

Social Status of the Nepalese Women in Assam: A Descriptive Analysis

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ABSTRACT :

Traditionally, the Nepali society is a patriarchal society in which women are generally dominated by men. As such, it is widely believed that production activities are mainly carried out by men and those of the house hold are performed by women. Domestic violence against women is a widespread phenomenon in the less educated Nepalese society in Assam. More specifically, rural Nepali women of Assam are ignored and treated like an animal having no voice or treated as silent voice. The reality is that thousands of such victimized women remain unheard of by the society. In this paper, an extrapolating attempt has been made to discuss descriptively the socio-cultural status of these women in their society.

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1. INTRODUCTION:

Gender issue is an important factor in studying the social status of women in any community or in a nation. Educational attainment, increasing labour participation and decision making role of women in both individual and societal level certainly enhanced the status of women in their respective societies. In this study it has been supposed to scratch the underlying actual social status of Nepalese women in Assam.

Human Rights of any nation universally advocate the free born and gender equity in dignity and all rights that an individual is entitled to access freely and safely. But, Nepalese society is the fastest growing racial group in Assam, being the social fabric of Assamese community. It defines a distinct role for men and women since its conception in this part of the nation. According to Subedi [2010] men in the society are considered as the 'Protector', 'Provider' and hold at a superior position within the 'domestic mode of production' and control the distribution of resources and goods in the family.

Domestic violence against women is a widespread phenomenon in the less educated Nepalese society in Assam. More specifically, rural Nepali women of Assam are ignored and treated like just an animal to provide the service for the owner (husband) having no voice or treated as silent voice. Frankly speaking, girls are dominated by father, mother or brother in their own home before marriage and she often faced marital violence by her husband or other in-laws. Simply women in Nepali society are being dominated or deprived since birth to death and stories of thousands of such victimize women usually remain unheard.

Background of the Nepalese in Assam

Social scientists have long attributed the Nepalese settled in Assam to ancient times. There were matrimonial and cultural relationship between Assam and Nepal from the time of King Harsabardhan and Biswa Singha the founder of Koch dynasty. According to Upadhyaya [2002], "Ratikanta Upadhyaya" the first "satradhikar" in Nepali 'satra', Teok of Jorhat District, was of Nepali origin, which reveals that the religious settlement of Nepalese in Assam began since the era of "Sankardeva". Also a group of social scientists has attributed Nepalese settled in Northeast India since 1820s with a migratory nature, either in search of economic opportunities or grazing lands for cattle crucial for their primary business of Milk Production [Nath 2005]. Recruitment of Gorkha soldiers to the British Indian Army after the treaty of Sugauli (1816) between British India and Nepal

was one of the important causes of Nepalese settlement in Northeast India or in Assam. According to this treaty, Nepal had to transfer some of its bordering areas like Darjeeling, Sikkim, Shimla, Nainital etc. to the British India and therefore Nepalese residing in these areas become automatically the subjects of the British India and now India.

Nepalese in Assam is mainly Hindu society and a very little part believes in Buddhism. According to Devi [2007], the growth of the Nepalese in Assam is deeply embedded in the history of the region but showed a marked growth in the 20th century, actively encouraged by the British who sought an increased revenue collection through the settlement of the region. Now these people have an important impact on the population dynamics, socio-cultural and economic foundation of the state as Nepali is the 5th largest language group in Assam sharing 2.30 percent contribution (according to census 2001) to the total population with relatively assimilating nature with custom and culture of this part of the nation.

Socio-cultural status of Nepali women

Marriage is early and universal, and it is viewed as disgrace for a Nepali couple, particularly for the wife, not to have any children. High fertility is desired because by producing children, preferably sons, a woman raises her status in the family. The practice of “purdha” seclusion of women and sexual purity for newly married women among relatively high castes Nepalese is highly valued. The social myth also indicates that women are basically inferior to and their labour, efforts, social right, role in decision making are less valuable than men. A strong son preference for socio-economic and religious reasons such as economic gain and old age security has been uniform in almost all the Nepalese. This contributes as a factor of population growth. These results in the decline of economic condition of a family and thus female children are deprived of adequate facilities of education, food and freedom. Ministry of Women and Child Development, Govt. of India, in their eleventh five year plan for Girl Child (2007-2012) mention girl’s nutritional intake is inferior in quality and quantity while boys have access to more nutritious food. As a result, 56 percent girls of the age group 15-19 years suffer from anemia. Gender inequality thus begins at home, a mother usually prefers a son to a daughter because sons can be especially important for women’s old-age security [Cain 1993]. This is one of the important issues of declining women status of Nepalese society.

Health and Reproductive status of Nepali women

Health status of women is one of the most important factors affecting the socio-economic development of a community. Nepali women particularly in rural and remote areas are disempowered resulting from patriarchal, social and cultural prejudices and civil and political unjust that legitimize and maintain unequal power relation between men and women in all private and public sphere [UNESCAP: 2000; Gandhi: 2004]. Nepalese women in rural Assam are deprived of basic health services even today. A number of Nepali women give birth to a child while working in the household or pain of delivery starts while she is working in the Agricultural field. Even today, a huge number of Nepali girls are to live at the store room or cattle-shed during menstrual cycles and at first menstrual cycle they are to stay in a dark unmanned place outside the household where there is none of brotherhood relationship. Due to lack of knowledge of contraceptives used rights regarding reproductive behaviour, they have been giving birth to a number of children against their wish. Also, if a woman is unable to give birth to a child then she has to face inexplicable torture from her husband or in-laws even if the problem may be of the husband.

Most people refuse to believe that Nepali women can also be educated and can have their own thinking. In Indian metropolitan attitude they are universally considered to be ‘easily available’ for their wild sexual behaviour and even sometimes they have been forced to sex work. It is a very disturbing fact that about 60 percent of sex workers in Mumbai and Kolkata are Nepalese out of which at least 25 percent of two lakh Nepali speaking girls in Red-light areas of India are of Indian origin (Indian Nepalese), most of these are from Northeast India including Darjeeling and Sikkim.

Educational Status of Nepali Women

Attainment of Women education, which is an indicator of social status, is very poor among the Nepali community. The study of Devi [2000] of Gangmouthan Gaon panchayat of Sonitpur district of Assam reveals the poor educational attainment of these women. She estimates 78 percent Nepali women are literate as against 91 percent of Assamese women in the panchayat. Also she estimates 92 percent Nepali male are literate as compared to 89 percent of Assamese male. Among all the panchayat of Assam, Nepalese literacy rate is highest in the Gangmouthan Gaon Panchayat. Even then, full literacy rate has not been achieved in the panchayat which shows the deplorable state of affairs in terms of literacy in other parts of the state. On the basis of the study of Nira Devi [2000], we estimated the literacy ratio of Nepali women to their men for the Gangmouthan Gaon panchayat as 0.85, when this ratio approaches unity it is supposed to be equity in the literacy.

Economic Status of Nepali Women

Women's economic dependency has long been understood to be a major factor in structuring inequalities between men and women. Thus, control over financial resources of a woman enhances her household position. The work participation rate among the women of the study community is very poor. Majority of the women worker are practiced agricultural and cattle rearing which do not upgrade their status in the society. The history of Nepali women participation in economic activities outside the household in Assam is not quite old. It started in early third decade of 20th century among the intellectual and educated Nepali families with participation in primary teaching and local economic activities like cutting, knitting etc.

The study of Nira Devi [2000] in the Nepali inhabitant gaon panchayat in Sonitpur district of Assam reveals that only 14 percent women are workers. From this study we have calculated the women economic dependency ratio as

$$\frac{\text{Number of non workers women}}{\text{Total women}} = 0.86$$

When this ratio approaches to zero we will have full women employment. Thus the women economic dependency among the community in the study panchayat established how poor economic attainment of these women is.

Political Status of Nepali Women

Political participation of a woman is important along with economic and social dimension [Acharya and Ghimire 2005] of women empowerment and removing inequalities between men and women. Increasing women's presence in political process and influencing power structure regarding economic and decision making will be effective voice to women empowerment and increase their social status. But in the Nepalese, rarely we see participation of a woman in direct politics in territory level. Poor political participation among Nepali women reveals that still they are dominated in their families and community.

Property Right of Nepali Women

Due to patriarchal and patrilineal system, women in Nepali community are denied access to and control over familial property. This socialframe work maintains discrimination till today in Nepalese though there is an act of women's property right in India.

Key Issues Facing Nepali Women in Assam

- Poor education for rural Nepali women in Assam.
- The disparity in educational facilities and nutritional intake between men (boys) and women (girls).
- Patriarchal society results domestic violence.

- Often gender based violence occurred.
- Barriers in direct political participation of women.
- No social reform to include women in the decision making process.
- Restricted women's mobility.
- Gender issues are the only problems of women not of the society.
- Inadequate access of health care.
- Lack of reproductive knowledge and right.
- No social norms on familial property right to women for inherent economic growth.

3. DISCUSSION:

This paper reveals that women are the most neglected and deprived in the Nepali society in Assam. Lack of educational achievement, less economic and political participation, poor decision making ability in both individual and societal level and insufficient knowledge of rights and health services among women are to be blamed for their inferior status to men in their own society. Family laws in Nepalese put severe limitations on women's rights, based on the patriarchal system which defines men as having the right to control women. Women's mobility restricted, marginalized and denied their fundamental rights of education and reproduction. Domestic violence is a continuing problem in Nepali society as most of the domestic violence do not come to light due to men dominating ideologies and the fear of breaking up the family relations on the part of a women.

4. CONCLUSION:

Lack of educational achievement, less economic and political participation, poor decision making ability in both individual and societal level and insufficient knowledge of rights and health services among women are to be blamed for their inferior status then men in their own society. But improvements in educational and economic conditions and steady rise in political participation in recent years among the Nepalese in Assam have made notable changes in the discriminatory ideology and son biased attitude which stands for the equal development irrespective of gender and caste.

Though our government provides free elementary education which is an effective tool to empower men and women and creating more economic opportunities still the gap between men and women is persisting. Therefore social scientists need to help government to adopt careful interventions for the education of girl as well as boys.

Gender gap is not women's issue only, it is a societal issue and hence all the members of the society should be careful on it. Now-a-days, these issues have become critical elements of development, therefore, a link between gender and human resource development has become indispensable.

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