

# Women Education in India

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**Abstract:** This paper shows the historical background of women education in Assam. Education plays a pivotal role in the development of a society. It helps us understand better the world. It empowers us to respond the challenges, to face their traditional role and change their life. Education was not easily accessible for women in Assam in olden days. Due to inadequacy of schools, especially girl's schools, it was not possible for women to acquire education and women were deprived of it. It was Baptist Missionaries who took initiatives first and established the first Girl's School in Sadia. This paved the way of women education in Assam. Later on, some Assamese Nobles and scholars also engaged themselves in establishing girl's schools. Now a days government has shown great concern on women's education. There are several policies made so that women can receive good education without any difficulty.

**Keyword:** Women Education, Primary, Secondary, Higher, Development.

## Introduction

Education is an essential agent of social change and development in any society. To think of a harmonious development of society without educating women is impossible. Moreover, it can be rightly said that to educate a woman is to educate a whole family. For, the development of future generation primarily depends upon the education of women section. Hence, education of women is realized to be the most essential part for the development of the society. Considering the importance of women education in the larger framework of development of the nation, Governments in India have introduced multiple schemes and policies to accommodate women in its policies for inclusive development. Seminars on women awareness are also held regularly. This paper is an attempt to understand the development of women education in the context of Assam.

## Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- To study the historical background of women's education in Assam. Especially in the post- independence era

- To reflect on the government policies taken to disseminate education among women in Assam.

## Methodology

The method of study is purely descriptive in nature. The study is based on primary and secondary data. Primary sources include archival records, magazines, periodicals, unpublished and published documents and the data collected by administering questionnaires and conducting interviews with people associated with academia. Important journal entries and publications are also accessed with historical perspective.

## Importance of Women Education

Women are the indispensable part of a society. Their education influence the coming generation .The development of future generation mainly depends upon the education of women section. So the education of women is realized to be the most essential part for the development of the society<sup>1</sup>. It can help every woman to educate their children to be good manager of the family as well as the active member of the society. The children learn their manners and behaviour at home and mostly mothers are responsible for cultivating good behaviour in their children .Every educated woman can run her house well and make it a paradise on earth . In a democratic system, the position of women is equal to that of men<sup>2</sup>. According to Jawaharlal Nehru "If you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate an entire family". Educated women play an important part in the social, political and economic environment in a country. The internal development of a nation depends on the development of women education<sup>3</sup>. They act as a harbinger of education from one society to another. Hence, the development of a nation is directly proportional to the number of educated women. Napoleon Bonaparte once said, "Give me an educated mother, I shall promise you the birth of a civilized, educated nation."

## Beginning of Women Education in India

The history of women education can be traced back to Ancient India. There was equal representation of women in all the fields and took an active part in every sphere of human life in the Vedic period. Women were highly responsible and carried out the responsibility of whole family on their shoulders. They were allowed to attend assemblies and social gatherings as well. Women were educated and acquired a respectable position in the society. Like sons, daughters also attended *Gurukula* and indulged in Vedic studies. The curriculum of study included religious texts, branches of culture and philosophy. Many women became Vedic scholars. Among them, Suryasavitri, Urvashi, Indrani, Shradha are prominent. Intellectuals such as Gargi, Maitreyi composed hymns. Some women even remained unmarried for a lifelong pursuit of knowledge and were known as *Brahmanavadinis*<sup>4</sup>.

With the spread of Buddhism in India, education became available to all and this led to the establishment of quality educational institutions. Students from all over the world converged in India to study at the universities of Nalanda, Takshashila and Vikramshila. These universities arose from Buddhist monasteries. The admission of women in the Buddhist order led to female education. A large number of women had joined the Buddhist order of nuns and became lifelong students of Buddhist religion and philosophy. Several women of the period, such as Shila, Bhattarika, Prabhudevi and Vijayanka practiced literature<sup>5</sup>. Even though the perusal of sacred literature was denied, they read and memorized popular epics. Educated women were also appointed as teachers. There was no seclusion of women and they could move about freely in the society.

Unfortunately, the position of women began to deteriorate from the Later Vedic period. Women were restricted to the relative freedom which they enjoyed in the Vedic period. The revival of Sati, prohibition of widow marriage, child marriages and great prevalence of polygamy made women's status in the society inferior to men. This period is described as one of the progressive deterioration in the status of women and education of women disappeared almost completely due to the social changes. In the Mediaeval period, position of women had undergone radical changes. They were now more confined to their homes with the introduction of Purdah system; a legacy of the Muslim conquests. Even though, the social environment was not suitable for education of women, Muslim rulers encouraged education of women. Separate chambers were kept in Fatehpur Sikri for Girl's School by Akbar. Women belonging to royal families were educated privately in their homes. Sultana Raziya, Gulbadan Begum, Nurjahan were among them.

In the development of women's education in India, the contribution of Christian Missionaries were of utmost importance. Apart from regular schools, women missionaries had established Zanana School for women at home. The system of sending missionary women into *Zananas* where women were confined to or denied access to education started gaining popularity during the mid-nineteenth century. The establishment of Bethune School further helped raise the standard of women's education in India. After Bethune passed away, Lord Dalhousie supported the school with full vigour<sup>6</sup>. The First Education Commission of India was established in 1822 with Sir William Hunter as the chairman. This Commission had highlighted the importance of women education and recommended that the private girl's schools should be provided liberal grants and a separate inspectorate for the guidance of women education. The commission also stressed on the availability of normal schools for women.

The first commission on education in Independent India was the Radhakrishnan Commission of 1948 under the Chairmanship of Dr. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan. Highlighting the importance of women education, Dr. Radhakrishnan said, "Women are human beings and have as much right to full development as men have. The position of women in any society is a true index of its cultural and spiritual level<sup>7</sup>." The commission recommended that the scope of women education should be increased and they should be provided facilities, women should be respected and they should be included in different educational

activities. It further recommended that the curriculum should be the same for both boys and girls. Apart from this, National Committee for Women Education (1958), Durgabai Deshmukh Committee (1959), Hansa Mehta Committee (1962), and Kothari Commission (1964) forwarded their valuable recommendations for the development of women education in India<sup>8</sup>. National Policies on Education (1986) laid down a common scheme for women education stressing on education for women's equality and special focus on the education of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and minorities<sup>9</sup>.

### Development of Women Education in Assam

Development of women education in Assam is sluggish. Before independence the development of women education was an unthinkable reality. Existing mores of the society posed a hindrance in providing education to girls. They were rather supposed to be married off. Education of women was limited to some affluent families. The history of modern education in Assam starts from 19<sup>th</sup> century, after it became a British Colony. The British asserted importance of female education in addition to men. It is seen that by the mid of 19<sup>th</sup> century, some progressive men made efforts to spread female education in Assam. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Hemchandra Barua, Gunabhiram Barua were in favor of women education in Assam<sup>10</sup>. Anandaram Barua advocated for emancipation of women in Assam and educated his wife and daughter himself. He was also associated with Bethune society which popularized women education in Bengal. American Baptist missionaries were the pioneers of female education in Assam. Only after a few months of their arrival to the state, they set up their first school in Sadia, which had separate classes for both boys and girls<sup>11</sup>. Mrs. Brown also established a girl's school in Sadia in 1938. In 1939, Mrs. Kattar established another girl's school in Sadia. Although it had a relatively short life, this was a bold step for female education in Assam. The first high school in Assam was established in Dibrugarh in 1916. Panbazar Girl's High School in Guwahati was established in 1926. The first Assamese women to matriculate is Durgaprabha, who graduated from Bethune School in Kolkata<sup>12</sup>. It was a common trend among Women from affluent families to go to Kolkata to pursue education.

Cotton College, established in 1901 had no female student until 1929. Lady Keane College, the first women's college in Shillong was established in 1933. In 1939, Handique College in Guwahati was established with Rajabala Das as its founder and principal, a pioneer in the field of women's education in Assam. The patronage and philanthropy of Radha Kanta Handique were also largely responsible for giving shape to the institution of higher education for women.

### Primary Education

The history of modern primary education in Assam can be traced back to the annexation of Assam by the British with the treaty of Yandabo in 1826. David Scott, the first agent of the East India Company, tried to improve and develop the indigenous system of education soon after his arrival in 1826 in Assam. Scott got the sanction of the government of West

Bengal to set up primary school in Assam. David Scott started 11 schools to win over the confidence of Assamese people which were started in mostly in lower Assam. In 1938, Baptist Missionaries set up two schools in Sadia, of which one was a girl's school. The missionaries also played an important role for the development of women education in the hill areas. Welsh missionaries made efforts to develop women education in the Khasi and Jaintia hills. In 1889, there were 185 schools set up to provide education to women<sup>13</sup>. In the Post-Independence period, recommendations of Kothari Commission and National Policies On Education set up an ideal environment for education of women in Assam. The data regarding women education in pre-independence Assam is shown in the table below.

Year	School	No. of Female Students
1889	185	3,144
1946-47	1468	56,998

### Secondary Education

After the culmination of primary education, a need for secondary schools for women had arisen. In 1891, two secondary schools for women were established in Dhuburi and Dibrugarh. A secondary school for women was also established in Shillong. There was a gradual increase in secondary schools for women with the establishment of several schools in various parts of Assam.

In 1960-61, there were 150 secondary schools for women, which was increase to 212 in 1965-66. In 1980, the number of schools were further increased to 337.

Prior to 1910, there were no separate high schools for women. Girls attended the same schools as boys. After the establishment of separate schools for high and higher secondary levels, the number of female students had risen considerably. Figures regarding the number of high and higher secondary schools for women in the post independent period are shown below.

Year	No. of Schools
1951-52	36
1970-71	178
1990-91	251

## Higher Education

Up to 19<sup>th</sup> century, opportunity of education in Assam was limited to high schools only. Cotton College was established in 1901 in Guwahati owing to public demand for higher education. Cotton College became the premier institution for both boys and girls in Assam. In 1905, the Department of Education was created for all round development of education in Assam. It is to be noted that from the beginning of the twentieth century, the education of girls received great importance in India. In Assam, we find that St. Mary's college was the first girls' college started in Shillong in 1922. Lady Keane Girls College was also established in 1935. Jagannath Barooah College (1930) in Jorhat and Gurucharan College (1935) in Barak Valley were also established<sup>1</sup>. Since the opening of the twentieth century some progress has been made in the field of women education in the state. But the numbers of matriculates were very limited. Even though an increase in the enrolment of girls in schools and colleges were seen, the proportions of girls and boys in terms of enrolment ratios remained very wide before independence in Assam. Two sisters, Sudhalata Duara and Sukhalata Duara were the first women graduates in Assam. Sudhalata Duara did her M.A. from Calcutta University in 1923.

After independence government of Assam has taken various steps for the expansion of women's education. As a result the number of literate women is increasing in Assam year after year. Before independence, there were only three girls' colleges in the state. But, now the number has increased to more than twenty in the state. Since the establishment of the Guwahati University in 1948, a large number of girls have been pursuing post-graduate studies. The State Council for Women's Education was also formed to advise the government on the expansion of Women's education in Assam. In 1963, the State Council mentioned that due to the economic pressure in Assam, education of women was in longer a luxury but an imperative necessary in the rural areas. A Girls' polytechnic was also set up in Guwahati in 1964. A Women's University is established by Govt. of Assam in Jorhat in 2009<sup>2</sup>.

### A Statistical Analysis of Assam's Women of Higher Education

Women's education in Assam was flagged off from the premises of Lady Keane College in Shillong. After the establishment of Handique Girl's College in Guwahati in 1939, women education in Assam had attained a new vigour.

Amal Prabha Das was the first female student to be admitted at Cotton College in 1927. The first woman principal of Assam was Rajabala Das of Handique Girl's College. Hemprabha Dutta was the first Assamese woman to pass F.A from Bethune School in Kolkata. Sukhalata Duara and Sudhalata Duara were the first women graduates in Assam. Sudhalata completed her M.A from Calcutta University in 1923. Rajaniprabha Saikia and Tilottama Ray Chowdhary were the first Assamese MBBS. The first Assamese women to

earn PhD were Tilottama Gogoi and Kamala Ray. Parul Das was the first Assamese woman to join the Indian Administrative Services. Naliniprabha Devi was the first woman to receive the prestigious Padmashree award and the first female president of Asom Sahitya Sabha<sup>3</sup>.

### **Conclusion:**

Women education still remains as a social problem in Assam. This problem is deeply associated with social, economic and educational problems. Now a days, women have changed their attitudes to compete and adapt themselves to the modern world. The barriers of women education are lack of social awareness, poor and conservative mind set<sup>4</sup> as well as illiteracy. To solve the problems and promote women education widespread, the government, public and other organisations should take some effective initiatives. Government has made reservation for women in various sectors like in parliament, gram panchayats, etc. Government has also made various policies for women to facilitate them in receiving higher education and to ensure their position, rights and security in society.

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