

1.3.1 Patriarchal traditions and customs:

One of the main factors contributing to gender inequality in Northeast India is the patriarchal traditions and customs that have been prevalent in the region for centuries. These traditions, which prioritize male dominance and control over women, have led to the marginalization of women and their exclusion from positions of power and decision-making. For example, in several communities in Northeast India, women are not allowed to inherit property or participate in the decision-making process within the family. This reinforces their subordinate position in society and limits their agency.

According to a study by the North Eastern Social Research Centre (NESRC), traditional patriarchal norms and practices have a profound impact on gender relations in Northeast India. The study found that in many communities, gender-based discrimination is not seen as a problem, but rather as a natural aspect of life. Moreover, many men view women's roles as limited to domestic work and child-rearing, thereby limiting their access to education, employment and political representation (NESRC, 2014).

1.3.2 Lack of access to education

Another factor contributing to gender inequality in Northeast India is the lack of access to education, particularly for girls and women. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), the literacy rate among women in Northeast India is lower than the national average (58% compared to 66%). This can be attributed to a number of factors, including poverty, early marriage, and cultural norms that prioritize boys' education

1.3.3 Violence against women

Violence against women is a significant problem in Northeast India. Women are often subjected to domestic violence, sexual harassment and other forms of abuse, which further reinforces gender inequality and restricts women's mobility and access to education and employment. To address gender inequality in Northeast India, it is essential to address these root causes. This could involve measures such as promoting women's education, addressing poverty and economic inequality, challenging patriarchal traditions and cultural norms, and implementing policies and programs that support women's rights and empowerment. Additionally, it is crucial to engage men in the fight against gender inequality and promote gender-sensitive attitudes and behaviors across all segments of society.

1.3.4 Political representation

Women's political representation is low in Northeast India comparatively other part of the country, and they often face significant barriers to political participation. The lack of political representation hinders women's ability to advocate for their rights and contributes to gender inequality in the region. Women's political representation is low in Northeast India,

compared to some other regions in India. While women in Northeast India have made some progress in politics, there are still significant challenges that limit their participation and representation.

According to a report by the National Commission for Women, the percentage of women in elected offices in Northeast India is lower than the national average. In some states, such as Arunachal Pradesh, the percentage of women in elected offices is as low as 3%. Some of the factors that contribute to the low political representation of women in Northeast India include patriarchal attitudes, limited access to education, societal norms, limited opportunities, and violence and intimidation. Women who do participate in politics in the region also face significant obstacles, such as a lack of support from political parties and a dearth of female role models in politics. Despite these challenges, women's groups and activists in Northeast India continue to advocate for greater political representation for women. There have been some positive developments in recent years.

1.4 How Gender Ideology Affected the Values and Social Relationships in Assam

Women in Assam have been traditionally enjoying a degree of autonomy and decision-making power that is rare in other parts of India, their status has also been influenced by gender ideology that affects values and social relationships in their day-to-day life. The impact of colonialism on the status of women in Assam has been mixed. On the one hand, colonial institutions brought women into the public sphere, and the introduction of new laws and institutions transformed traditional social structures. On the other hand, the colonial period also saw the imposition of patriarchal values and norms on local communities, which led to the marginalization of women in some areas. Post-independence, the Indian government has implemented various programs and policies to promote gender equality. However, the reality on the ground is often different, with women facing discrimination and violence in various forms. For example, women in Assam have been the victims of ethnic conflicts and insurgency, with rape and sexual violence being used as weapons of war.

Gender ideology has also affected the values and social relationships in the day-to-day life of women in Assam. Traditional gender roles and expectations have been challenged by the rise of feminist movements and the influence of modern education and media. Women have increasingly entered the public sphere and have taken on roles that were traditionally reserved for men. However, gender-based discrimination and violence remain prevalent, and women still face obstacles in accessing education, employment and political power.

1.5 Conclusion

Gender and society in Northeast India have been shaped by complex historical, cultural and political factors. Despite significant progress in recent decades, gender inequality remains a

pervasive issue in the region, with women often facing discrimination, marginalization and violence. One of the most important factors contributing to gender inequality in Northeast India is the persistence of patriarchal attitudes and norms. These norms are deeply ingrained in traditional cultures and have been reinforced by social, economic and political structures. At the same time, there have been numerous efforts to challenge gender inequality and promote gender equality in Northeast India. These efforts have been led by activists, civil society organizations, and government agencies and have focused on a range of issues, including education, employment, health and political representation. Despite the challenges, there is reason for hope. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the need to address gender inequality in Northeast India, and many individuals and organizations are working hard to create a more equitable society. While progress may be slow, there is no doubt that change is possible, and that by working together, we can create a future where gender equality is a reality for all.

1.6 References

Baruah, A. (2015). Women's Movement in Assam: A Study of the All Assam Women's Federation. *Journal of South Asian Women Studies*, 17(2), 32-51.

Bhattacharjee, D. (2014). Violence against Women in Assam: A Feminist Perspective. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 21(1), 67-84.

Dutta, S. (2016). Gender Inequality in Northeast India: A Critical Review. *Indian Journal of Human Development*, 10(2), 273-290.

Goswami, D & Thapa L.B (2017). *Women in Northeast India: Tradition, Change and Challenges*. Sage Publications

Goswami, M. (2017). Women and Politics in Assam. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 52(10), 50-57.

Mahanta, Bidisha & Gogoi, Pranami (2020). Gender and Society in North-East India: A Review of Literature. *Sociological Bulletin*, Vol. 69, No. 1, January-April 2020.

Medhi, S. (2019). Women and the Matrilineal System of Inheritance in Assam. *Journal of Northeast Indian Cultures*, 10(1), 17-24

Mitra, Smita & Clark, Fiona C (ed) (2016). *Gender and Governance in Northeast India: Narratives of Development and Conflict*. Routledge.