

The “Women” of Nowhere: A Study of the Women Migrants of North East India

Srija Rakshit

Research Scholar, Department of History, University of North Bengal.

Abstract:

The women in general play a very important role in every community. The status of women in India differ in each region. In most parts of India women are considered as a weaker section of the society due to various reasons like gender differences, customs, traditions, attitudes and also due to patriarchal nature of the society. However, today in most parts of the country women are outshining, and enjoying equal rights as men and striving for the best. This paper seeks to bring in some of the frames of the women in Northeast India. The idea of Northeast is too contested, at the same time constitutes a very large area, to bring into the ambit of this paper. Therefore, what it attempts to do is to take a view from afar and see from a broader lens touching the status of women in north east India with respect to dignity, rights, education, roles in the family and society, opportunities, occupation, and violence. The regions selected for the study were Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Assam Meghalaya and Tripura. The age group was approximately 12 to 40 years of age. The methodology of this paper is descriptive and required information were collected from different secondary sources like books, research articles, different government documents, etc. The implications of the study is to bring awareness about the condition of women of north east borders. Both the positive and negative aspects that they live in are explained, which provides a more comprehensive and clearer picture about the overall status of women in the North East Indian regions.

Keywords: North East, Women, Border, India, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura, Nepal, Bhutan, China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Khasis, Garos, Jaintias, marginalised women.

INTRODUCTION:

Being the gateway to the Southeast Asian countries and having shared an international border with several countries, the Northeastern part of India, though holds the key to boost the country's trade & commerce, is no longer a stranger to disputes and complexities. Northeastern India is gradually attracting academia and intelligentsia in and outside the country for its prodigious ethnocultural and linguistic diversities. Before the British rule, the Northeast was a trading and migratory route between the Indian sub-continent and its neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia. Today, it also fulfils the objectives of the Act East Policy to develop relations between India and ASEAN countries.

Northeast India comprises the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura, Meghalaya, and Sikkim, bordering Nepal, Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and Bangladesh.

The Northeast region with 99 per cent of its boundary being international border, the problems and peculiarities are even more accentuated. The region consists of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur,

Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. The region is located between latitudes 290 and 220 North and longitudes about 89.46 and 97.5/ East. The region is covering an area of 262185 sq. km, which is nearly 8 per cent of the total geographical area of the country. The region has a population of 389.84 lakh that is 3.79 per cent of the total population of India. The region has a vast coverage of forest nearly 55 per cent of the total geographical area. The States of the region are surrounded by China, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Bhutan. In fact, the region has a long international border of (5182 km), which is more than 99 percent of its total geographical boundary. These States have international border with China (1395 km), Bhutan (455 km), Myanmar (1640 km), Bangladesh (1596 km) and Nepal (97 km). On the other hand the region is connected with the mainland India through a very narrow strip of land with the width of about 22 km called 'chicken neck'. The region is best known for its picturesque topography, cultural heritage, ethnic beauty and rich natural resources. The region has rich bio diversity, oil and natural gas, coal, limestone, hydro potential and forest wealth. Given the peculiar geo-political location, the region can develop cross-border markets, which are likely to be more cost effective for North East India's surplus production than the distant national markets. The region is famous for its exotic flora and fauna. It is ideally situated to produce spices, fruit & vegetables, flowers and herbs. Therefore, the North East India can emerge as an exporter of orchids, flowers, apple, orange, pineapples, spices, herbs, etc. to the South East Asian Region. The vast array of aromatic plants of the region can be used in aromatic industry for the manufacture of perfumes, incenses, etc. Rich bio-diversity, heritage sites & ethnic beauty can make it a destination for the tourists. Several big & small rivers flowing across this region are suitable to construct hydro projects to generate electricity. Moreover, owing to climatic advantage the region can also be a major producer and exporter of tea. In spite of resourcefulness the entire region is regarded as underdeveloped. The remoteness, difficult terrain, infrastructural bottlenecks and unfriendly neighbours are the serious impediments of the development of the region. Being a border area, the region is suffering from specific problems like illegal cross-border movements, law and order, security, insurgency, smuggling etc.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS:**

1. What are the regions that comprise North East India?
2. Which are the countries with which the states share their borders?
3. What are the conditions of the people living in these borders particularly of the women?
4. What are the means livelihood for the people of these region?
5. What are the difficulties faced by them for their subsistence?
6. How is the government of India taking care of its migrants?

7. What are the schemes implemented for the well being of the people of the north east border region and the women in particular?
8. What are the measures taken by the neighbouring countries in controlling migrant flow, trafficking and other illegal activities?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

1. To find a detailed analysis on the lives of the women of north east border region.
2. To find out their means of employment, any illegal activities if being done.
3. To talk about the people of North East India in general and women in particular.
4. The role of India in the growth of this region and actions taken to forbid illegal activities
5. The relation of the north eastern states with their neighbouring border countries.
6. The schemes taken by the government of India for the women of the north eastern border.
7. The schemes, if any, taken by the government of the neighbouring countries to stop flow of immigrants and prevent trafficking or any other explicit activity.
8. The future of the 'chicken-neck' of India.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Early Sunrise, Early Sunset: Tales of a Solo Woman Traveler Across North East and East India by Priyanka Rastogi is a fervent explorer backed with rich experience in travel and tourism Industry from the grassroots level. As an author of 'Early Sunrise, Early Sunset', Priyanka opens up three treasure boxes to you, the readers. The first box reveals the beauty of the rising North East India, the seven sisters along with states of Sikkim, West Bengal, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Bihar - inside and out. The first-hand experience of the author highlights the exquisiteness of these states that lies in the simplicity of people, tribal richness and biodiversity through her short yet rooted trips. The second treasure box facilitates the hidden jewels the people - in these states. From the drivers who took her to exotic places, to strangers in homestays, hotels and restaurants, it is the people, who made it possible and gifted her a wonderful experience as a solo woman traveller. The third treasure box defines a different perspective to the 'matrilineal society' of North East India. Priyanka, as a mother, an entrepreneur, has beautifully reflected her observations as a woman to explore many non-familiar places. The reflections in the form of this book are Indeed a maiden attempt from her entire family.

Women North East India- Issues and Challenges by BHANUPRABHA BRAHMA AND TEJASWITA DUARAAH is another insight on the lives of the women of north east. This book is the outcome of our research work on women in North-East India. As a researcher we had our particular areas, limited within the chosen topic. While on the field, as a researcher we would get the opportunity to learn about the conditions and status of women in North-east India through diverse manner. Hence, this book is the result of those stories which we could not incorporate in our thesis. Women constitute roughly one half of the population of our country. While, they were denied their basic human rights that made them marginalized to such an extent that most of them do not expect equality with men. The book 'Women of North East India: Issues and Challenges' is modelled keeping in mind that the northeast is generally considered better off than that of the nation as a whole in terms of gender equality. However gender inequality still exists in the region in spite of the predominance of the fact various ethnic groups do not believe in sex discrimination. The study reveals that women are relatively disempowered and enjoy somewhat lower status than that of

men in the region. Gender gap exists in terms of access to education, employment, health and public space too. This book that is based on North East India, attempts to throw a partial light on the diverse issues that impact gender relation and women's status in the region. Along with the conditions, struggles and position of women in North East India it also projects the vast potential of ideas for future researchers to explore academically. The book brings out a clear perception on the existing gender disparity in North East India and the impact it has on the status of women. The chapters of this book display a wide spectrum of issues that impact upon the gender relations and women's status in the region. The book is systematically arranged into eight chapters that highlight diverse issues like gender inequality to moral policing and witch-hunting. It also goes through a chronological order covering the undefined position of Karbi women also focussing on aspects like education, identity of women in neoliberal market. The book further highlights the recent issues like the marginalised citizenship through a gender lens and women's social security schemes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

History of North East India by Rajesh Verma says that North East is a collective term which is used for the eight States of India, namely, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. It has some very unique features such as dominance of Mongoloid race of people, tribal culture, 'Hot Spot of Biodiversity', and immense potential for hydro-electricity. Its proximity to countries like China, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Bangladesh has made it special from strategic point of view. Modern period in the history of North East begins with the foundation of British rule in Assam following the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26). After this most of the parts of the North East came under the British domination and the so called isolation of the North East came to an end. This book deals with the forces and factors of change which gave to the North East its present identity. The book starts with an introduction on the land and people and historiography of the North East. It further acquaints the readers with the Ahom rule in Assam and describes the factors that led to its downfall after a long period of rule extending over six centuries. The book covers a description on the coming of Europeans and the Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26) followed by the policy of annexation of North Eastern states. It further goes to examine the frontier policy followed by the British government in the North East. The book also presents a description on the freedom struggle which the Indian people and the people of North East started against the colonial rule. Finally, the book also deals with the events and progress of the North East since independence and gives a concluding remarks on recent social and economic development in the North East.

North-East India (Society, Culture and Development) by AMALENDU DE talks about the region which is now popularly known as 'North-East India' was primarily familiar as the land of seven sisters viz. Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh. Much later Sikkim was also added to this regional agglomeration which has a long history of politico-economic and socio-cultural formation of the land and its people. The scope of the present preface is primarily limited to a specific focus related to the contributions of seminar papers included in this volume. Therefore, I would not venture to go into its details, but mention that since the annexation of Assam in 1826 by the British colonizers the region and its people had gone through a number of historical turning points. Originally, Assam and its two substantial valleys i.e. Barak and Brahmaputra and the outlying hilly terrain along with two principalities i.e. Manipur and Tripura formed the geographical land mass of today's North- East India. Going through the various phases of political vicissitude Nagaland was carved out in 1963 as the first Hill State besides Assam. Subsequently, Manipur and Tripura, the hitherto known two princely states along with Meghalaya obtained their statehood in 1972. The declaration of hill states continued till the formation

of Mizoram in 1986 and Arunachal Pradesh in 1987. Sikkim was declared as State in 1975 and was added to the North- East Region only in 2002. Officially the North-East Region came into being since the inception of North-Eastern Council (NEC) in 1971. The North-East region is extremely important and unique in many senses of the term on account of its strategic geo-political existence having 25,500 sq. km area of which 4500 sq. km accounts for the international boundary with Tibet, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and China. The region presents about 200 tribal communities out of the country's total of 650 tribal communities. About 175 languages are recorded in the region out of 325 in the whole of the country. The North-East Region occupies about eight per cent of the total geographical area having five per cent of the total country's population. In this region four states i.e. Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh have a majority of tribal populations. One is struck between the two archetypal characteristics of the region. While a beautiful natural scenario with its immense bio-cultural diversities presents a cogent and optically attractive mosaic on the one hand, it has equally earned a notoriety of being branded as a region full of continuous political violence, trans-border arms trade and drug trafficking and so on on the other. The entire range of high human drama is being enacted here with a strong sense of ethnic identity and cultural autonomy. The papers included in the present volume were contributed by a group of very eminent scholars of North-East region as well as those who worked on this region. Very many social, economic, political and cultural issues have been covered by the individual scholars. This is the outcome of practically two seminars held at the Asiatic Society-one in April 29-30, 2003, and the other in March 25-26, 2004. As a host of these two deliberations, after a long interregnum, the Asiatic Society has practically picked up its thread of academic tradition with which it initiated research and publication on North-East India long back. A cursory glance on the list of publications of the Society's journal as well as occasional monographs would bring this point into relief for the readers. Due to certain constraints beyond our control the publication of this seminar volume unfortunately got delayed and in the process we have unfortunately lost our respected Editor of the Volume, Professor Amalendu De (Former President of the Asiatic Society) who passed away on 15th May, 2014 and could not see the publication himself. I take this opportunity to pay my humble tribute to the departed soul with an apologetic mind for this incidental delay in bringing out this very important publication.

EMERGING ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN NORTH-EAST INDIA by JESMINE AHMED, RITA SAIKIA, NIRANJAN MOHAPATRA highlights Present Up-and-coming Issues And Challenges Of Land-locked Region Of North-east India. The Book Includes All The Up To Date Issues Of North-east India With Special Reference To National Register Of Citizenship, Insurgency Movement, Ethnic Conflict, Strategic Significance Of North-east, Environmental Movement, Political Issues, Untouchability Issues, And The Rights Of Indigenous People Of This North-east Region. The Book Will Directly Benefit For All The Students And Research Scholars From The Academic Perspective. The Book Can Be Considered As A Text Book And A Reference Book For The Subjects Like Political Science, Public Administration And Contemporary Politics In North-East India. The Book Will Be Helpful To Understand The Various Issues Of North-east India In Context Of Present Existing Scenario Of This Region.

White as Milk and Rice: Stories of India's isolated tribes by Nidhi Dugar Kundalia talks about how he Maria girls from Bastar practise sex as an institution before marriage, but with rules-one may not sleep with a partner more than three times; the Hallaki women from the Konkan coast sing throughout the day-in forests, fields, the market and at protests; the Kanjars have plundered, looted and killed generation after

generation, and will show you how to roast a lizard when hungry. The original inhabitants of India, these Adivasis still live in forests and hills, with religious beliefs, traditions and rituals so far removed from the rest of the country that they represent an anthropological wealth of our heritage. This book weaves together prose, oral narratives and Adivasi history to tell the stories of six remarkable tribes of India—reckoning with radical changes over the last century—as they were pulled apart and thrown together in ways none of them fathomed.

Walking with the Comrades: Adventures In the Underground Forest by Arundhati Roy is another insight on the lives of the people of north eastern region. Deep in the forests, under the pretence of battling Maoist guerrillas, the Indian government is waging a vicious total war against its own citizens—a war undocumented by a weak domestic press and fostered by corporations eager to exploit the rare minerals buried in tribal lands. Arundhati Roy takes readers to the unseen front lines of this ongoing battle, chronicling her months spent living with the rebel guerrillas in the forests. In documenting their local struggles, Roy addresses the much larger question of whether global capitalism will tolerate any societies existing outside of its colossal control.

Beyond Counter-Insurgency: Breaking The Impasse in Northeast India by SANJIB BARUAH says how decades of armed conflicts in North-east India have militarized the region, restricted civil right, and impeded economic growth. Conveying a sense of the region’s rich and vibrant public discourse, this collection explores how democratic politics and the world of armed rebellions intersect in complex ways. A number of the contributors argue that only concerted efforts to establish the rule of law, a system of accountability, and faith in institutions of government can break the cycle of violence. This volume will be interest to all those interested in armed conflicts, the state of Indian democracy, civil liberties, and north-east India.

ANALYSIS OF THE STUDY:

The region’s history under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act reflects how women have suffered under the two patriarchies of rebel and state armed forces.² After the Act’s passage, state security personnel flooded into the region while migrants responded to the demand for labour to build roads and military infrastructure. This increased the number of males and exacerbated the already uneven gender ratio: the 2001 census reported 978 women per 1,000 men in Manipur, 975 in Meghalaya, 950 in Tripura, 938 in Mizoram, 932 in Assam, 909 in Nagaland and 901 in Arunachal Pradesh. This coincided with increased violence against women who were marginalised from public spaces, while state-sanctioned and inter-communal conflict further intensified their marginalisation. Human rights abuses against women considered members of alien groups became endemic: rape, torture, trafficking and the sex trade have all increased in recent years. Newspapers report that ‘the northeast has become a supply zone for trafficking women and children not only in the flesh trade, but for forced labour, child labour, organ transplantation, camel jockeys and others. Migration is considered one of the area’s greatest security threats, with rebel violence and terrorism routinely portrayed as external threats which justify AFSPA. Most migration-related media reports from Northeast India verge on the sensational, are anti-immigrant, and typically emphasise the need to protect native sons and daughters. The atmosphere is now so tense that both internal and external migrant workers are regularly attacked.



Infiltration is indeed among the threats that Northeast Indian women face; as the border is porous, it is easy for criminals to cross over, attack women (on either side) and then disappear back behind the border. While rape is common and is often blamed on people from across the border, the public rarely acknowledges that these incidents are part of a more general rise in violence against women, including kidnapping and marital rape. A related trend concerns Northeast matrilineal tribes such as the Khasis, Garos and Jaintias, where migration is being used to justify making these tribes patrilineal in order to change inheritance patterns. In 1997, the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council – which has constitutional jurisdiction over Khasi ‘customary law’ – passed the Khasi Social Custom of Lineage Bill. It sought to codify the traditional system of inheritance through the female line, but it drew protests led by the all-male organisation Syngkhong Rympei Thymai (SRT), which called for changes to the matrilineal system. SRT executive Teibor Khongee claimed: ‘We are just like refugees and the moment we get married we are at the mercy of our in-laws. We are reduced to bulls and baby-sitters with virtually no role in society.’ The SRT claim outsiders marry Khasi women for their property. ‘There is frustration among the Khasi youth’, reported Shillong school teacher Peter Lyngdoh, who had to move to his wife’s house after his marriage. ‘I think this should be changed. We have no land, no business and our generation ends with us. The Khasi Student Union (KSU) and the Naga Student Federation (NSF) have issued decrees prohibiting outsiders from marrying their women. The issues of migration/ infiltration are thus not just used by the government to justify AFSPA; they have become tools to justify empowering men at the expense of already marginalised women. Trafficking for the sex trade and for labour is also on the rise. India is one of seven Asian nations on the US watch list for human trafficking, and a transit country for prostitutes from Bangladesh, Myanmar and Nepal. Girls are practically imprisoned in the region’s brothels while children as young as nine are auctioned off for up to 60,000 rupees to buyers from as far as away as the Persian Gulf. ‘A sizeable proportion of prostitutes found in Kamathipura and Sonagachi, the infamous redlight districts of Mumbai and Kolkata, respectively, are of Nepalese origin. Of the 5,000-7,000 Nepalese girls trafficked into India each year, the average age over the past decade has fallen’ from between 14 and 16 years to between 10 and 14 years. AIDS adds to their misery. ‘Women and children who are trafficked are at high risk for infection with HIV, which is a death sentence for the victims.’⁷ Most newspaper reports portray AIDS as a disease from abroad: ‘prostitutes, who belong to the immigrant population, are the main carriers of the virus.’⁸ Wild stories proliferate: women from communities in conflict with the state are said to infect themselves in order to infect the armed forces, thus justifying the security measures allowed by AFSPA. Increased migration has thus become an occasion for men to reconfirm their control over resources. The plight of women in Northeast India demonstrates how in times

of crisis, women are victimised not merely by external power structures but also by those of their own communities.



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LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY:

When we analyzed the gender differentials in women's political participation in northeastern states, we found that elected women members in Legislative Assembly of the states were negligible. For instance in Assam, in 1972 there was not even a single woman MLA. However the number and percentage had increased over time. In 2006 about 10 per cent of MLAs were women. Similarly in Arunachal Pradesh, percentage of women MLA never exceeded 5 per cent. In the last 25 years there had been only one woman MP from the state. However at the local level women's representation was almost one third. Participation of women at village, intermediate and district Panchayat level of Arunachal Pradesh was 39.6 per cent, 34.99 per cent and 33.82 percent respectively (Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh, 2005). Mizoram also tells the same story. In the past only once a single woman was elected as a Member (Lalthansangi, 2005). In Manipur at the local level the participation of women was about one third of the total. However in hilly districts of Manipur women were not allowed to have any representation in any political institution (Govt. of Manipur, 2011). In Tripura no woman had been elected as MP till date. However only one woman was elected to the State Legislative Assembly, but representation in local bodies had been good and about one third of the total members (Govt. of Tripura, 2007). In Nagaland also no woman had been elected till date. But representation in local bodies had been relatively good (Govt. of Nagaland, 2004). Till date Meghalaya had represented one woman in parliament. Although representation in local bodies did not always indicate empowerment of women as in most cases they acted as proxies to their male counterparts yet it is desirable from the point of view of progress in the long run. It is believed that elected women in the long no longer remain as proxies rather they become politically active and empowered. Overall information revealed that there had been a huge gender gap in political participation at higher bodies in northeastern states but grounding was being prepared for future as revealed from their participation at local bodies. Hence much

is not written or recorded about the women of north eastern region of India and that remains a major limitation of the study.

CONCLUSION:

The status of women in India has been subject to many changes over the span of recorded Indian history. The states of North East India have always experienced some or the other kinds of discrimination as compared to the rest of Indian. The women of North East India play a crucial role in various domains of life, from being in the workforce, to land cultivators and producers, house makers, running small scale businesses, and so on. Still the respect, autonomy, freedom, and value of women are a grey area and very questionable. Government Policies and shift in patriarchal trends give some hope for a better future of women in the states of North East. Life of women in North East India Implications The present study aims to explore the status of women in North East India. This study will hold a significant endeavour in promoting the awareness about the status that the woman of North East India beholds. It will provide a deep and clear understanding of various domains associated with Life of women in North East India.

Although the status of women were relatively better in northeastern states viz., Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur and Meghalaya as compared to national level yet there were gaps in educational attainment, access to employment, health, political participation etc. Giving property right, access to employment and educational opportunity to women thus might not change the picture. A revolutionary change in the social and cultural values and behavioral pattern is necessary to foster the process of achieving gender equality. As soon as women feel that they have the capability to operate the society at the same term as men then achieving gender equality would not remain as a distant dream.

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