

ROLE OF EDUCATION IN RESPECT OF EMPOWERMENT OF ASSAMESE WOMEN

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Abstract

Education is the primary tool in respect of the empowerment of women. Since last few decades, women empowerment has become a burning issue in many parts of the world, in cladding Assam. Education is an important tool for women if they are to make striding progress in society. Without investing in women's education, a society cannot think of development since a woman is considered to be the other half of a society. In 19th and 20th centuries, the state of women education was in a pitiable condition. However, some Assamese language magazines viz. 'Arunodoi', 'Mou', 'Assam Bondhu', 'Jonaki' and 'Ghar- Jeuti' have played a vital role in respect of women education as well as their empowerment. The term 'women empowerment' has become popular after the emergent of these Assamese magazines which tried to strengthen women's resolution towards attaining education. Thus, education is the fundamental right of everyone, including women, and to educate a woman means to educate a nation.

Keywords: Education, women education, British missionaries, women empowerment, Assamese magazine.

1. Introduction

Women are, undoubtedly, the better half of a society. Without the active participation of women, welfare of a society is a far-fetched dream. In every society, the role of women is of vital importance. If a woman is progressive in her deeds and action, it will lead to the wellbeing of a family. Hence, women's education has a significant role to play from the grassroots level itself. In the 19th century, women's education was nearly non-existent in Assam. At around that time, the Christian Missionaries had come to Assam to preach and propagate Christianity amongst the deprived and downtrodden people of Assam. While spreading Christianity, they had also established schools and gradually women education gained momentum.

2. Objectives of the study:

The main objectives of the study are-

1. To study about the empowerment of women and role of education.
2. To study about the need of women education for equal development of society.
3. To study about the Assamese magazines of 19th-20th centuries viz. *Arunodoi, Assam-Bondhu, Mou, Jonaki, Ghar-Jeuti* etc. in the given context.

3. Scope and Method of the study

While preparing the proposed research paper, the following aspects has been taken into consideration: role of women in the educational reforms in 19th century Assam, the influence of contemporary women's magazines and the subject of women's education in Assam in the present times. Analytical and narrative methods have been adopted as a method of study.

4) Source of data collection

In preparing this research paper, both the primary and secondary data collection methods have been

5. Discussion

1.1 Need of women's education and its role in women's empowerment:

Education not only gives knowledge but also shows the way forward in everyday life. To guide the lives of people, education is required. This educational pursuit is not only limited to textbooks, but one can learn from different fields and genres. It is worth mentioning that half of the world's population is women. Women need to be educated as much as men in this regard because women play an important role in the smooth functioning of the house-hold activities even when they are engaged in outdoor works. Additionally, women are also expected to raise and nurture their children.

The first school for a child is his/her home and the first teacher is his/her mother. In such case, the role of a mother in the overall development of a child is significant because today's child is future's responsible citizen. As Jawaharlal Nehru said, 'Teaching a man means teaching a family.'

Women also need education to excel at their workplace. Earlier, women's education meant only staying within the four walls of the house and somehow getting a bare minimum education. Looking at the society of the 19th-20th century, numerous examples of this are noticed. But today, people have become more aware about the importance of education. The civil society in Assam does not want women to be inside the four walls of the house. Women are now mentally and physically strong enough to employ themselves in all workplaces as men. As a result, many women were seen going out of Assam to pursue higher education or jobs in different parts of the world. Now, parents are all aware of this. The revelations and discoveries of science and technology have changed the minds of people as they can communicate in difficult and remote places as well. The media has also played a special role in this regard. Women need to acquire knowledge that can help them to achieve employable skills and consequently, they can take the society forward.

1.2 Women education in 19th and 20th centuries and present time:

Looking at the history of women's education in Assam, the 19th century is an important phase because this is the time when the societal changes in Assam had begun. The British regime, especially with the arrival of the American Baptist Missionaries, had established schools and those British-educated indigenous people played a vital role in transforming the society. The new governance practices including those of educational and economic system, transformed the social life of Assam, which was full of medieval ideologies. Only those engaged in traditional education, scholarships, gradually out through old meditations in the hope of becoming employed and professional and financially transparent.

In the Middle Ages, there were no educational institutions for women's education in Assam. The education imparted in Tul, Satra, Buddhist Bihar, Muktab etc., were only meant for boys. Only the boys belonging to the upper caste were given access to attend such educational privileges. There was no concern or provisions made for women education. Women were considered to be fit for domestic chores and to live within the four walls of the house. They never dared to question the *status quo*. From the mid 19th century onwards, the reformists of western society gradually helped to transform the Assamese women's society. During this period, due credit must be given to the British administration and education system, the efforts of the American Baptist Missionary and the support of some liberal neo-educated people who helped the women in Assam to look beyond social meditation and towards the outside world. Nevertheless, at that time, most of the women of Assam were neglected by the society and were victims of various social and evil practices. Women's first and foremost task in patriarchal society was to convince male members of the household, raise children and solve various household chores. Regressive practices such as lack of education, polygamy, child discrimination, domestic violence etc. in the society hindered women's progress.

Modern education was introduced in Assam only after it was taken over by the British East India Company. It was a capitalistic exigency to introduce English education in Assam due to the establishment of British-owned factories and companies. Measures were taken to set up eleven schools in Assam in 1926. These schools taught in the Sanskrit language. Thus modern education was introduced in Assam under the patronage of the British, although this education was only able to create English-speaking clerks, sahibs etc. meeting the requirements of the Britishers. There was no spread of real knowledge so to speak.

In the context of Assam, women education was introduced by the Christian Missionaries. The problem of education was highlighted by the Missionaries who entered Assam at various places to propagate Christianity in the state. They went from door to door preaching about the need of education for women. The missionaries set up residential schools to facilitate women to read and also provided accommodation. It is worth mentioning that the Missionaries had to gather girls from Assam with utmost skill and difficulty. Most of the girls were either orphans or belonged to impoverished families. The missionaries, whose main aim was to educate the womenfolk of Assam, did not find the environment conducive enough to teach at that time. So, the magazine "Arunodai" was chosen as a medium to bring awareness for women's education.

"Arunodai" was the first Assamese language newspaper and magazine published from Assam in 1846. From the writings of this magazine, we can learn about women's education and the assisting role played by the missionary schools in the 19th century. Before coming to school in the morning, girls completed their necessary works like cooking, washing clothes, spinning yarn, etc. Women were taught to be self-reliant from education and perform revenue generating activities such as wool work, sewing work etc. The missionaries paved the way for early education by imparting textbook education, practical knowledge to Assamese women through the establishment of residential schools.

"Arunodai" also reveals the attitude of the people of Assam towards women's education from the writings of the countryman, when Christian missionaries played a leading role in the education of Assamese women. Gunabhiram Baruah sent a letter to "Arunodai" in May 1853, under the little 'Asom Deshor Likhokolor Proti Nibedon Patra'. In this letter he stated that both boys and girls should acquire knowledge, and there is a provision in the scriptures. But in India, women are discouraged from reading religious texts. Baruah also conveyed the letter to those parents who had shown eagerness towards their child's education. Hemchandra Baruah was another such progressive individual who advocated for female education. Many of the articles in 'Arunodai' express Baruah's passion towards women's education. In May 1861, Baruah's article titled "Stree Hikhya" published anonymously reveals his relentless commitment towards women's education for the betterment of the country.

Some women also supported the cause of women's education as much as men. In January 1867, B. Devi in her article titled "*Bharjyo Swamir Kortobyo Karam*" (Arunodai, January, 1867) had expressed her concern about men's education and to teach children properly. She mentioned that educating a woman is more important than educating a man. Similarly, Pa Devi in her article titled "*Strihokolor Kortobyo Karma*" (Arunodai, October, 1867) advocates proper education for women by expressing how lack of education leads to a narrow mindset. Women's education in contemporary Assam can also be learnt from the pages of magazines like 'Assam bandhu', 'Mou', 'Jonaki' etc. published next to Arunodai. The 'Assam Bandhu' magazine, edited by Raibahadur Gunabhiram Baruah has a variety of articles dealing with female education. Ra Mahanta under the title 'Swadhinota Ne swessachar' considers students who are not going to school to be the best than those who are educated. He also urged educated youth to remove women's education from the minds. Similarly, the satire, 'Sadananda's samachar', 'Sadananda's New Dictionary' etc. is found to be a satirical lore about female education. He satires that female education means learning to write letters, concentrating on novels and drama, weaving, cooking, forgetting household chores, lacking energy in the body. Another magazine of 19th century, 'Mou' reflects various pictures of education in Assam. According to 'Mou', the women's workplace is home. So the western education acquired by men is not suitable for women.

One of the notable 19th century magazine that has a significant impact on the national development of Assam is "Jonaki" which is of the opinion that caste can be improved if mother tongue is used as a medium to teach. In the field of women's education, 'Jonaki' reiterated the need for textbook education as well as the skills required to run the domestic life smoothly.

Later, in the 20th century, people's mindset towards women education began to change. Both men and women began to take a stand for women education during this period. One of the major women's magazines focusing on women education of the 20th century was '*Ghar Jeuti*'. '*Ghar Jeuti*' the first women's magazine in Assam that made several efforts to improve the plight of women. The magazine provided a platform to many talented women to make their mark in society. The magazine published the achievements of various women in diverse fields.

The education scenario has changed for the better in 21st century as compared to the 19th and 20th century. Today, most women are living an independent life pursuing higher education in India and abroad. In

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this regard, the government has also played a positive role in executing grant making schemes, loan assistance, free education etc.

Conclusion

This research article titled “Role of education in respect of empowerment of Assamese women” emphasises on the need for education for the all round development of women. The article asserts, citing the names of female-centric magazines, that it is only through education that women are able to educate her family as well as the larger society. Only an educated and empowered woman can live her life according to her own terms. A study of the history of women education in Assam shows that Assamese women started learning from the time of the arrival of Christian missionaries in Assam. Women need education to be on equal footing with men and to pass on this awareness to their children. In any case, with the passage of time, people’s thinking began to change as women were able to come out of the restrictive environment and attain education and get employed, much like men. So, women education plays an important role in their empowerment and everyone should be vocal about granting women their basic Right to it.

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