

Role of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Empowerment of Women in Assam

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Abstract:

Education is considered as the key factor for the development of a society. Therefore education is the necessary pre-condition of empowerment of the weaker section of the society. In many societies of the world education has never been within the reach of all sections of the society. More particularly the women's access to education is very less in most of the developing countries. In India too, women are facing many constraints in pursuing education in their life because of the patriarchic social structure. Women have to invest more their time and energy for maintaining family responsibilities. In such conditions women are facing difficulty to acquire education through the conventional face-to-face mode of education. In such situations the Open and Distance mode of learning can help women to pursue their education thereby empower the women. Hence the Open and Distance learning has an important role in empowering women. In this paper we will try to discuss the role of Open and Distance Learning system in empowering women particularly in Assam.

Keywords: Empowerment, Open and Distance Learning, Deprivation, Development, Marginalized, Constraints etc.

INTRODUCTION:

Education is the cornerstone of human progress and social development. Education therefore is the key to empowerment. Former Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi said, "Education is a liberating force, and in our age it is also a democratizing force, cutting across the barriers of caste and class, smoothing out inequalities imposed by birth and other circumstances" (S. Thavamani: 2007). The role of education in empowering the weaker sections more particularly the women is acknowledged by all. But in reality, in most societies, education has never been within the reach of all sections of the population owing to a diverse range of socio-cultural reasons. The unequal access to education is a crucial issue in almost all the developing countries in general. In these societies, the conventional face-to-face mode of education had been the dominant means of imparting higher education. Given the constraints of this traditional mode of education in terms of its intake capacity and fixed schedule based style of learning, a sizeable section of the society who would have otherwise opted for higher education stood deprived. A vast majority of this deprived section constitutes women, who for various social, cultural, economic and physical factors have not been able to avail themselves of the benefits of higher education. It is in this context, that one needs to take a close look at the challenges and prospects of securing empowerment of women vis-à-vis education, or more precisely, the open and distance mode of education in the context of India in general and the State of Assam in particular. Therefore the main objectives of this research

paper is to-

1. To understand women empowerment scenario in Assam,
2. To discuss the corresponding role of education particularly higher Education to be played in women empowerment in Assam.
3. To identify barriers impeding women's advancement educationally particularly in the Higher Education sector in Assam.
4. To discuss the role of Open and Distance Learning expected to play particularly in the higher education sector for the empowerment of women in the State.

Methodology:

The study will be an analytical and descriptive one, based on secondary data. For the theoretical understanding of the stated problem various published literatures have been consulted i.e. books, research papers and published resources available in the website.

Review of literature:

Since the issue of women empowerment is a widely discussed issue throughout the world in the present century there is large magnitude of literatures which discussed about the issue of women empowerment. The World Bank (2002) defined empowerment as the “expansion of the assets and capabilities of individuals to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives. Alsop and Heinsohn's (2005) define empowerment as person's capacity to make effective choices; that is , as the capacity to transform choices into desired actions and outcomes. Empowerment is multi dimensional. Irshad Ahmed Reshi and Dr.T Sudha (2022), in their paper titled “Women Empowerment: A Literature Review” stated that women's empowerment refers to the process of enabling women to take control of their lives, make decisions, and participate fully in all spheres of society. Empowerment of women includes their economic, social, and political empowerment. Economic empowerment refers to women's ability to access resources and participate in the economic decision-making process. Social empowerment refers to women's ability to participate in cultural, social and community activities. Political empowerment refers to women's ability to participate in the political process and decision-making. M. Suguna (2011), in the paper titled with “Education and Women Empowerment in India” mentioned about the importance of education in women's life. The author stated that the empowerment of women is impossible without education. The education will bring equality and thus improve the structure of our society. Dhruva Hazarika (2011), in his paper on “Women Empowerment in India: A Brief Discussion” stated that in ancient Indian society women were getting equal status with men. But in the Vedic and later ages, women's position was eroded in the Indian society. In the present century the movements for women empowerment have brought out many positive changes in the status of women in Indian society. Soumitro Chakravarty, Anant Kumar, Amar Nath Jha (2013), in their paper on “Women's Empowerment in India: Issues, Challenges and Future Directions” stated that not only in India but in almost all the developing countries women are deprived from the adequate facilities of health, education and nutritious food which is considered as essential to live a healthy life.

From the above survey of related literature it is understood that Women empowerment is defined as redistribution of social power and control of resources in favor of women. It stands for empower women with information and knowledge and allow them to emerge as leaders with confidence to guide their

own destinies. Theoretically, the women empowerment entails the enhancement of Women’s sense of self-worth, their right to have and to determine choices, their right to have access to opportunities and resources, their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order. Women empowerment is related to gain control over their own lives and thereby enhance their position in power structure of the society. To gain control over their lives it is necessary to develop the inner capacities of women as well as reduce in gender gap in everywhere.

The need of Women Empowerment in Assam: Challenges

In Assam empowerment of women is an important challenge before the Government as well as to the peoples of the State. Women are the most marginalized section in the Assamese society from all the aspects of life. In the following, an attempt has been made to understand the plight of the women in Assam with the help of some official data in some key areas which are considered as important measure to understand the plight of Assamese women.

Sex ratio:

The status of women in a particular society can be studied from the demographic factors such as sex ratio, infant mortality rate etc. It was noticed that Assam’s position in sex ratio (number of females per 1000 males) in 2001 was 17th (935) which has been changed to 15th (954) in 2011 which is a positive sign for a nation. (Source: Census Report, 2011; published by Registrar General of India)

Educational status:

The education is the most powerful tool to bring a change in the status and to get a powerful status in the society for female. It reduces inequalities and gender gap in the family as well as society.

The growth of literacy in Assam has shown an increasing trend over the years from 1951 to 2011 (As per the Census Report). The following data showed a clear picture of the literacy rate of female over the years which was promising one, but female literacy rate was always lesser than male literacy rate.

Assam Literacy rate over the years:

Year	Person	Male	Female
1951	18.53	28.01	7.58
1961	32.95	44.28	18.67
1971	33.94	43.72	22.76
1981	NA	NA	NA
1991	52.89	61.87	43.03
2001	63.25	71.28	54.61
2011	73.18	78.81	67.27

(Source: Status of Women Empowerment in Assam, by Paramita Medhi viewed in iskv.in/wp-content/themes/.../169cd35b49679e4d5b72e564afcd0b60jkv-3-2s-022pdf, viewed on 24/9/2024)

Work Participation:

For the understanding of economic self sufficiency of a particular studied group, the work force participation is considered as an important indicator. Even as the State Government continues to make tall claims about improvement in various social indicators, women’s participation in the economic arena in Assam continues to be abysmal. As per the latest issue of Women and Men in India, brought out by

the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in 2014, the workforce participation rate of females in Assam is only 22.46 per cent, which is not only the lowest among the seven North Eastern States, but also one of the lowest across India. The report showed that the female workforce participation rate in 2011 in Assam was 23.7 per cent in rural areas and only 14.9 per cent in the urban areas of the State. According to broad employment status in 2011-12, of the total female workers in Assam, 64.3 per cent in rural areas were self-employed, 17.5 per cent were earning regular wages as salaried employees, while 18.2 per cent were in casual labor. (Source - <https://www.researchgate.net/.../23795415-women-empowerment-in-Assam> by Pranjal Bhunya viewed on 24/9/2024)

Role of Open and Distance Learning Education (ODL) in Empowerment of Women in Assam:

The above brief analysis of the statistics in different aspects of life clearly shows the need of a comprehensive approach towards the women empowerment in the state. In this approach the education is to be considered as the key to empowerment. Because education facilitates building of a positive self-image and self-confidence among women and develop their ability to think critically. Education is needed to improve the knowledge, skill, abilities, and capacities and to build self-confidence. Unfortunately women's are lagging behind of all the facilities of getting higher learning.

Despite many reform initiatives, Assam has fared poorly in terms of Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education. As per a report on "Annual Status of Higher Education in States and Union Territories 2013" prepared by Industry Body CII, in partnership with the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), Assam is placed at 28th in terms of Higher Education (GER) Enrollment Ratio. According to the report, the GER for males is 13.3% and for female is 13.4%. The GER at the All India level is 19.4% while in the State, it is 13.4%.

The said report states that Assam ranks 21st among all states and U.Ts in India with nine Universities. The State has only 1.4% of all universities in the country.

In terms of access, Assam has a meagre 13 colleges per lakh population as compared to the all-India average of 23 colleges per lakh population. In terms of average enrolment per college, Assam (1009) is significantly higher than the all India average of 700. The total enrolment of students in regular mode in higher educational institutes in Assam is around 4.16 lakh according to the report.

Thus, there is urgent need of extension of the scope of Higher Education sector to cater the large number marginalized women to make their livings rightful as well as to contribute towards the national development.

The Issues to be addressed for the educational empowerment of women particularly in the Higher Education level in Assam:

In our societies, tension persists between the value of formal education for women and the disruptive potential for the patrifocal family have influenced the very system of education. Male-oriented structures and beliefs profoundly affect women's access to education and educational achievements. (Mukhupadhyay & Sengupta, 1994). Women still had to take the responsibility of cooking, shoulder the responsibility of care and other household works. In our society women receives very less enrollment in the education sector particularly in Higher Education basically due to the social norms and suppression.

The ODL facility in Assam:

ODL has a very important role in empowering women by imparting opportunity for higher learning. Women have constraints of time, space, resources and socio-economic disabilities. ODL can help them with its outreach to their homes. It enables them to learn at their own pace and to take up vocations and skills for economic and individual development. It gives them a second chance to step into the

mainstream of education, including higher education, enabling them at the same time to learn and earn as well as to fulfill their family responsibilities. The leading Institutions which provided the Open and Distance Learning opportunity for the marginalized section of the society are – Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), Krishna Kanta Handique State Open University (KKHSOU), Gauhati University Center for Distance and Online Learning (GUCDOL). The IGNOU is a national University and it has multiple centres in different parts of Assam. The KKHSOU and GUCDOL are established in the state to cater the needs of the marginalized section of society in Assam.

The Krishna Kanta Handique State Open University (KKHSOU):

The Krishna Kanta Handique State Open University (KKHSOU), was established under the provision of the KKHSOU, Act' 2005 enacted by the Govt. of Assam & published in the Assam Gazette (extraordinary) dt. 29/9/05 has been recognized by the Distance Education Council, New Delhi. The University Grants Commission also has empowered the University to award degrees under Section 22 of UGC Act, 1956. It is the fourteenth of its kind along with IGNOU and the only state Open University in the whole of NE India.

Among other objectives, the university holds the promise of providing equality of opportunities for higher education and bringing into its fold the deprived and denied sections along with the fresh learners. The very purpose of the University is to promote education to reach the unreached through the Open and Distance Learning System and the motto of the University is 'Education Beyond Barriers' of age, academic background and geographical boundaries. With this mandate the University is running with more than 200 study centers across the state.

The Gauhati University Centre for Distance and Online Education (GUCDOE):

The Gauhati University Centre for Distance and Online Education (GUCDOE) formerly known as Institute of Distance and Open Learning (IDOL) and Post Graduate Correspondence School (PGCS) was established in May 1998 with the objective to ensure the opportunity to pursue quality higher education to the students who could not pursue higher education through conventional mode of education. GUCDOE strives to accommodate the students who cannot enroll in the conventional system of higher education due to various factors like limited number of seats in Post Graduate classes, livelihood compulsion etc. and aims to impart quality education in an intellectually challenging learning environment. In 2024 the GUCDOE has completed 26 years of successful existence. Apart from self-learning materials and counseling facilities, the GUCDOE developed the first E-learning portal of the North-East India <http://bodhidroom.net/>, and "Radio Luit" the Community Radio Centre to maximize the learning opportunities for the learners. In 1998, it was started with 514 students and 6 courses, now it has enrolled more than 15000 students in several programmes equipped with latest technologies.

Findings of the study about the advantages of the ODL for the sake of empowerment of the women are:

1. The basic advantage of the ODL is the flexibility in its programmes. The flexibility in terms of time, pace, place, age, occupation certainly gives a new hope and fresh life to thousands of learners who were the victims of the rigid traditional University education system. Since the Open University is a learner-centered system, it provides education to large and diverse groups of students in a flexible manner. As far as the qualifications are concerned most of the learners who couldn't able to continue in the formal system, because of socio-economic and cultural reasons have the advantage of Open learning. Further the flexibility of entry into academic programmes irrespective of their age, qualification makes the learner to pursue their higher education. In ODL students can choose the

subjects of study according to their interests. The flexibility in teaching and learning process is also an additional advantage for the learners. The learner can learn through the course material, in his own pace and place. To seek further help or information they can attend the counseling sessions in nearby study centers. This facility helps the learners who work for their livelihoods. The ODL institutions in Assam came in to existence with a popular slogan “Education at your door step” literally brought higher education closer to the people.

2. The pursuing of a degree in the ODL is cost effectiveness. It offers courses at a very economic rate as compared to the other institutions of higher learning. . A student can pursue his/her study while he/she is earning and can learn according to his/her convenience and interest.
3. The ODL involves wide range of experts to train and teach the students.
4. The Open Universities adopted mostly self learning process with the active guidance of the experts which will build the confidence among its learners.
5. The learning materials are prepared by the experienced and expert academicians from the relevant fields. Thus in the ODL system, the universities involves a large number of academicians from the relevant subjects for its learning material preparation.
6. With the decentralized study centers the women learners can keep constant contact with the system in their locality which will build their confidence.

With these advantages the ODL has been able to attract the mass of rural women to pursue their half ended academic careers.

Some Suggestions:

1. There are many challenges that confront on the path to gender equality and empowerment. The women’s need motivation as well as vocational counseling with the greater involvement of the experts. They should be made aware about the courses on higher income generating skills. Merely giving them free education up to graduation level will not yield much result.
2. The problems of deep rooted cultural, traditional and undemocratic value system attached with the girl child have to be solved and their participation in the educational process should be encouraged.
3. The Universities providing ODL opportunities should ascertain its commitment to enhance more technical competencies among the women and make them resourceful with awareness of up to date knowledge.
4. The maintenance of quality is a major challenge before the University authorities in the ODL system. Because, for the academic programmes the universities are solely dependent on the study centers. In some study centers the maintenance of quality education is utterly dishonoured. This resulted in carrying a bad image about the quality of the degrees of the University. The University authority should undertake an approach for the maintenance of quality in its study centers.

Conclusions:

Today, the ODL education has a very important role in women empowerment and development. Women have constraints of time and, space and resources and socio-economic disabilities. The ODL can help them with its outreach to their homes. It enables them to learn at their own pace and to take up vocations and skills for economic and individual development. It gives them a second chance to step into the mainstream of education, including higher education, enabling them at the same time to earn and learn as well as to fulfill their family responsibility.

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