Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

The status of women and their eminence in any society is a mark of its civilisation. Women are to be weighed up as equal partners in the process of development. But due to exploitation and suppression from centuries, the position of Indian women in the society has remained at the receiving end. After independence, though substantial progresses have been taking place in the lives of women but there still remains a bleak picture. Even in today’s modern society, women are not treated equally potential like men. There continues to be resistance against viewing women as professionals, as economically independent person, and parents and the society still wish to see her as a dutiful wife and responsible mother first, rather her professional carrier. A majority of women are still underprivileged in a tradition bound society where there is a distinction between lawful legitimacy and general practice. “In spite of women’s contribution towards family income, their position in the family hierarchy mostly remains subordinate” (Nandal, 2005). The societal attitude is still discriminatory against women even in the second decade of 21st century. In India, more than 6000 women are killed every year because their in-laws consider their dowries inadequate (UNICEF, 2000). Some problems to be given topmost priority are female foeticide (Census India, 2001), female infanticide, malnutrition, illiteracy, child marriage, dowry harassment and dowry deaths (Rastogi and Therly, 2006), domestic violence, sexual harassment in society as well as in the workplace, bonded labourers, poverty, and police neglect and harassment (Mukhopadhyay, 2008).

Discrimination against girls and women in the developing world is a devastating reality. It results in millions of individual tragedies, which add up to loss of potential for
entire economy. Globally, one in every three women is subjected to violence during her lifetime. Indian women are also victims of social discrimination and have a low status within the family. The logic behind such discrimination is such that girls appear as a liability for the family as they have to be married off, often with huge dowry, whereas boys are considered an asset as they carry on the family lineage and support the family in times of financial needs and bring in dowry (Human Development in South Asia, 2000). India is a country which contains mainly with patriarchal society in which a cultural bias against women has contributed to frequent cases of female infanticide, particularly in poor and rural areas. Female infanticide is leading to an ever-increasing imbalance in the sex-ratio. The children sex ratio has decreased over the last decade from 945 girls to 927 girls per 1000 male children. The overall sex ratio has also decreased over the last decade from 927 to 914 female per 1000 male\(^1\) which also shows the male dominancy in the country in figure. The position of women in the development of a society has never been considered on the same level as that of men. On the other hand, the achievements of men folk and their contributions to the development processes have always been given priority. In many parts of India, women are viewed as an economic liability despite their various contributions to our society and economy. In many rural areas, women do not belong to themselves and their physical well-being, health, security and bodily integrity are all beyond their control. Moreover, if women do not have control over money, they cannot choose to get health care for themselves or their children. Ntombfuthi (1995) advocates that Indian tradition regard women as inferior to men. The situation in rural areas is such that women have no role in the societal debates; women in rural areas will always remain where they are, and ultimately will end up in a worse position (Kongolo and Bamgose, 2002). Discrimination against women is responsible for their low status. Women at home and workplace are considered as inferior to male. They still have

\(^1\) Source: Census of India 2001 and 2011.
lesser access to assets, resources, technology and credit. Women’s work in communities combines domestic service and ‘productive work’ (Iyer, 1991) working long hours in childcare, food preparation, cooking, washing and cleaning.

1.2 Importance and Relevance of the Study

Empowerment is a multi-dimensional process. It is a process that helps and assesses people, both men and women to realize their identity, becoming aware of the capacity and potential and strive for success, happiness and peace of mind. Gender empowerment generally implies woman empowerment because women are mostly neglected in the society and they always become victims of exploitation, violence and all forms of discrimination. But, without the participation of women a nation or a society cannot achieve its inclusive growth and development of the economy. So, it is of utmost necessity to empower women as they form a large component of human resources of our country.

Empowerment of women, in its simplest form means the manifestation of redistribution of powers that challenges patriarchal ideology and male dominance. It signifies balance of power between males and females. This power can be the control over physical, natural, intellectual, financial and human resources along with the control over their self-esteem. In recent perspectives, empowerment of women has become a serious area of study.

Empowerment of women may arise from three dimensions – social, economic and political.

Social dimension of empowerment signifies respectable and non-discriminatory position in the society. Political dimension of empowerment relates to their involvement in the governance of the nation from Panchayat to national Parliament level. Economic empowerment means to have equality of power in the economic resources.

The Human Development Report 1995, stresses that empowerment is about participation: Development must be by people, not only for them; people must participate...
fully in the decisions and processes that shape their lives but at the same time promotes a rather instrumentalist view of empowerment: investing in women’s capabilities and empowering them to exercise their choices is not only valuable in itself but is also the surest way to contribute to economic growth and overall development (UN, 1995b: iii)

Empowerment is essential for promoting development activities. A number of areas of activity in development have become closely associated with the promotion of women’s empowerment, such as micro-credit, political participation and reproductive health and much innovative work has been done in these areas.

Involving women into the mainstream of development has been a national concern since early fifties. ‘Empowerment of Women’ became one of the objectives of Ninth Five Year Plan (1997-02). This was also the period when National Policy for Empowerment of Women, 2001 was adopted to ‘eliminate all types of discrimination against women’ and to ensure gender justice.

History bears testimony to the fact that heights of patriotism, selflessness, fearlessness and determination are imbibed in children only through the persistent efforts of mothers. But unless women are given opportunities for developing her vision, proper health care, respect and political and socio-economic status, her efforts may not achieve the ultimate objective of a strong, civilized and prosperous nation. Health, education and their economic potential have to be taken care of in order to make use fully the rich resources of women power for the overall development of the society. It is viewed that women are the wheels of a nation, constituting almost fifty per cent of the total population. They contribute one third of labour force and supply two third of total working hours and yet they are earning only one tenth of the income and they own only one percent of the prosperity (Saravanavel, 1987). It is a growing concern among nations that if the operation of social and economic change has to be
guaranteed it is the women who has to be mobilised and this will lead the nation towards progress and prosperity. Women by all means can be very effectual agents of change for a better home, society and ultimately a better economy. In recent years, women are coming to the front line in different walks of life and are competing successfully with men despite the social, psychological and economical barriers. This has been possible because the scenario has been changing fast with modernisation, urbanisation enhanced level of education, political awakening, legal safeguard and the democratic system taking roots in the country. The tradition bound Indian society is now undergoing change and women are now seeking gainful economic participator in several fields in increasing numbers. Thus the opportunities of economic activities for women have increased drastically. The status of women and its contribution to social and economic development largely depends on the availability of economic opportunities for the women (Roy, 2008). Thus, increasing economic opportunities for women is essential for improving women’s lives and accelerating economic growth and development, with prospective to lift hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. The role of women farmers in the Indian agriculture is substantial. Women contribute monetary and non-monetary inputs towards national income, occupy low position in the socio-economic index of India in spite of their involvement in agricultural activities to a great extent. Women perform wide variety of duties both in the home and outside but their participation is considered as normal by the society. Women are extensively involved in activities related to production, processing, preparation and marketing and selling of food grains, oilseeds, fruits, vegetables and fishes, dairy and other animal products. Women’s contribution to food production and processing is vital and crucial. In almost all the activities, women are involved right from land preparation till storage and marketing of harvested grains. Women play significant roles in supplying all ingredients necessary to achieve food security in developing countries. But women play these roles in the face of enormous social, cultural and
economic constraints. Most of the work that women do, such as collecting fuel, fodder and water, or growing vegetables, or keeping poultry for domestic consumption is not recorded in the Census counts. Many women and girls who work on family land are not recorded as workers (Kumar, 2009).

As we enter the new millennium, the development focus is on alleviating world poverty and for this “the empowerment of women and the promotion of gender equality” has become one of the eight internationally agreed Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). There is a great deal of evidence drawn from comparisons at the national and sub-national scale that societies which discriminate on the basis of gender pay a price in more poverty, slower growth and a lower quality of life, while gender equality enhances development (Momsen 2006).

After 60 years of Independence, the Government of India has realized the importance of women and the first step of women reservation Bill was passed in the higher Parliamentary body, Rajya Sabha on 9th March, 2010. The bill will give women a platform to voice their opinions. It will realize the dreams of thousands of women still fighting discrimination every day. But, unfortunately the passing of final stage of this bill is yet to complete due to lack of unanimity among the political parties. It implies that though women were neglected earlier in the society but their empowerment is very much necessary to integrate them in the country’s mainstream. This shows that even of late, the Government of India has realized the fact that women need to be empowered and that will help our economic development. So, this study seems to be more relevant in the recent perspectives.

1.3: Statement of the Problem

Women, the first educator of a child, constitute nearly 50 per cent of world’s population. They play a very crucial role in reproduction, rearing and bearing children,
looking after the family and supply of workforce in the labor market. But the social, political, economic and cultural status of women is far less than that of men in developing countries.

In India, male dominations and gender discrimination are customized habitually. Though the Constitution of India is based on the principle of liberty, fraternity, equality and justice to all citizens but, unfortunately these affirmations are only in the Constitution. The fruits of development are not being shared by men and women on any front. Women are lagged behind not because that they are incapable but they have been denied the opportunity to prove their mettle.

It has been increasingly felt that everywhere in the country, women are facing threats to their lives, health and well-being. In spite of the various welfare related activities for women, the plight of women in the country is not very sound. In all spheres of their life, they are discriminated. They are getting less education, enjoying less health care facilities and less nutrition than men but are being over-represented among poor and powerless. Though some progress in developing women’s capabilities have been made, women and men still live in an unequal world.

The most essential thing we have within us is our capability to function effectively as rational beings. Sen (1993) suggests that freedom is both the end and the means to development and he classifies capability as a type of freedom that enables one to choose a lifestyle one wants to live. But, one basic question that needs to be asked is – “Are the capabilities of Indian women actualized?” When it comes to India, women are the most deprived human being. In almost all areas, they face violence, discrimination and sexual abuse. Without the actualization of their capabilities, women cannot function effectively. So, investment in women’s capabilities and their empowerment to open out their choices is not
only important but also an indubitable means to contribute to the economic growth and development of the nation.

1.4 Area of the Study:

For the study, the area ‘Barak Valley’ of the state Assam has been selected. Barak Valley is situated in the southern part of Assam. It mainly consists of three districts viz; Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. In the north Barak valley is surrounded by North Cachar Hills, in the east by Manipur Hills and in the south by Mizoram hills. The area of the valley is 6962 sq. km.

Barak Valley is still an underdeveloped region of the state Assam. The present study mainly focuses on the socio-economic status of both rural and urban women in Barak Valley and their empowerment and also their role in the development of the region.

1.5: Objectives of the Study:

The present study has focused on the following specified objectives:

(i) To examine the socio-economic status of women in Barak Valley.

(ii) To investigate the problems that women are facing in Barak Valley.

(iii) To construct a Women Empowerment Index.

(iv) To study the rural-urban disparities of women empowerment in Barak Valley.

(v) To examine the relationship between women empowerment and economic development.

(vi) To evaluate how far the programmes and policies for empowerment of women taken by the government have proven successful in raising the status of women in Barak Valley.
1.6: Research Questions:

On the basis of above the mentioned objectives, some research questions have been framed which are given below:

(i) What is the present socio-economic status of both rural and urban women in Barak Valley?

(ii) What are the problems that women are facing in Barak Valley?

(iii) Is there any rural-urban disparities of women empowerment in Barak Valley and if it is then up to what extent?

(iv) How women empowerment and economic development are inter-related?

(v) How far the programmes and policies for empowerment of women taken by the Government have proven successful in raising the status of women in Barak Valley?

1.7: Data Sources:

The study is based on both primary data and secondary data. Primary data have been collected from 400 households by using stratified random sampling i.e; 160 from the urban area and 240 from the rural area of Barak Valley through personal interview by preparing a suitable questionnaire. The detail methodology is explained in the Chapter 3.

Secondary data have been collected from different government publications, books and journals, Census Reports of India, Govt. of India, Human Development Reports, Statistical Hand Book of Assam, District Election Offices of Barak Valley and various NGOs etc.

1.8 Outline of the Chapters:

This introductory chapter is followed by other six chapters. A brief outline is given in the following:
Chapter 2 consists of the review of literature which is combined by both theoretical and empirical literature. These literatures mainly focus on the problems of women, determinants of women empowerment, status of women, relation between women and development, role of NGOs and microfinance for development of women and other related aspects of both domestic and foreign countries.

Chapter 3 discusses the theoretical and conceptual framework on women empowerment and economic development. This chapter also explains the detailed methodology for this study.

Chapter 4 explains the empowerment status of both rural and urban women belonging to Barak Valley.

Chapter 5 focuses on the disparity between rural and urban women in respect of their social, economic and political empowerment and the role of government policy in empowering women both at national level and at the local level.

Chapter 6 explains the relation between women empowerment and economic development.

Chapter 7 describes the summary, conclusion, policy suggestions and limitations of the study.