INTRODUCTION

Women play a vital role in socio-economic development of our country. Indian women are slowly breaking out of the traditional mould imposed upon them for centuries as there is change in the lifestyle due to increasing modernization. Globalization has presented new challenges for the realization of the goal of women’s equality. The struggle for individual and equal rights as well as economic necessities are resulting in more and more women supplementing the family income in order to share the burden of looking after their families along with their husbands.

Historically the isolation of women from the mainstream economy and their lack of access to information because of social, cultural and market constraints have led them to become distant from the global pool of information and knowledge. This distance is reflected in the levels of empowerment and equality of women, in comparison to men and has enormously contributed to the slow pace of development of women. It is now a well understood fact that without the progress towards the empowerment of women, any attempt to raise quality of lives of people in developing countries would be incomplete.

No nation can progress well, unless women, who form almost fifty percent of the total population, are brought into the mainstream of development. Women not only play the biological role of the mother, but also irrevocably influence the future generation. The talent potential in women should be developed so that they can make a positive contribution to progress, without being exploited.
Women’s at present have broken the monopoly of men in controlling the market and taken rapid strides and proved that they are not inferior when compared to men. In the past few decades the role of women has been breaking the barriers of four walls. Today the role of women is not confined to the traditional one as a mother and a housewife.

Women entry into business is a recent phenomenon. It is traced out as an extension of their kitchen activities to three Ps, i.e. pickles, powder (spices) and papad manufacturing. With growing awareness and spread of education over the years, women have started engrossing to modern activities like engineering, electronics and energy popularly known as 3Es. In handloom and handicraft women entrepreneurs are doing exceedingly well and excelling their male counterparts. (Khanka 2012)

Women today are playing a very important role in all walks of life, and have entered into all developmental areas. Many women have proved that they are more capable of doing things with more efficiency than men, especially in decision making. In view of the above qualities, they are also becoming good entrepreneurs for development of business and industry.

In modern era, entrepreneurial classes of women are playing an increasingly prominent role in the various scopes of industrial growth and economic development. Entrepreneurship amongst women is relatively recent phenomenon, which is gradually changing the growth sensitivity to the roles, responsibilities and economic states of women in the society in general and family in particular.(Khanka 2005)
For women, starting and operating a business involves considerable risk and difficulties because in the Indian social environment women have always considered as subordinate to men. Fortunately, today there have been noticeable changes in the socio-psycho-cultural and economic norms of our society due to liberalized policies of the government of India, increase in education level of women and increased social awareness in respect of the role women play. (Desai et.al., 2006)

Women entrepreneurs in India represent group of women who have broken away from the beaten track and are exploring new vistas of economic participation. Behind every successful face, there is a long story of trails in climbing the hard way. Their task has been full of challenges and yet they have steered of clear of public prejudices, family opposition and cynical remarks of co-workers and in a thorny way they have established themselves as independent entrepreneurs. A great many of them have chosen the entrepreneurs’ world because of compelling urge of wanting to do something positive in their lives. Nevertheless, they are pace settlers for women in their quest for economic independence.

The contribution of women to the process of development is widely accepted. Liberalization and modernization have provided major breakthrough for women to participate in the process of development. Keeping these in mind policy makers are of opinion that the women in the household and non-household sector are major emerging force in the area of economic prosperity of her family and the state as well.
Women entrepreneurs of India, both prospective and practicing have tremendous potential and can contribute significant to India’s economic prosperity. By enabling women to become entrepreneurs, and participate fully and more effectively in wider range of economic activities, it is possible not only to improve their position in society, but also to make great progress towards overall social and economic development objective such as increased economic growth, improved productivity, improved distribution of income, reduction in poverty and above all reduction of unemployment. (Kalyani 1997)

North East India is the home of seven sisters of namely Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura. All these states comprise of innumerable ethnic communities, having a distinct identity of their own.

According to the fourth all India census of Micro Small Medium Enterprise, MSME (2006-2007) registered sector revealed that 8.2% of the enterprise in the northeast India are controlled and managed by women. Total percentage of enterprises managed by women is 214.65% in the country. (Final report MSME 2011)

In the North Eastern region of India, plan and methodical efforts in entrepreneurship development began in the 70’s and Assam is the pioneer in this field. In 1973, Assam started a novel experiment on entrepreneurship development by setting up district level agencies known as entrepreneurial motivational training centres (EMTC) to identify, select, and train prospective entrepreneurs generally for both gender and provide them all support services to start and run their enterprises.
Entrepreneurship is a difficult undertaking as it calls for innovative ideas, risk-taking, strong business acumen and effective leadership in all aspects of business. It’s a challenging role for a woman but growing sensitivity towards the role of a thinking individual and increasing economic independence has made it possible today for several women to don the entrepreneur’s hat.

The modern concept of women entrepreneurship took shape in this region of the country from the eighties. Contrary to the popular notion that women from the north east are still backward, they have come a long way now and have established themselves as successful and thriving entrepreneurs not only in the region but also beyond the boundaries of the nation.

Like most women entrepreneurs in India, these women from the NE region have also embarked on their entrepreneurial journey in a relatively smaller scale, mostly based out of their homes. They began with traditionally women-oriented business like beauty and well-being, garments, fashion, handloom and handicrafts etc, mostly without any formal training or a rigid business framework.

Women from the region have realized the potential resources of the region and have initiated various entrepreneurial activities in order to tap the natural wealth of the region. Handloom and Handicrafts have been playing an important role in the economies of the NE states. According to a study sponsored by NEDFi (2002), NE contributes 19.18% of total number of handicrafts units in India, 21.71% in terms of artisans and 79.58% in terms of value of production. Every state in the region has some unique items
of production that have been highly appreciated within the country and also abroad. Handloom and handicrafts products from the NE have excellent brand value. (Ankurika 2012) Northeast women are also taking a very prominent role in the economic development of the state. They are engaged in different occupation and business according to their capacity. In the SSI sector, there are more women operating small scale industry in these region then men. And most of their handloom products fetch good price in the national and international market and the handlooms designs of northeast are world famous.

Assam is the frontier province of North-Eastern region of India. The boundaries of Assam lies between latitudes 28° 18' and 24° North and latitudes 89° 46' and 97° 4' East. Assam comprises an area of 78,523 square kilometers (30,318 square miles). Modern Assam has 22 districts which are akin to counties in the US or the UK. Except for the districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills, Assam is generally composed of plains and river valleys. It can be divided into three principal geographical regions: the Brahmaputra Valley in the north; the Barak Plain in the south; and the Mikir (Karbi Anglong) and Cachar Hills that divide the two regions. Assam is blessed with rich flora and fauna which form the basis for many agro industries. (Assam-wikipedia.org/wikiassam 2012)

Assam is not lagging behind the rest of the country in respect of women entrepreneurship. This is evident from the fact that Assam accounts for 18 percent women entrepreneurs as against 7.7 percent in the country. (Directorate of Economic & Statistics, Government of
Assam, Statistical Hand Book of Assam 2010) Besides, the potential for developing women entrepreneurs in Assam is very high. Generally, women entrepreneurs in Assam are engaged mainly in traditional activities like weaving, knitting, embroidery, beauty parlour, running of schools, crèches, readymade garments, jam, jelly and pickle making etc. In recent years it has been observed that women entrepreneurs of Assam are venturing into non-traditional traits also like beauty parlous, computer center, small production units etc.

Sericulture is the backbone of the rural economy of the state. An alternative to agriculture, most of the women entrepreneurs from the rural background are engaged in the production of silks and silken goods.

Manipur, which lies in the North eastern corner of India is a small and isolated state, surrounded by green hills on all sides and a valley at the centre which is 20 per cent of the total area of the land (22, 327 sq.kms). There is no railway in Manipur. The nearest rail station in Manipur Road (Dimapur) which is about 220kms away from Imphal; Manipur is also blessed with rich flora which is used for agro-based industries, and fauna, promoting a National Park which is serve as centre of tourist attraction.(sorokhaibam 1998)

Handloom industry is the largest cottage industry in the Manipur. Manipuri women have an ancient and splendid heritage of handlooms and handicrafts. Manipur accounts for 35.4% women entrepreneurs of the state. There are avenues of promoting women entrepreneurs in Manipur. Nowadays, women are engaged not only in producing
handloom and handicrafts products, they are also engaged in many activities like fruit processing, beauty parlous, Xeroxing, incense stick making, shoes making etc. (Devi 2004)

Handloom and Handicraft works are exclusively done by women in Manipur unlike in other states in India. In fact, Manipur was introduced to the outside world by handloom products of the women entrepreneurs. The handloom industry is a house-hold industry in Manipur. This industries demands intensive labour, but it provides more employment scope with proper use of entrepreneurial skills. Before the mill cloth was introduced into this state, Manipur women use to produce all the cloths required for domestic consumption and export by using indigenous raw material like cotton, silk which was abundantly found in Manipur.

Apart handloom, handicraft, etc. there are other potentialities of developing sericulture and silk industry in both Manipur and Assam where large number of women entrepreneurs can take part for boosting up economy of the state. Agro and food processing industry is another area for entrepreneurship in the NE region, especially mushroom cultivation which is flourishing in the area. Moreover, entrepreneurs can venture into areas like agriculture, horticulture, fisheries, poultry, animal husbandry and forest which would improve value addition in the agricultural produce, employment generation in the region.

Woman is the full circle, within her is the power to create, nurture and transform.” (Ankurita, July 23, 2012). Therefore, empowering women entrepreneurs of the NE region is truly essential for achieving the
goals of sustainable development of the nation in totality. Right efforts from all areas are required in the development of women entrepreneurs and their greater participation in the entrepreneurial activities. Better educational facilities, suitable financial schemes, training on technical and management skills and professional competence to women folk and on the part of the society, incessant support and recognition extended by the state government of Assam and Manipur has propelled the growth of women.

As more and more women become economically and emotionally independent through business careers and self employment negative attitude towards women entrepreneurs and their dual role has diminish in strength. Although the barriers do still come between women and their goals, progress, can be measured in small ways and all in all future does look promising.