

GENDER, FEMINISM AND INDIAN WOMEN WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ASSAM -AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

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Abstract: Gender, feminism and Status of Indian women specially women of Assam are a matter of great debate. So, on the issue of gender discrimination, feminist movements started in order to defend all types of socio-economic and political rights of Indian women. To know about the gender status of Indian women, we are to go back to history of India from pre-historic period to post independent period till date. So, attempts have been made to focus on the position of Indian women in a historical perspective keeping in mind the position of Assamese women. During the pre-historic period, it is very difficult to find out the status of Indian women as family concept was absent during that time. During the early part of ancient Indian history under different ruling dynasties, status of women were found contradictory-sometimes found respectable position and sometimes found derogatory position both in north-east and south India. During Medieval period of Indian history (1206-1757), the socio-economic and political status of women was not sufficiently good in spite of having their contribution in various fields. During the modern period (1757-1947), status of women has been developing no doubt, but they had to suffer for some social evils. So, social reformers tried their level best to eradicate those social evils for the emancipation of women. During the course of freedom movement, large number of Indian women actively participated in the movement against the colonial British government and sacrificed their lives for the cause of nation that resulted the attainment of independence in 1947. In the post independence period, position of women drastically changed due to the initiatives taken by UNO, Human Rights Commission, Indian Constitution and the conscious general masses. Equal rights to both the sexes were guaranteed by the Indian constitution. It is also evident from the fact that only constitutional facilities granted by government to women cannot establish gender equality and reduce the sufferings of them. Even in present day society, women have been suffering for frequent violence, child marriage, dowry etc. So, this paper aimed to ameliorate the general conditions of Indian women through the establishment of gender equality highlighting their contribution as well as problems in various segments. Finally gender discrimination can only be averted through goodwill and public awareness through acquiring proper education.

Key Words: acts, consciousness, education, equality, feminism, freedom, gender, reformers, status, women, social evils

1. INTRODUCTION:

Gender is a social construct through which the social and cultural roles of males and females are defined. Gender refers to either of the two major forms of individuals distinguished as male or female, based on their sense. It is a social stratification. The Gender Study is becoming an invincible part of history to defend the rights of women in all aspects of life through feminist movement started mostly in European world. Feminism refers to the principle of equality and equal rights to both men and women. However, inspite of having biological differences between male and female, mother's role in the human civilization cannot be denied. However, it is right to say that mother is the backbone of every society in the world civilization. But concept of gender discrimination is also rampant in our society that created problems all around centering the status of women .It is also evident from the fact that the position of women as well as mother was not discriminatory from the inception of human civilization. This view was accepted by prominent scholars like Prof. Frischlew and Metin Jazo. But from the anatomical point of view, mothers are weak in most cases in comparison to men. So, anatomists viewed that women should remain under the guidance of men for the physical weakness of women. Accordingly, The Holy Quran says, 'Men are the in- charge of women". At the same time, it is also said that zannat (Peace in Heaven) of children is under the feet of parents as stated in Islam. Some significant sayings, "Of all good things in the earth, nothing is preferable to a good wife", "One mother is better than hundreds fathers", (Upanishads) etc. proved superior position of women in our society. Gandhiji said, "If you educate the man, you educate the person but if you educate the women, you educate the whole family." But practically due honour and respect is not provided to women by our present society in spite of having various initiatives undertaken by Indian Government as well as by various organizations in this direction. So, in order to regenerate our forthcoming

generation, due regard should be provided to women. Because, in absence of any sex-either father or mother, nobody can visit this world. So, gender discrimination should be eradicated for the betterment of Indian society.

1.1. Objective of the study: The study aimed at:

- i.to find out the position of Indian women from pre-historic period till date,
- ii.to trace out the role played by Indian women in various segments,
- iii. .to find out the role of Assamese women in various segments along with Indian women and
- iv.to find out the sufferings of the Indian women in various ages and the policy formulated for the emancipation of them.

3. METHODOLOGY:

In preparing this paper, information collected from websites, respondent of society and secondary sources like books, journals, news papers are exploited and explained in analytical method.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW:

- Tripathi, Rama Shankar, History of Ancient India, Delhi, 1992 deals with political, social aspects of Ancient India but gender related matters are not elaborated.
- Baruah, S L, A Comprehensive History of Assam, New Delhi, 2007 deals with the total History of Assam where we find fragmented discussion on this topic.
- Chand, Tara, History of Freedom Movement in India, vol-II, New Delhi, 2005 deals with the freedom movement and scanty discussions are made regarding women participation in the freedom movement in India but this topic was not elaborated.
- Dutta, K N, Landmarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam, Guwahati, 1993 do not highlight gender issues in detail of Assam.
- Hajira Kumar, Status of Muslim Women in India, New Delhi, 2002 deals with the contribution of women in Mediaeval India. But this topic is not elaborated.
- Raj Hans, History of Modern India, Delhi, 1987 deals with various aspects of Modern India but my topic is not explained except little discussion on the emancipation of women under the initiatives of 18th century social reformers of India.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS:

5.1. HISTORICAL REVIEW:

History of India and the gender status of Indian women can be historically understood only through the periodisation of Indian history. Indian History can be periodised as follows: Pre-History from earliest times to Indus Valley Civilization, Ancient period from Indus Valley Civilization to 1206, Medieval period (1206-1757): i) Sultanate period (1206-1526) ii) Mughal period (1526-1757), Modern Period (1757-1947), Post Independence period from 1947 to till date. Similarly position of Assamese women also can be traced out through the periodisation of Assam History into Ancient (Earliest times to 1228), Medieval Assam (1228-1826), Modern Assam (1826-1947) and post Modern period (1947 to till date). If we critically go through it, we can trace out the gender discrimination, feminism and the status of Indian women in the socio-economic and political fields.

5.2. PRE-HISTORIC PERIOD:

During the pre-historic period, specially during Paleolithic, Neolithic, Mesolithic and Chalcolithic ages, it is very difficult to find out the position of Indian women of hunter gathering society. So; Angel expressed the absence of family in the barbaric period. Sociologist Marx said about the existence of both matriarchal and patriarchal family. Mother was the supreme authority in matriarchal and slave in the patriarchal family. E.O. Wilson wrote, "In hunter gathering societies men hunt, women stay at home. This strong bias persists in most agricultural and industrial societies and on that ground alone appears to have a genetic origin." In Bashista Dharmasutra, it is stated –women are being represented as fickle, quarrelsome and untruthful, must remain under the control of men all throughout her life. But in real sense, women are symbol of prosperity, better half, friend, philosopher and guide of her husband. She is, therefore, worthy of all attention and respect.

The status of women was dynamic both in north and south India during the early part of ancient history which is evident from the following facts. Prof. Basham and R.C. Majumder highlighted the respectable position of women in Vedic and Upanishad period. Because, women were worshipped as Goddess Kali which is even today prevalent in our society. In the early Vedic period, position of women was high due to their educational advancement. They were free from Sati, purdah system. Upanishad declared, "Hundred teachers are equal to one father; one mother is greater than thousand fathers". But in later Vedic period, women were opposed to study Vedas and Sastras in some cases and some

Vedic literature mentioned the degraded position of them. So, it is correct to say that women could not enjoy equal rights with men during the early part of Indian history.

During Maurya period, women were treated as a source of luxury for the practice of some social evils like sati, polygamy dowry, prostitution etc. But during the Satavahana and Gupta rule, women enjoyed special rights in politics and society as stated by Manu. They were free from purdah no doubt, but sati, polygamy, prostitutions were practiced and patronized. Women also enjoyed freedom in education, administration and got complete liberty in selecting their husband in Rajput society in spite of the prevalence of female infanticide. According to Alberuni, “Women were all educated and took active part in public life.”

5.3. MEDIEVAL PERIOD:

In Medieval Indian society, status of women was not sufficiently good. But some prominent ladies like Razia Sultana, Nurjahan steered the wheel of administration of Slave dynasty and of Mughal dynasty respectively. It is also found that some prominent ladies like Rani Durgawati, Mira Bai, Rani Karmavati etc played a significant role as warrior and ruler during the medieval period. Critic said that women were backward in education during the Muslim rule in India. But practically they never considered themselves backward in the field of education. Because; they were educated by the verses of the Holy Quran. So, from the religious point of view, their position was considered to be good. Some prominent literary figures like Gulbadan Begum, Salima Sultana, Zebun Nissa, Hamida Banu Begum, Mumtaz etc also contributed much in the field of learning and literature and glorified the Mughal India.. On the other hand, some social evils prevalent in both Muslim and Hindu society that degraded the status of women during the medieval period. For example, purdah, polygamy, divorce in Muslim society and sati, prostitution etc on Hindu women made them slaves to men. So, Neera Desai said, “Ideologically women were considered a completely inferior species, inferior to the male, having no significance, no personality; socially she was kept in a state of utter subjugation, denied any right, suppressed and oppressed, she was branded as basically lacking the ethical fibre.” Contribution of Assamese women for the regeneration of our society during medieval period is also remarkable. Because, Sati Sadhani, Sati Joymati, wife of Gadadhar Singha of Assam showed their talent in establishing a peaceful kingdom through sacrificing their lives. Not only had this, Henguli, a Barahi wife of Sukapha insisted on her husband to foster unity among various ethnic tribes of Assam. Mula Gabhuru herself sacrificed her life in 16th century. We also find the name of three Ahom lady namely Bar Raja Phuleswari, Ambica, Sarbeswari who successfully ran the Ahom administration.

5.5. MODERN PERIOD:

In the early part of British rule, dignity and position of women was miserable. They had to suffer by some obnoxious practices like sati, infanticide, child marriage, polygamy, purdah, female infanticide etc. Social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy; Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan undertook measures for the emancipation of Indian women in 18th and 19th century. Raja Ram Mohan Roy succeeded in abolishing sati in 1829 during Lord William Bentinck. They advocated widow marriage, women education for the upliftment of women and for establishing gender equality in Indian society. British government compelled to pass the Widow Re Marriage Act in 1856 declaring widow marriage as lawful. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Justice Ranade, D K Kharve etc advocated in favour of widow remarriage that resulted the enactment of this act. Accordingly widow remarriage was legalized in 1860 under the initiatives of Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. D K Kharve himself set glaring example who married a widow and opened a Hindu Widow's Home at Poona. A section of Assamese intellectuals influenced by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar supported widow remarriage considering the feelings of women. Gunaviram Baruah himself married a widow and her daughter was married after her husband's death.

Moreover, female infanticide was also declared a crime through the enactment of Female Infanticide Prevention Act in 1870. Not only this, in 1795 infanticide was declared to be a murder by Bengal Regulation XXI. The Civil Marriage Act of 1872 not only abolished early marriage and polygamy but also sanctioned widow and inter caste marriage for those who did not belong to any recognized religion. It is to be noted here that due to the efforts of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Act of 1860 was passed raising the age of consent for married and unmarried girls to ten. In 1891 Age of Consent Act was passed by which no girl was allowed to marry below the age of 12. However, it was only in 1929 that a legal step was taken to strike a blow at the harmful custom of child marriage. Accordingly, The Child Marriage Restraint Act passed in that year in 1929 which raised the marriage age for girls to 14 and for boys to 18. Some prominent women scholar and writers tried their level best by their scholarly writings for women empowerment through the opening of schools for girls and organizing some women associations during 19th and early part of 20th century. The glaring example of it was the role played by Pandita Ramabai, Rokeya Shekhawat Hossain for the upliftment and empowerment of women in Indian society. We also find the reference of opening total 13 no of Balika Vidyalayas in Assam from 1870 to 1873 for the promotion of female education. In this respect, credit goes to Ganga Gobind Barua who started first Balika Vidyalaya in 1870. The position of Devadasis (temple prostitutes) in our society was degraded and thereby Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi and some other social reformers undertook strenuous agitation for the cause of Devadasis. Accordingly an act was passed in 1925 which extended to them (Devadasis)

sections of the penal code which made traffic in minors a criminal offence .So, it is seen that Indian women have been victimized by such social evils .So, feminist movements started in our country to protect all types of rights for women as European countries.

The education policy of the colonial British Government ruined the backbone of Indian women. Of course attempts were made by British government through Woods Despatch of 1854, Hunter Commission of 1881, Lord Curzon's University Act, 1904 to upgrade the female education in India and educational institutions were set up in this dimension for them but failed to satisfy the Indian women. Whatever attempts were made for female education through setting up of educational institutions in various parts of the country, that was not up to the level of satisfaction as girls were not allowed to get admission in Universities till 1875 and even the course curriculum was only to make them as house wife. So, in order to provide facility of higher education to Indian women, some higher educational institutions were set up in India. Mention may be made of 'Indian Women's University' (1916) established by D K Karve, 'Shrimati Nathubai Damodar Thackersey Women's University' (1916) .In this dimension, it is also seen that Muslim women remained backward in education during colonial period. So, initiatives were taken by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan to improve the condition of education among the Indian Muslims including women. Maulavi Siraj Ali also tried his level best to upgrade the position of Muslim women. He wanted to give them respectable position in the family and strongly stood for monogamy that failed to improve their lot. Nazir Ahmed writes that to educate a boy is to educate a single individual, but to educate a girl is to educate an entire family. But unfortunately Muslim women could not materialize and got proper education for some specific reasons during colonial period.

The status of Indian women can also be visualized from their active participation in the freedom struggle in India. If we look into the period from 1857 to 1947, we see that the Indian women played a significant role not only in fighting against the British but their writings and moral support for the cause of nation is really praiseworthy. Women in large numbers participated in most of the movements of the country and also joined legislatures constituted under the Govt. of India Act, 1919 and 1935 and proved their Competency. For instance, Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, Begum Hazrat Mahal, ruler of Awadh valiantly fought against the British during Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. Moreover, large number of prominent women sacrificed their lives through their active participation in the movement. Sarojini Naidu, Nightingale of India, started her participation in the freedom movement right from the partition of Bengal in 1905. Through her organizing capacity, she became the first Indian lady president of Indian National Congress in 1925. We also find the participation of prominent lady like Mithuben, Bhaktben, Maniben in the Bardoli Satyagrah started by Sardar Patel in 1928. Annie Besant fought against the British and started Home Rule Movement (1916) in collaboration with B G Tilak to attain swaraj. Not only this, Annie Besant also formed Women's Indian Association in 1917. Annie Besant said, "Freedom is the birth right of every nation." Annie Besant also became the first lady president of Indian National Congress in 1917. We also observe Matri Divas on 22 February in memory of Bharat Mata Kasturba Gandhi who valiantly joined Quit India movement of 1942 and became the victim of imprisonment and died of heart attack in 1944 for the cause of mother land. To redress the grievances, large number of women organizations were formed in various stages. Mention may be made of Bharat Mahila Sabha (1905), Bharat Stree Mandal (1910) founded by Sarala Devi Choudharini, Naga Mother's Association etc. At all, we find a host of women organizations and women activists and politicians indifferent phases of independent movement of our country. Amongst them, mention may be made of Bidyutprabha Debi, Hemanta Kumari Debi, Girija Debi, Dharmada Sundari Debi who joined the Non Co-operation Movement in Assam which was started after the formation of First Provincial Congress Committee of Assam in 1921. Moreover, Chandraprava Saikiani, Kanaklata Baruah, Puspallata Das, Hemaprava Das, Bhogeswari Phukanani, Kamala Miri, Matangini Hazra, Aruna Asaf Ali (Grand Old Lady), Tara Rani, Sucheta Kripalini, Lakshmi Sehgal, Rani Gaidinlieu, Irbat Singh etc joined in the Non Cooperation Movement (1920-22), Civil Disobedient Movement (1930-32), Quit India Movement (1942) and sacrificed their lives for the cause of our nation. The glaring example was Malati Mem of Lalmati Tea Estate, Darrang who became the first martyr of Assam. Consequently we attained independence in 1947. .Gandhi said; "I am uncompromising in the matter of women's rights. I should treat the daughters and sons on a footing of perfect equality".

5.6. POST INDEPENDENT PERIOD:

After the attainment of independence, concept of gender ideology, feminism deeply rooted in the minds of a group of enlightened people who tried their level best to enhance the position of Indian women. So, in the post independence period, position of women drastically changed due to the initiatives taken by of UNO, Human Rights Commission, Indian Constitution and the conscious general masses. Equal rights to both the sexes were guaranteed by the Indian constitution. The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 permitted dissolution of marriage. The Hindu Seclusion Act of 1955 enabled the daughters to inherit property. Accordingly we got Indira Gandhi as the first lady Prime Minister, Pratiba Patil as the first lady president of independent India. Moreover, contribution of Kiran Bedi, Kalpana Chawla, Sania Mirza, Sunita Williams, and Mrs. Anowara Timur, first lady Chief Minister of Assam, folk singer Pratima Pandey Barua and many other literary figures of our country etc for the cause of our nation is mention worthy. But only constitutional facilities granted by government to women cannot reduce the sufferings of them. Even in present

day society, women have been suffering for frequent violence, child marriage, dowry etc. So, Puspallata Das, a prominent woman of Assam inspires the womenfolk to reawaken their spirit to fight against terrorism and violation of Human Rights. Accordingly, the National Commission for Women (1992), National Policy on Education (1986), National Perspective Plan (1990), National Plan for Action for Women were set up to uplift the dignity of womenfolk. The object of the commission is to secure Fundamental Rights (Art14, 15, 16) with respect to women and to give effect to the Directive Principle of State Policy (Art-38, 39, 42) of our constitution to improve the status and dignity of women, to suggest remedial measures against practices derogatory to women, to effectively monitor and implement laws affecting women and to advise government and all matters related to the improvement of the status of women in the society. But the problems of domestic violence, sexual harassment in workplace, rape etc. had been becoming the centre of discussion in our day today life. It is known to all that in 1997, the Supreme Court laid down guidelines for the protection of women against sexual harassment in workplace and educational institutions. Moreover, in 2006, a law was passed providing respite to women facing domestic violence. Such type of gender issues can be minimized through proper education, alleviation of poverty and provide employment opportunity in our society. It is to be noted here that female education tremendously developed during the post colonial period in comparison to the colonial period. It is known to all that right from Woods Dispatch of 1854; attempts had been taken for the improvement of female education under British rule. In this case, credit goes to missionary societies in developing female education. If we refer this matter in Assam, it is observed that there were only 44 primary girls schools sprang up in 1880-81. At present we have large number of lady IAS, IPS Officers in our country along with large number of lady academicians, politicians, social activists in our society. It is to be noted that Jyotsna Chanda (1904-1973), daughter of Mahesh Chandra Dutta and wife of Arun Kumar Chanda, made significant contribution as the MLA and MP from the soil of Cachar, Assam during 1952 to 1971. Moreover, sacrifice of Kamala Bhattacharjee, a 14 year old girl of Cachar for Bengali language is remarkable in the language movement of 1961. But gender discrimination is even today rampant in our country. So; these problems have been taking by the feminist as a great issue. So, feminist Anthropologist Simon de Beacevoir remarked, 'a woman is not born but made'. In case of property rights, both the Hindu and Muslim women are not getting reasonable share of paternal property in spite of having Hindu Women Succession Act, Muslim Personal Law, and Waqf Board. Traditional systems have been enforcing in allocating paternal property among the Indian women that created a sort of silent dissatisfaction among the married women in our society. Subsequently gender study, gender historiography and feminism have been becoming a vital concern today. Of course, some initiatives were taken through the setting up of Mahilla Adalat, Panchayat level campaign and some NGO for the promotion of socio-economic and legal status of women. Even today, our central and state governments have been undertaking measures for the protection of Indian women.

6. CONCLUSION:

It is observed that the gender history and feminist movements in India for the emancipation of Indian women is a significant study in the history of our country. Through the ages, women had been playing dual role-first as mother and second as a responsible citizen but the condition of Indian women is not to the expectation that led to the study of Gender History. Of course, recent studies shows that mothers community have been advancing rapidly in all aspects of life through engaging themselves in various higher executive posts acquiring education. But the question of security and safety of women in our society is a vital issue. Subsequently to ameliorate the condition of mothers' community, a lot of initiatives had been taken from various angles especially from government and non-governmental sides. But all these initiatives of the government and other institutions cannot protect the rights of women completely if the common people of our society are not conscious. So, it is right to say that respect to mother is the respect to our motherland. We hope if we think from the moral point of view through toleration, mutual understanding, adjustment among ourselves without creating class distinction, then it would reduce the sufferings of women and peaceful society will be established in India. So, in order to safeguard the interest of Indian women, ethically we should come forward for the betterment of Indian women that must restore the cultural identity of our country. So, to attain all these, proper education must be acquired in any form. It is to be noted that gender equality, feminism in Indian society is a modern concept to safeguard the interest Indian women.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: Thankfully acknowledge those authors, media persons, respondents of our society as well as the web pages whose writings are consulted in preparing the paper.

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