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Empowering rural women through education: A study on the rural areas of Dhubri district (Assam)

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Abstract

Education is a landmark of women empowerment because it not only enables them to response to the challenges but also to take decisions of their life. Education of women is the most powerful means of change of position in society. Education also brings equality and improves the status of women in the family and society. As education is the major tool of empowerment but the condition of education for women in the rural areas is very alarming in Assam in general and in Dhubri district in particular. A vast majority of population especially women are far away from their basic constitutional and human right, right to education. The growth of women's education in rural areas is very slow in the entire Dhubri district. The topic of women empowerment would become meaning less if we left out the question of education in rural areas. There is a huge gap in the literacy rate between the urban areas and the rural areas of Dhubri district. In the present day context this subject requires an extensive study and is needed to be highlighted. Following are the objectives of my study-

- 1. To study the importance of education for the women of rural areas for their empowerment.*
- 2. To study the condition of women education in the rural areas of the district of Dhubri.*

Key words: women empowerment, rural women, Dhubri district.

“If you are planning one year ahead, plant rice, if you are planning ten years ahead, plant trees, if you are planning a hundred years ahead, educate the people”.

An old Chinese proverb

The concept of empowerment has various dimensions and scope. But the question of women empowerment has a common objective. Empowerment allows individuals to reach their full potential to improve their political and social participation and to believe in their own capabilities. Empowerment enables the person to gain insight and have awareness of what is undesirable and unfavourable about her current situation, perceive a better situation, the possibilities of attaining it and realising what is within her reach and what she could do to get to a better situation.¹ We can infer from the commitment made by the governments of the world for the women empowerment on the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995 where Governments committed themselves to the “empowerment and advancement of women, including the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief, thus contributing to the moral, ethical, spiritual and intellectual needs of women and men, individually or in community with others and thereby guaranteeing them the possibility of realizing their full potential in society and shaping their lives in accordance with their own aspirations.”² In simpler term empowerment of women may be women's abilities to take control over their lives, their perceptions about their own value and capabilities, their competence to determine a goal and work towards this goal.

Generally when we talk on the tools for empowerment, there may be various tools for the empowerment especially of women empowerment. But the uses of education as a tool always remain on the top. There is an integrated and inseparable relationship between education and empowerment. Education is a fundamental human right and significant aspect for empowerment, particularly for women and girls the economic, political and personal empowerment that education provides capability to make improved choices for themselves and their families. The Millennium Development Goals of the UN Millennium Declaration 2000 recognize education as development that creates choices and opportunities for people, reduces the twin burden of poverty and diseases and gives

people a stronger voice in society. Education certainly is a means to all-round progress of man. In other words, the pathway to human-development goes through the lanes of education. Moreover, true education is the sole basis of achieving one's purpose in life. Education is one of the most important means of empowering women with knowledge, skills and self confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process.³The education of women and girls has a tremendous impact not only on their own development, but also on their families and communities. It also has a catalytic effect on every dimension of development and poverty alleviation.⁴

The framers of the constitution of our nation felt the need of the empowerment of the women folk. They realized well that leaving half of the population of the nation no development is possible. The constitution of India made significant provisions for the equal rights of the women in all the aspects including educational, social, economic etc. in Indian constitution education is in the concurrent list. The Fundamental rights are the most significant in ensuring equality irrespective of caste, religion, sex or place of birth. Articles 14, 15, 15(3), 16, 39(a), 39(b) and 42 are very prominent. Several articles exclusively mentions about the education. Article 41 of the constitution provides that, 'All the citizens have equal right to education'. Article 45 made provisions for free and compulsory education for children. The state shall provide free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years of age. Further Article 46 mentions, special care to the promotion of education and economic interest of the SC, ST's and the weaker sections of the society. More over, the 86th Amendment Act, 2002, inserted Article 21-A in the constitution of India to provide free and compulsory education of all the children in the age group of 6 to 14 as a fundamental right.

Education for rural women has a special need, as women from rural areas and those belonging to deprived sectors of the society are far from the light of education. There is a crucial need for education among women of rural areas and the backward sections of the society as they are unable to get benefits of various schemes of the government due to lack of education. There is need for educating rural women so that feeling of self confidence can be generated among them.⁵ About 70% of the poor live in rural areas. Despite the fact education is a basic right in itself and an essential pre-requisite conditions of rural people.⁶ The Beijing Declaration and platform for Action adopted in 1995 at the Fourth world conference on women, focused on improving the situation of rural women through equal access to productive resources, especially land, capital, technology as well as to gain full employment, decision making, education and health services. The platform for action emphasized the need for successful strategies to empower women living in rural areas.⁷In equalities in education and skill acquisition can explain the fact that women benefit less than men from economic opportunities as well as the trend towards the increase of women among the poorest in the population.⁸

India is a nation of villages, about two third of the total population lives in the rural areas. But the educational conditions in the rural areas still in a very bad shape after more than sixty years of our independence except some states which have achieved tremendous success in the field of the education of the women in the rural areas. Assam remains at the bottom level in the long list of the states in India. However, in the long list of the districts of Assam, district of Dhubri remains at the ebb in imparting education of the women especially in the rural areas. The district of Dhubri is situated in the extreme western corner of Assam having inter-state and an international boarder. This district is located on the globe between 89.42 to 90.12 degree east longitude and 26.22 to 25.28 degree north latitude. This river Brahmaputra flows through the district as a major river with number of its tributaries. The total area of Dhubri district is 2838 sq. km. It has four urban areas viz, Dhubri (district head quarter), Bilasipara, South Salmara and Mankachar which covers an area of only 27.24 sq. km. This district since independent is suffering from abject poverty, underdevelopment, illiteracy, high population growth rate, mean age at marriage, highest infant and child mortality, lowest female literacy etc. when we talk on education and literacy this district always remain on the bottom. A vast section, about half of its population are totally illiterate. The scenario of women education in this district is in a very serious condition, especially in the rural areas of this district.

As per the census report of 2011 the average literacy rate of Dhubri district is 59.36% in which male literacy rate is 64.20% and the female is 54.26%. But in the average literacy rate in Assam is 73.18 among them Male literacy is 78.81 and female literacy rate is 67.27.⁹ But if we look on the differences in case of literacy rate in the urban areas and rural areas of Dhubri district we can bring out a different picture. As per the census report 2011, 89.55% people lives in the rural areas and only 10.35 people lives in the urban or semi urban areas. However, the average literacy rate in the urban

areas is 82.28% in which Males and females are 87.07% and 77.30% respectively. The literacy rate in the rural areas of Dhubri district is 55.25% and gender wise male and female literacy stood at 60.02% and 50.21 percent respectively.¹⁰ The women in the rural areas are deprived from their basic constitutional and fundamental right, which is right to education.

Among the rural areas the educational condition especially in the *char* areas of this district are in a severe state. Char or the sand bars are the common phenomenon in the lower course of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries. The plight of the women of char areas in Dhubri district remains pathetic. Education is still a distant dream for the most of the women folk here. Literacy rate in char areas is ten percent, among which women's share is about nil. Women in these areas are seen as nothing but more an instruments of child birth and as domestic chattels.¹¹ It has been unreservedly believed that, when a girl or a woman is not educated, along with her, the entire family and the society has to bear the adverse consequences. They have the high level of fertility and also the mortality rate. These lines are truly proved in Dhubri district, which has the highest level of population growth rate with a figure of 24.44 which is much higher than the state average growth 17.07 percent. Both women and men are totally ignorant of birth control and contraception facilities. As a result population of the char areas increasing at an alarming rate.¹² On the other hand *talak* (divorce) system has been plaguing the lives of women. The women are unable to voice their protest against these malpractices. Dowry deaths and *talaks* continue to occur in the char areas in Dhubri.¹³

The consequences of the illiteracy of a vast section of this district are clearly visible. Though these deprived women section of the rural areas can contribute immensely for the economic, social and other developmental works. The main obstacle in front of these women's progress is their deprivation from education. Poverty may be as one of the reason but not the absolute. There are number of reasons for the vast illiteracy among the women of rural areas in Dhubri district. The non-availability of the schools with in the reach areas effected badly. The girls have to go several miles to reach schools. Parents generally do not want to send their daughters to the far flung villages of other villages. The parents also have a general apathy towards girl child education. Jahan uddin (45) of sadhur char of Bilasipara subdivision told that girls should learn and do the house hold work and help their parents in the agricultural works. Also they don't need the general education (formal education), they should only able to read the holy Quran. Zainab Begum (14) of Guailer char, of Bilasipara subdivision told that they are not allowed to step outside their homes before marriage. Further, the flood and erosion especially in river rine areas affected a lot in education. Moreover, unlike the urban areas there is no availability of the private initiatives in the rural areas.

There may be different hazards for the education of the women of the rural population of the Dhubri district but it must be remembered that these are cure able. A more focused attention must be given from the authority to educate the poor women section in the rural areas. As education is in the concurrent list it is the duty of both the central and the state government to take care of it. Otherwise, if this worse educational scenario continues its results may be very dangerous. Government should establish more schools in the remote rural areas which is reachable by the girl. Along with the formal education, distance learning can be boon for women of rural areas. The special characteristic of distance education is that it is endowed with high flexibility and can meet the demands of education, which the conventional education system is unable to meet. Further distance education takes education to places and people hitherto unreached, transcending social, economic and geographical equality and thereby opens a new vista in our striving towards breaking the barriers of opportunity and equity.¹⁴

All weather affordable schools especially during the time of summer will be a boon for the girl students in the remote rural areas of this district. At the time of flood these people become cut-off from the educational system, which not only make an adverse impact on their examinations but also their further study. Many among them leave schools for ever due to this gap in their study. The floating schools on the boats may be a one way short term solutions to fill up this gap.

Conclusion: The women empowerment at the present context is the vital topic among the academicians and scholars but we need to include all section of the society irrespective of urban or rural. Unless we bring this vast section of rural women towards the main stream of empowerment, the term in itself loose its relevance. And these lines are most important for one of the most backward district of Assam with an immediate effect. As we all the citizen of India it is the duty of the state to uplift its citizens irrespective of religion, region or language. Effective initiatives can bring provide a

new way towards the women section residing in the rural areas of this district. Finally, the lines of our first prime minister are aptly appropriate.

“If you educate a man you educate an individual, however, if you educate a woman you educate a whole family. Women empowered means mother India empowered”. Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru

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